

## Vistas

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The architect who builds a glass tower in the middle of the Arabian desert will justify the design with a hundred different reasons – except possibly the real one, which is the unconscious attempt to recreate the mythic imagery of what is perhaps the quintessential city of the twentieth century: Houston, Texas.

Such is the power of the mythic image – and the control it exercises on our lives. And this of course is the key issue at the heart of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. How can architect and client free themselves from this colonisation of the mind? The task is not easy, nor is it one that concerns only the Islamic world. On the contrary, it is an arena in which every architect dwells, including those who build in the western world, where the dichotomy between the Modern movement and Post-Modernism, or between either of them and the Deconstructivists, can be perceived as analogues of this paradigm. Thus the agenda of this Award is really quite central to our profession; and not just the exotic Disneyland hothouse that many assume it to be. Indeed, working on the Steering Committee has provided an insight into many of the most crucial questions that confront architects here in India, as well as in other parts of the world. This essay addresses some of those issues, and the perspectives they have generated.

### Mythic Imagery

To begin with, the power of mythic imagery is of course much older than Texas, it is one of the basic mechanisms involved in the design process. Every architect has an assortment of images on which to draw during the design process. Islam provides a particularly rich reservoir of such imagery. As it came out of the desert and spread eastward through Yemen and India and westward to Morocco and Spain, it brilliantly internalised the various architectural systems it encountered, integrating them into a language which is unrivalled for sheer lyrical beauty in the history of architecture. Certainly these typologies, based on the hot, dry climate which prevails from Granada in the West to Delhi and Agra in the East, generated the kind of built form which appeals immensely to our contemporary sensibilities: clusters of courtyard houses, closely packed together, sheltering each other from the sun, around large-domed public buildings built of thick heat-resisting walls.

For most people, these are the images of Islamic Architecture that spring to mind. Yet, ironically enough, the majority of Muslims do not live in countries where this kind of built form is relevant. They live *east* of Delhi; in fact, east of *Calcutta*! They live in Bangladesh and Indonesia and Malaysia. They live in hot humid climates. What they need is not dense massing, but light free-standing structures and cross-ventilation. So what is the relevance of the great domed mosque of Isfahan to them? In their part of the world, they cannot build masonry arches and domes; they must instead use sloping tiled roofs in order to keep out the heavy monsoon rains. What should *their* mosques look like? Right now, most Muslims deal with the problem by building a tiled-roof structure and then sticking a small tin dome on top (often just a flat two-dimensional cut-out) to symbolise what their effort is all about. Can the Muslim architect in Indonesia or Bangladesh be free of such images or accept them as an essential part of the imagery of faith?

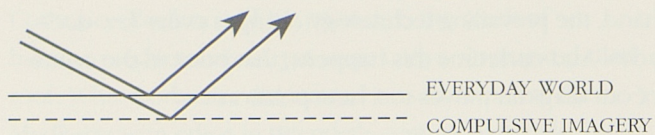
Yet, is that a fair question? After all, a symbol cannot be made to order as and when we want, like a piece of clothing. Its power and meaning slowly accrues, down through the centuries, and cannot be changed overnight. Thus the Cross of Calvary is but a machine for putting people to death, therefore in nations around the world where it has been replaced by the guillotine or the electric chair, should Christian churches follow suit? Or more pertinently, can they?

### Deep Structure

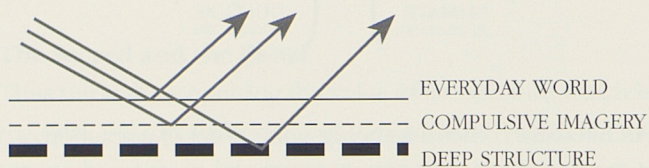
To answer this question, let us start by examining the way an architect designs. At work everyday in a somewhat banal world, the architect faces quite commonsensical problems dealing with clients who have particular requirements, budgets, time schedules and so forth. Within these parameters the architect tries to arrive at suitable arrangements of built form.

But at another level, just below this surface, architects – at least some of them – seem to have access to that world of compulsive, near-mythic, imagery which we have just been discussing. These images act like powerful elixirs, transforming the drab of everyday construction into something far more vivid and exciting:





But is this the whole picture? Surely the very existence of the 'grab-bag' implies the presence of a third stratum: a far more profound deep structure, which, throughout history, has nourished the arts.

