
The Modernity in a Tradition

The Arab-Muslim culture of North Africa

Bernard Huet

Photographs by Serge Santelli

This article, which is a revised version of a public lecture given at the Institut français d'architecture, is one of those rare and insightful attempts to address broad issues of architectural conception and design in the Muslim world. The author who has long been a sensitive and devoted observer of tradition in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, formulates certain hypotheses about the way space and geometry are conceived and used in Arab culture, about the codes and conventions applied by traditional builders, about the role of professional architects in Islamic societies. For many years a teacher of architecture in France but also in Maghreb, he offers stimulating perceptions of the difficulties inherent in asking students from non-Western cultures, such as those of Islam, to adopt Western cultural norms and conceptions, like the notion of an "architectural project", when these may be totally incompatible with their tradition. Although his arguments are based upon experience in the Arab world, there are insights which pertain to other cultures as well.

— Editors.

Space and Geometry

Geometry is not, to my mind, an abstract study of solids, shapes and regulating lines such as we conceive of it in Euclidian space. Space in architectural geometry is of a *qualitative*, not a *quantitative*, order; it is oriented and differential. I am not particularly concerned with the regulating lines of stalactites (*mūqarnās*) nor the esoteric symbolism of Iranian Sufism, although I do not deny the relative interest of certain books that treat these problems. It seems much more fundamental (and less ideological also) to raise basic questions about the ways in which society as a whole (and especially people of modest background) operates concretely within the spaces it inhabits.

I might say that when we have undertaken our research with a certain number of Tunisians, Algerians, Moroccans or even French, we have formulated *a priori* the principle of an irreducible *difference*, insisting on the perceived differences first of all, over and beyond apparent and familiar similarities. The identities or resemblances between different cultural phenomena must be considered with suspicion and only accepted on the basis of strong argument. This is something which I have attempted in the past to impress upon Tunisian students of mine (among others). I say to them: "Take a familiar element which you

see in your own houses, like a window. It has features in common with windows found in our European houses; however, you must conceive of it as being fundamentally different from our windows". In trying to demonstrate this difference we are, in the end, able to comprehend: this window, in spite of its appearance, is the result of a different way of thinking, but also its function is different, its status is different. The window in the Arab Islamic culture does not serve in the same way as European windows; it fulfills functions of which we have no idea in our own uses of space. Starting from there we can perhaps better imagine the reasons for its position in a bedroom space, its placement with regard to floor level and its relationship with the courtyard space.

We can proceed in a similar manner with a geometric shape such as a square. We have to convince ourselves that when we look at a square in an Arab Islamic space, we are seeing a shape which is very different from our own conception of square. For us, a square is a shape which we describe according to its properties, the geometric elements which compose it; that is to say, we state that it is formed by four equal sides or lines and that it has four angles of 90 degrees each, etc. In Arabic conception, the square is a shape in and of itself, having global properties. The shape cannot be reduced by an abstract reasoning which separates each element. It is a concrete form in space. One perceives little by little, when watching people operate in space, that the problem resides in the concept and the status of geometric forms. Geometric forms have a highly concrete and directly operational value for them, whereas for us, such forms are initially abstract. In this sense Arabic thought is more attached to the topological "quality" of a form than to the geometric "quantity" of a shape.

It is possible to observe these things in another, more elementary fashion that relies upon specific abilities. If you place a boy or girl from a Western culture before a problem of geometry having to do with traditional North African architecture, one perceives very well their difficulty in finding solutions which a Tunisian child or a mason would propose almost spontaneously. In this respect, the precise order in which each element of a house-plan is arranged, the

hierarchical placement of spaces, appear quite clearly in this kind of geometric representation.

