Contemporary Arab Architecture

Toward an Islamic Identity

This is an introduction and first in a series of articles which will attempt to examine contributions made by Arab architects to the transformation of the contemporary environment in their countries. The articles will cover the writings and buildings of Hassan Fathy and other Egyptian architects, working today in Egypt and other countries such as Japan, Canada, Germany and Saudi Arabia. Other articles will look into Iraq, which developed its own architectural importance through the influence of Mohamed Saleh Makiya, and the Arab architects working in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan and the Arab Peninsula. The common denominator of the architects from these countries is their search for identity, which is a fundamental necessity in order to continue the great tradition of Islamic architecture.

In his introduction to the book "Architecture of the Islamic World", edited by George Michell, Ernst J. Grube asked the question, "What is Islamic Architecture?" In his attempt to define its specific traditional characteristics, Grube refers to the concentration given to the interior space, the continuous experience of the architecture as part of the urban fabric which Grube terms "hidden architecture", and the non-representational appearance and the meaningful application of decoration. But Grube only refers to the characteristics of Islamic architecture of the past without taking its contemporary manifestations into consideration. Tradition is only valid when re-validated every generation; when the continuity of past developments are appreciated not only by scholars admiring things lost and forgotten but also by contemporary architects who are capable of continuing tradition and adding new phases to it.

Contemporary Arab architects in many of the Arab states are attempting to do this by reviewing Arab architecture of the past, selecting those works which they consider of value and creating their own models for today. Preservation of values rather than preservation of forms or ornamental detail is, as in all creative cultural revolutions, a reinforcement of identity. Only with a living history can the self be found and expressed, only with roots is growth possible.

One of the main characteristics of the Islamic tradition is diversity in unity, the assimilation and adaptation of existing cultural values with regional differentiations. The Muslim religion is based on reconciliation, the harmonious relation between something new and something already in existence. Islamic architecture which is based on this same principle assimilates the architectural language of the country in which it is located, thereby taking on a regional identity. This assimilation can be seen in North Africa, Iraq, Sudan, Persia, Indonesia, and even — in first attempts — in the Islamic architecture in Madrid, Rome, Chicago and other cities in Europe and America. But, in whatever country one finds Islamic architecture, as diverse as it might be, its Islamic identity is always visible.

To a large extent contemporary Arab architecture is dominated by Western influence which manifests itself in technology and new building types which were unknown in traditional Islamic architecture. Fazlur R. Khan, one of the revolutionary innovators of Western technology, defined these relations in his paper at the First Seminar of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1978. Talking about "The Islamic Environment: Can Future Learn from the Past?" He said: "The force of modern technology, whose base is primarily Europe and America, is so overwhelming, so deceptively attractive to these countries and so responsive to their desire for fast construction of unprecedented scale and volume that it is almost impossible to resist the temptation to copy, by-and-large, their methods, forms and technology."

This statement accurately reflects the current architectural situation in the Arab states which is a mid-way expression between Western technology and the rediscovery of Arab tradition. Representative of this ambivalence are buildings by several Arab architects. A house by the Moroccan architect Mourad Ben Embarek in Rabat of 1968-1970 reveals the Scandinavian background of his education, in spite of his dedicated attempt to overcome foreign architectural forms. His airport building in Casablanca is his expression of a new independent Moroccan architecture based on the most advanced modern technology. Two other Moroccan architects Abdesien Faroui and Patrice de Mazières were based on French tradition in their Family Planning Centre in Rabat in 1976, but used imaginative forms of Moroccan tradition, harmonising it with the landscape and climate, in their hotel building in Bounmale du Dades of 1972-1974.

Architects from Iraq and Jordan such as Rifā' Chadirji and Rasem Badran come close to reviving the traditional Arab house, not by using formalistic adaptations but by taking the essential values and reconstituting them to suit contemporary needs. Chadirji's Villa Hamood in Baghdad of 1970-1972 and Badran's Villa Handal in Amman of 1975-1977 are outstanding examples of contemporary Arab architecture.