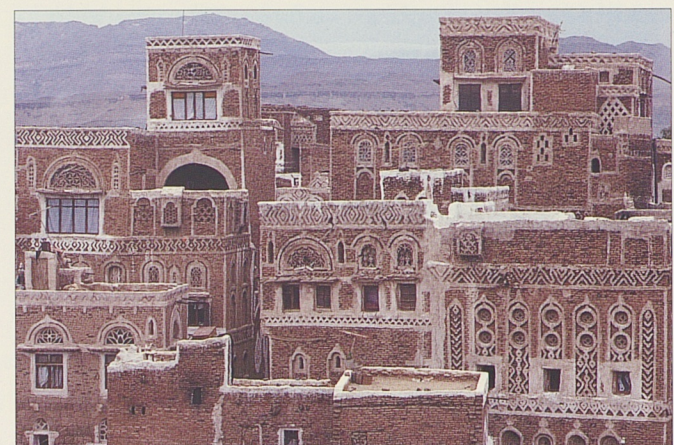


This deep structure is the wellspring of architecture, a primordial force that underlies the middle level and generates its compulsive imagery. For example, Frank Lloyd Wright created his Usonian houses not by raiding the middle level (ie the existing Tudor and Cape Cod vocabulary), but rather by his intuitive understanding of the *aspirations* of middle America in the Midwest. In other words, his path seems to cut right through the middle layer, penetrating to rock bottom mythic images of Usonia. Deposited at the middle level, they become accessible to architects and developers, forming the new lifestyle of most North American suburbia throughout this century, two steps up to the dining area, the carport, the picture window, the open plan and so forth.

### Regionalism

In the process, Wright challenged the cultural elitism of America's East Coast establishment and its Beaux Arts clones. Because of the nature of their mandate, architects are sensitive to cultural bullying. Thus when asked to build the US Embassy in India, for example, the architect may try to design an 'Indian' looking building that will fit into the context of Delhi. On the other hand, if asked to design the Indian Embassy in Washington, the same architect will probably come up with a design that conveys Indian cultural values, and not American ones. So we do not really perceive these twin tasks as mirror images of each other. Both our responses are biased, but not symmetrical. We vaguely suspect that in the power struggle going on around the world, there are those cultures which are 'underdogs' and those that are 'bullies', and that the imbalance has nothing to do with intrinsic cultural value but with economic clout.

*FROM ABOVE: Distant view of Houston, Texas Downtown, taken in 1988; Sana'a Yemen, 'Yemen: brilliantly internalised'; indigenous architecture, while seemingly modest, has a subtle richness that reveals itself through careful study*



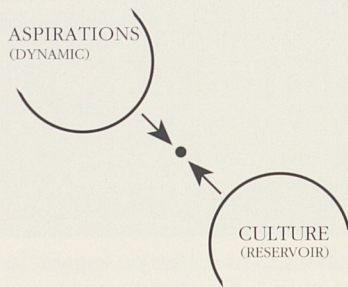


Hence the great emphasis among architects today on regionalism; which, in itself, unfortunately, is not a panacea since regionalism in architecture can come about in two quite different ways. The first consists of those designers who bounce off the middle layer. The main difference between them and the so-called 'International' stylists is that their 'grab-bag' of images is somewhat more localised. But essentially, it is the same superficial process.

On the other hand, there is another process, quite different from the first, that also generates a regional architecture, expressing strong cultural roots. This process involves reaching the deep structure in the lowest layer. It is a far more difficult but far more rewarding path. Such architecture does not merely *transfer* images (whether of local or foreign origin) but *transforms* them, by re-inventing them.

To understand how this happens, we must examine the forces that generate architecture. The first of these is, of course, culture. This is like a great reservoir, calm and continuous, changing only very gradually over the years. The second is aspirations, which is dynamic and volatile. It is very different from culture, though of course they interact continuously. Thus while some aspirations can be quite ephemeral, others may become an integral part of culture.

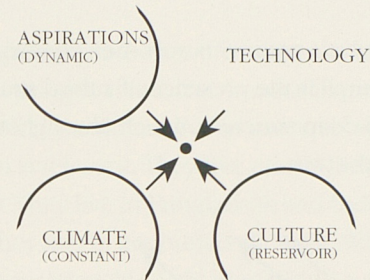
All the arts are profoundly affected by shifts along the axis that runs between these two forces. Thus if we represent a piece of architecture we all admire (for instance Registan Square in Samarqand or Chartres Cathedral in France) by a central point in a schema, then we can diagram their relationship in this manner:



There are two other forces that exert a far more primary influence on architecture than they do on any of the other arts. One of these is climate. This is a fundamental and unchanging force. The architect must learn to master its practical implications (sun angles, wind directions, etc) and go much further than this. For at a deep structure level, climate conditions culture itself, its expression, its rites and rituals. In itself, climate can become the source of myth, as witness the metaphysical qualities attributed to open-to sky space from Mexico to Arabia and from India to Japan.