Ethnographical observation is always necessary. The words that are employed to designate places, the uses of spaces, placement of furniture all have an importance. Furthermore, the procedures for representing space — whether they are those used spontaneously by people who have not had any training in Western drawing techniques — or children who draw their house and attempt to communicate something through their drawing. Another thing is problematic: the difficulties which North African students in architecture encounter in conceiving a project according to our Western norms and imagining spaces according to our categories. This poorly understood difficulty makes one think of certain of them for whom this is a form of racism on the part of their teachers towards them; others utilise this cultural difference in order to explain away a real incapability. But the problem will remain entirely, until such time as the specificity of a particular way of thinking of space is recognised and until the teaching of architecture in Algiers, Rabat, Tunis or Cairo ceases to take Western education as a model. By continuing the latter, whole generations of architects are being trained who are alienated from their own spatial culture and ultimately cut off from the existing thinking of their people. They cannot understand their traditional architecture any more, nor produce the modern architecture which is expected of them. The only solution for them is to reproduce Western architecture under the worst conditions and to become the active agents of a technical and cultural colonialism.

Clearly it is the students from modest social backgrounds who have the greatest difficulty, a nearly total inability to conceive spaces, and when they do achieve this — and I do not say that all fail to do so — the result is a tremendous cultural shock. Nevertheless, the manner in which Western space is avoided rather than penetrated by these students tells me a great deal about the spaces from which they themselves come, which even they only know about intuitively most of the time, having experienced these spaces unconsciously and not through learning.

Observations of the ways in which craftsmen work are equally informative. It is enough to see the way in which a craftsman who engraves in plaster or assembles *zelliges* in Morocco actually inscribes the shapes in order to observe not only his virtuosity in composing geometric forms and complex combinations of these, but above all the means he employs, and his aims, which are not the same as ours. These craftsmen are totally unaware of the abstractness of Euclidian geometry; they operate within a very concrete space with implements inherited from Vitruvius. One of the things I object to in the books that deal with Arabic geometry in decorative design is that they offer up formal representations for Western consumption which are without any real content, as though the forms could be reproduced without going through the processes that brought them about.

Conception and Execution

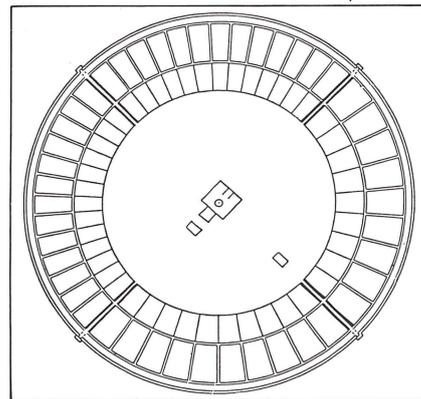
Contrary to our analytical and deductive way of thinking which separates each element and makes it dependent upon the whole, the conception of a Muslim Arab architect excludes any abstract dichotomy of elements: everything is contained within the totality of the thing, as a complete entity made up of elementary properties. Geometry, in this instance, is not a category which is separable from the form itself because it is in fact the *raison d'être* of the form. The same applies for the relationship between construction, materials, space and light. It is truly a matter of an extremely elaborate know-how which simply does not operate according to the same rules as our modern know-how.

When we speak of geometry, we must remember that *our* geometry is an abstract tool which presumes an homogenous, isotropic three-dimensional space. Arab Islamic space is, on the contrary, explicitly oriented and each direction has a precise meaning; it is even a space which is conceived in six-dimensions: front, back, above, below, right and left. While the three dimensions which we employ in order to draw our axonometric plans are abstractions having equal values and brought into simple quantitative relationships, the dimensions of Arabo-Islamic space correspond to concrete actions and have differential values, which explains in part that in drawing outlines and

shapes the Arabs do *not* differentiate in time the processes of conception and execution. This has made me recognise the idiocy of regulating lines imagined by some well-known authors who try to discover geometric relations through "Western" representations (in plan or section) of Arab buildings without taking into account at all the way in which these buildings were laid out in order to be executed.

Whereas in our society there is a separation between intellectual and material work, with specific and autonomous conceptual and methodological tools for creation and execution, in traditional cultures the person who actually conceives and he who executes (if there are two different persons) operate in exactly the same way and within the same conceptual framework — even though the knowledge of one may be more vast than that of the other. This fact is extremely important if we are to understand why this architecture does not need to go through the project phase. A project in Western societies is the mediator between conception and execution. That Arabo-Islamic architecture does not pass through a project stage does not mean that the architecture is not rigorously preconceived.