Text by Professor Udo Kultermann. Photographs courtesy of respective architectural firms.
But there are other building schemes, some of them large-scale universities, mosques and new cities in line with the Islamic tradition and the pragmatic requirements of contemporary Arab society. Jafar Tukan's and Kenzo Tange's Yarmouk University in Jordan is an example of carefully considered campus planning. Every aspect of an academic community has been integrated into the traditional patterns of Arab planning schemes creating a harmonious synthesis of old and new. The campus for the Gulf University by Kamal El Kafrawi in Doha, which was begun in 1980, is a good example of programatically integrating traditional features that have proven efficient over years into a modern and contemporary building programme. The cooling system of the old wind-tower houses in the Gulf region have been made part of the contemporary design relating the old Arab tradition with a new task.


Special emphasis has been given to relating recent construction of mosques to the Islamic past. The most prominent example of this can be seen in the Kuwait State Mosque by the architect Mohamed Saleh Makiya. Now under construction, this mosque, as well as other mosques by Makiya, combines past and present, which is a necessity in the perpetuation of culture. New independent works by architects from Saudi Arabia such as the palaces or the Port Authority Headquarters in Riyadh of 1979 by the architect Zuhair Fayez or the social buildings and markets by the Beeah Group Consultants signify the changing situation.
of architects in Arab countries who are now capable of competing with architects from all over the world. Arab architects no doubt feel a sense of self-esteem and pride as they face this new challenge.

The identity of Arab architecture seen in the context of works by large international firms based on high technology may appear simple and less sophisticated. But, the basic spiritual dedication which prevails is compensation for the scientific expertise of the foreigners. Saba George Shiber, the great Arabian planner was aware of this as early as 1963 when he wrote: "Today, not only in the Arab world but elsewhere, perhaps what is needed most is not merely technical skill and knowledge, but wisdom..." The know-how in matters of technology may be better handled for the time being by firms such as Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Kenzo Tange, Rolf Gutbrod and Frei Otto and the Architects' Collaborative, and that is just as well. What is more important in the Arab States right now is not technology or the transfer of technology which has been developed in other countries but the revitalisation of the Arab past, along with an appropriate amount of technology which is needed for specific tasks. Too much technology and its inappropriate use can be enormously harmful, therefore a balance has to be found which is based on human concern and the specific needs of the Arab world. A step in this direction has already been taken by the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy in his writings, teaching and buildings.

Hassan Fathy was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1900 and had a profound universal education and architectural experience in many countries, such as Greece where he worked for several years in the office of the architect Constantinos Doxiadis in Athens. His name is known in the United States as well as in Europe and Japan. His main goal has been the spiritual awakening of the Arab people directed toward a respect for their own architecture, and with it a respect for their own tradition and cultural identity. He designed houses and markets, a theatre and a concert hall as well as villages which in their radical traditional shape created new concepts for architecture in general.

In 1945-1947 Hassan Fathy built, according to his earlier theories of adapting mud-brick for contemporary architecture, the village of New Goura in upper Egypt near Luxor which has become a symbol of architecture of the Third world. The English architectural critic J.M. Richards considered it a masterpiece after a visit in 1967 and wrote in "The Architectural Review": "Its basic geometry of cube and vault and rectangle emphasised by the deep shadows cast by the Egyptian sun, appeared as the essence of architecture itself."

But, Goura is more than formal architecture of high quality, it is architecture as a process in which the designer, builder and user work in a harmonious relationship. New Goura is in line with traditional ways of living and at the same time constitutes a contemporary type of rural architecture. The emphasis was placed on a group of clients who had been forgotten in modern times: "...no architect normally designs for peasants in the villages. No peasant can ever dream of employing an architect, and no architect ever dreams of working with the miserable resources of the peasant. The architect designs for the rich man, and thinks in terms of what the rich man can pay for."

This statement is from a book by Hassan Fathy in which he describes his experience in New Goura along with its failure due to, among other things, the lack of cooperation of the government. The book originally had the title "Goura. A Tale of Two Villages" and was published in Cairo in 1969. It was published in a second edition in Chicago in 1973 under the title "Architecture for the Poor" and has since become a handbook for thousands of architects in all parts of the world. This book which challenged the sophisticated and intellectual manifestations of all branches of "modern architecture" can be seen as a programmatic statement of a new Arab identity which values spiritual and cosmic awareness more than the necessity of modern technology. His book has become a moral basis for the coordinated activities of Arab architects in all Arab states and thus has eminently contributed to the first phase of a Renaissance of Arab architecture today.