The fourth force acting on architecture is technology. No other art feels its influence so directly. Musical instruments

change, but only gradually. In architecture on the other hand, the prevailing technology changes every few decades. And each time this happens, that point in the centre of our diagram moves to a new position:



Architecture comes into being at the point of resolution of these four forces. Sometimes this point moves because of a shift in the basic cultural paradigm. This happened in India when the Vedic concept of architecture as a model of the cosmos was replaced by the sacred values and imagery of the Islamic Garden of Paradise, which in turn was overrun by the arrival of the Europeans with their mythic belief in science and rationality. In European history, the change from Romanesque to Gothic is probably the expression of a change in technology, but that from Gothic to Renaissance is clearly the fall-out of a decisive shift along the cultural-aspiration axis.

### Transfer and Transformation

Changes along this cultural-aspiration axis are shared by architecture with all the other arts, many of which, such as poetry and music are indeed much purer arts, since they do not have to deal with the exigencies of the pragmatic and commercial world we live in. No, it is the frequency and decisiveness of the *technological* changes that are unique to architecture, and that make it such a sensitive barometer of the health and robustness of a particular society. This is why cities, and the buildings they contain, are of such decisive importance to the cultural historian.

For when we have to substitute stone with steel, or wood with concrete, we are faced with a challenge: we can either use the new technologies to superficially *transfer* the old images (hence the fake Gothic arches and Islamic domes, that we see all around us), or we can *transform* them, re-inventing the architectural expression of the mythic values they represent. Both options work, but there is a difference. The process of transfer is facile but debilitating. Transformation, on the other hand, challenges society and renews it as well. This is the challenge, and the reward, that architecture represents in society every time the technology changes.



A prime example, in our own century, is the work of Le Corbusier. Each one of his projects is the work of 'un homme méditerranéen', yet none uses a sloping red-tiled roof. What Corbusier did instead was to *re-invent* the Mediterranean ethos in twentieth-century materials. Similarly in North America, the work of Louis Sullivan and his colleagues in Chicago generated the energy which has fuelled US architecture for a century or more. But the *modus operandi* of Post-Modernism (looting the middle layer of 'Wham-O' imagery) has weakened that same society because, at a fundamental level, it provides no nourishment.

### **The Sacred and the Banal**

Thus through recognising the value of architecture which is regional, we can address issues which are universal. For all true architecture is, by definition, regional. Not because it retreats into a Disneyworld of facile imagery (History as Caricature), but because it expresses those prime forces (culture, aspiration, climate) through using the technology available at that particular point on our planet. In this profound sense, all the finest examples of architecture in history, from Fatehpur-Sikri in Agra, to the temples of Nara, to the Oak Park houses of Frank Lloyd Wright, are all regional. Not because they exploit the superficial layers of facile imagery, but because they make contact with the deep structure that lies beneath.

For it is through this process that architecture expresses the sacred invisibilia that underlie society. By sacred, one, of course, means not only that which is evoked by religion, but also by nature, by the primordial and the mythic. The Japanese tea ceremony and the bull fights of Spain are but two examples. These obviously deal with elements buried deep in our subconscious, such as the riveting centrality of a house around a courtyard. To cross the hot desert plain and arrive at such a house is an experience beyond the merely photogenic. Something deep is stirred in our mind – perhaps the memory of a lost paradise?

In this layer of invisibilia lie the roots of architecture. Perhaps this is what Louis Kahn was referring to when he spoke of his yearning of the non-existent Volume Zero of History. 'Architecture' he said 'deals with the recesses of the mind. With that which is not yet said, and not yet built.'

In this context, are Islamic domes eternal symbols of a religion, or accidents of technology? If the latter, then perhaps it might be better for the architects of Bangladesh to search in a deeper stratum of mythic intuition, as for instance, the Koranic Garden of Paradise. How can the Char Bagh be expressed anew in the lush tropical climate of Bengal? Perhaps from such questions may arrive the

architecture they seek, an architecture which, at one and the same time, is both regional as well as universal.

In this search, we should be open to new technologies, whenever appropriate and available, keeping intact our own self-confidence. When, and why, does a society pause mid-stride and doubt itself? The matter is indeed a delicate one. In the early eighties, when they started drinking Pepsi Cola in China, one sensed instinctively that this was going to be the beginning of the end, that eventually all of Mao's China must unravel. On the other hand, when you see New Yorkers eating in a Chinese restaurant, do you panic and think that this is the first step in the Chinafication of America?