Of course, we ought to ask ourselves then, what is it that mediates between conception and execution in the absence of a project? The role of conventions becomes crucial. Included here are all the typological, technical, social and cultural conventions which ensure the transition between the two levels. An illustration of what I mean might be useful at this juncture. I know a Tunisian village in the Sahel region where the head of a family had decided to enlarge his house. The mason had indicated on the ground the place for foundations for three rooms and, since there were no drawings, I asked him: "What is your house going to be like?" He replied: "Like all the other houses". In order to learn more, I asked: "How does one locate the window, at what height?" He answered: "As usual". In answer to all of my questions, there was never any problem. But when the house was finished, I noticed that the roofline of his house was the same height as that of the adjoining house, give or take 10 centimetres. So I inquired again of the man: "How did you decide the height of your

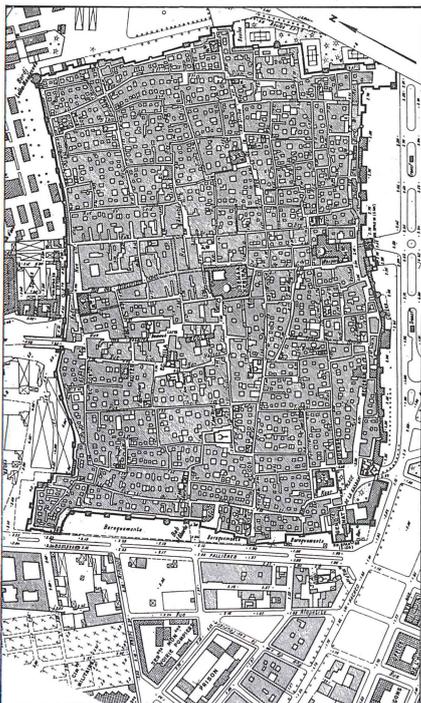
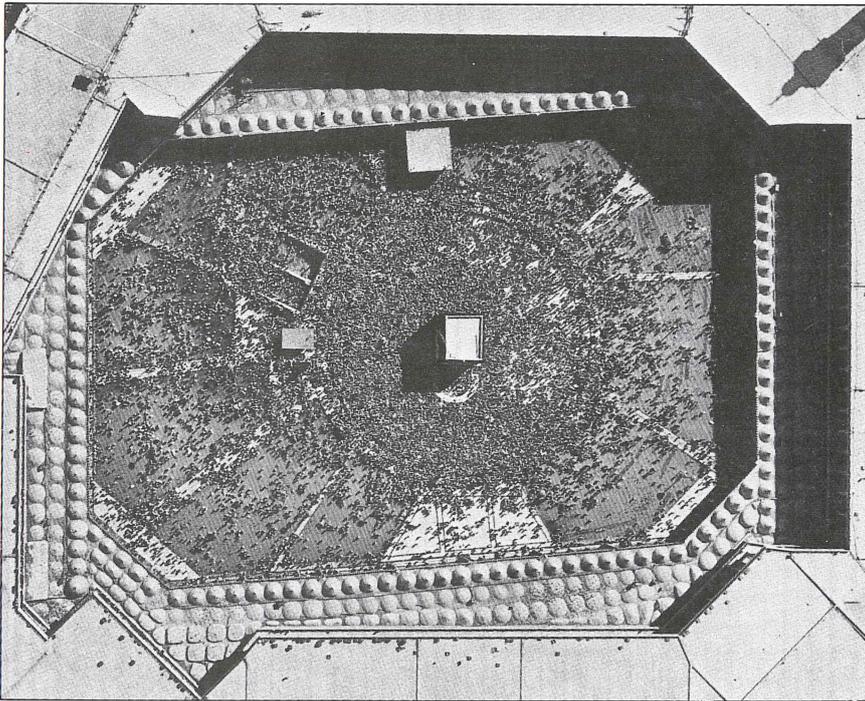


Plan of Baghdad. Source: J.D. Hoag, *Architecture islamique*. Berger-Levrault, Paris, 1982.

house?" His reply was: "It's just like that, the height is what was necessary for that room". That's all; it seems simple and obvious but it isn't at all. There is no code imposed which would apparently limit the freedom of the person who conceives or that of the builder. This freedom is closely implicated with the set of conventions which make it possible to obtain a harmonious continuity in these traditional villages and neighbourhoods, without urban planning, regulations and building permits, and without a project or drawing. Problems of geometry, and proportional relationships never occur in an isolated manner; these are resolved in very concrete terms within the different conventions which lend themselves to the production of architectural or craft objects.