The difference of course is one of self-confidence. When Islam came out of the Arabian desert and spread towards Iran and Yemen, it was full of confidence in itself. It found wonderful architecture which already existed in these places, which it just absorbed, ingested, made its very own. Thus when Islam arrived in India, it discovered all kinds of exotic marbles and precious stones which it had never seen before, and these again were assimilated and internalised with great self-confidence. And so we get Agra, Fatehpur-Sikri, Mandu and many other masterpieces. And we get the stunningly beautiful housing typologies we find in the hill towns of Yemen and the wind-catching houses of Iran, all of which, regardless of origin we identify today with Islam. Where has that self-confidence gone today?

### **Housing and Habit**

This brings us to another range of issues with which the Award is vitally concerned, and which is also of fundamental importance to much more than just the Muslim world. These are the issues which concern our housing, our cities and our environment.

The building of the habitat we have just been discussing, as everywhere in the world, is an organic process, involving society as a whole. The incredibly beautiful houses in Mykonos, Rajasthan and Tahiti are not the brainchild of individual architects, but the product of the entire community and its history. For people can indeed produce the housing they need as naturally and instinctively as birds build nests. In fact, habitat which addresses just about every one of our contemporary concerns (balanced eco-systems, recycling of wastes, human scale, cultural identity and so forth) *already exists* in the vernacular building systems of people throughout the world. What does *not* exist is the urban context where these solutions are viable. This then is our primary responsibility: to help generate this context.

This is why we must always pay the keenest attention to efforts that attempt to provide the support structure, the



subsystems, which generate habitat. This is of crucial importance to urban centres, not only in the Third World, but increasingly in the industrialised nations as well. As our cities decay, the situation worsens. Those who suffer most of all, of course, are the poor.

How can the architect, using professional skills, help in this process and not simply express a feeling of compassion, like Florence Nightingale among the wounded? The answer is by not acting like a prima donna professional, but more modestly and anonymously. It is a role which has very important precedents. Throughout Asia, and elsewhere in the world as well, the architects' prototype was the site *mistri*, that is an experienced mason/carpenter who helped with the design and construction of habitat.

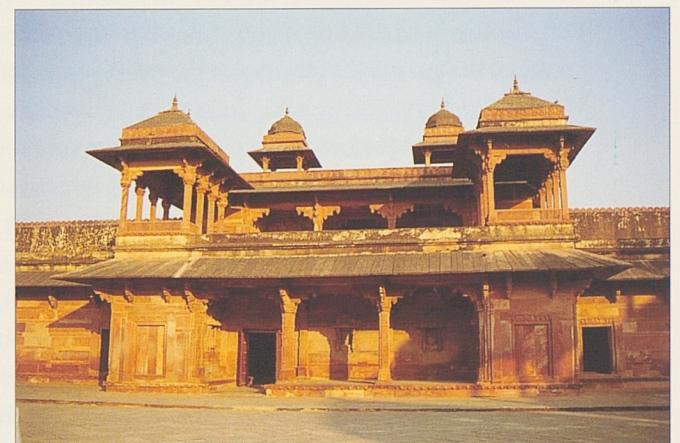
The extraordinarily high quality of these master artisans is evident not only in housing, but also in the architectural masterpieces of history. In fact, without these peerless craftsmen, the Taj Mahal and Fatehpur-Sikri would have been an impossibility; not only in their construction, but in the very conceptualisation of the architectural language itself. By totally undervaluing the decisive contribution of these craftsmen to architecture, we have, over the last few decades, discouraged them to the point of extinction.

Our arrogance stems from a lack of understanding of architecture and its relationship with the other arts. So we design a building and then put some art into it, or a piece of sculpture in front of it, which is indeed myopic. A mural need not just adorn a room, it can, through the tension it generates, totally change the dynamics of the space. This is what the frescos of Fra Filippo Lippi do to those courtyards in Florence, or the cave-paintings in Ajanta do to the landscape without, or, for that matter, the white and golden cherubs of the rococo churches of Austria, flying in from the windows, beckoning in the daylight. It is important that we understand and clarify in our minds the roles of the various players such as builders, architects and clients, involved in the creation of architecture and why sometimes it succeeds, and why sometimes it fails.

### The Processes of Architecture

This is indeed an important question. When one looks at the architecture in the countries around the Gulf, one is aware of the incredible mismatch between the high quality of the architects who were commissioned for the projects and (in far too many cases) the low quality of the results. Why does this happen? It is irrelevant that a number of the architects involved are foreigners. On the contrary, when the city of Chandigarh in India was being designed by Le Corbusier forty years ago, many people wondered: don't Indian architects object to this key project being assigned to

*FROM ABOVE: View along the side of the facade of Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House; cupola fresco by Damiam in the rococo Weltenburg Abbey Church; the use of local red sandstone makes Fatehpur Sikri seem to blend with its surroundings, particularly at dawn and dusk*





a foreigner? I always replied: No, on the contrary. We are lucky to get Corbusier. He takes architecture very seriously. We can only profit by his example. This indeed proved to be true; in two important ways. Firstly because Le Corbusier's work was at the cutting edge of architecture, and India suddenly moved to centre stage as the focus of attention for the whole profession. People came from all over the world to see Chandigarh and Ahmedabad. Far from feeling they were working in some weird corner of Disneyland, Indian architects felt part of the mainstream and still do today. Secondly young Indian architects had an extraordinary opportunity to learn from Le Corbusier's architecture.

This was indeed true. Not only did young Indian architects learn from his extraordinary buildings, but also from exposure to the man himself. His contract with the Government of Punjab stipulated that he spend a month on site in Chandigarh, twice a year. This was in addition to his collaborators Pierre Jeanneret, Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, who resided there full-time on contracts which lasted several years. Thus the interface with India (and with Indian architects) was considerable, and mutually beneficial. We had in-depth access to creative processes of the highest order. At the same time, being exposed to the climatic and living conditions of the Punjab was of immense benefit to Le Corbusier not to mention the feedback from the users of his buildings.

This arrangement was not unique. In their design of New Delhi in the twenties the contracts of Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker stipulated that they reside continuously for six months a year in Delhi for the duration of the project. This was of decisive importance to the success of the venture, since it allowed them to absorb a far more vivid understanding of the country, its climate, its culture and its people.

In contrast, most architects in the Gulf get by with a kind of parachute planning and designing which is quite horrendous. They fly in for a few days (or hours) on projects much larger than Chandigarh. What is their exposure to the locals? And vice versa? It seems clear that there is (or should be) a difference between architecture and carpetbagging. And the clients should be astute enough to understand this. They must not only insist on a far more lengthy interface, but they must also take an intelligent interest in what the architect is trying to achieve. If they don't, then they have only themselves to blame.

No building can be better than the architect who designs it, or the contractor who builds it, or, one could add, of the client who commissions it. This is where the rich clients around the Gulf have some soul-searching to do. Years later, reading some of Corbusier's writing from the thirties, in which he appeals somewhat effusively to 'the Captains

of Industry', one suspects that all he may really have been trying to do was solicit for clients – who, luckily for him, did not swallow the bait. If the Gulf Boom had occurred in the thirties, Corbusier might well have got involved – and ruined – in the process. As I said before: India was lucky to get Corbusier. But he, too, was lucky to get India. Here he met clients who believed in the seriousness of architecture, and what it could do to our lives.

### Coda

I can never forget the brilliant address that the scientist and humanist Jacob Bronowski gave at the summation of the 1967 Aspen Design Conference on 'Order and Disorder'. Computers were then the newest buzzword among architects and designers, and there seemed to be no end to the wonders they would achieve. Bronowski took a less optimistic view. He illustrated this by examining the old proposition that 'a monkey pecking randomly at a keyboard would, sooner or later, type out the entire works of William Shakespeare'. Bronowski was sporting; he took not the whole works, but just the sonnets; and not all the sonnets but the celebrated one which starts with:

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*

*Thou art more lovely and more temperate.*

In fact, Bronowski took only the first two lines – and showed it would indeed take a great deal of time to finish these two lines by random selection, even if the monkey were to be replaced by the fastest mainframe computer. Bronowski gave us his calculation for each consecutive word, but when he reached the last word of the second line, he stopped and said: 'You know, any of us would know that this word must have three syllables – but only Shakespeare would have thought of this extraordinary word: temperate'. To Bronowski, neither Art nor Science is the product of random action. As he put it: 'If Nature wants to produce honey, it first produces the bee. If Nature wants poetry, she first produces Man.'

So perhaps when Nature wanted the exquisite architecture of the Alhambra, she first produced the Muslim. For when we look at the incredible range and beauty of Islamic Architecture down the centuries, are we not also looking at societies who through the elimination of sculpture and painting and the reliance on calligraphy, through the non-availability of tensile materials and the reliance on masonry vaults and domes were meant to produce architecture of an incredibly high order? Not just the great architects who are justly celebrated in history, but also more humble practitioners. To return to those standards, might it not necessitate an analysis of that programming, and its re-invention in the context of the aspirations and technologies of our times?