Circularity and Identity

It seems to me that circularity is the first aspect of this space. This is more of a topological category than it is a geometric one since the circle, as a form, only appears exceptionally in Arab architecture and urban settings. Each of us knows the circular plan for Baghdad, but the plan is exceptional, almost mythological, and without any model in the layout of Arab cities. However, if one talks so much about it, it is because it has less significance as a model than as a paradigm of the circularity I am speaking about. The circularity, the concentric character of the Muslim world, is manifest even on the level of religious geography. It is enough to reflect on that world



Top: Ka'ba in Mecca with pilgrims.
Above: Plan of the medina of Sfax.

where five times a day masses of the faithful form an uninterrupted circle around a single centre: Mecca. Moreover, there is circularity which appears clearly in the procession of pilgrims around the Ka'ba at the centre of the great mosque in Mecca. All Muslims are perfectly aware of this; but, for each individual, the *centre* towards which everything is oriented is absent. Invisible like God, prayer is always a mental projection towards this centre. This may perhaps seem rather far from architecture, whereas in reality this image of circularity in the Muslim world is to be found everywhere, as the underlying principle of everything.

There is a second aspect of this space which is the identity of figures. Every figure, or shape, in this world is a finite figure, complete, autonomous, from the moment that it appears. Every figure is finite as soon as it appears, which is to say that by its nature it possesses all the characteristics of its finiteness even if it still remains in a potential state. A traditional house in North Africa is potentially defined in its totality, even in the simplest, most primitive state. The house may be only a single inhabitable room, yet the principle, and the limits, are already set forth — of

what it could become as it is completed, as it becomes more complex. The court, or *wustidar*, will be defined as the centre of the house, around which the rooms will be oriented and given a hierarchical status; an enclosing wall will be constructed which constitutes the boundary of the spatial organisation.

We observe therefore that the notion of circularity is fundamental to the definition of identity. The importance of the centre and the limit is borne out by the myths surrounding the creation of certain cities. The founder almost always begins by establishing the centre of the city, i.e. the major mosque, and then delimits the extent and perimeter of the walls from the outset.

Let us take the city of Sfax, for example. The plan represents a rectangle, quite strictly limited by walls, with the main mosque occupying the centre, around which everything is organised and given a hierarchical rank.

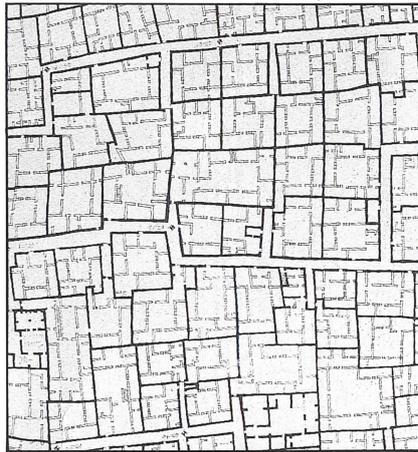
We are practically certain that in historic cities such as Tunis and Sfax, the city blocks were organised around a very large dwelling which belonged to one or another of the most important families; it was always located at the centre, as far as possible from the boundaries of the block, and the more modest houses, belonging to dependents of the clan or "clients" of the important family, were grouped around the main edifice. This characteristic of circularity of space with a centre and a limit is present in all the public buildings of the city, whether it is a mosque, a *medersa*, a *fondouk* or other type.

The Courtyard: Its Centre and Periphery

We perceive the basic meaning of the court as a regulating system for spaces of rooms which are subordinate to it. This is particularly apparent in the way that Tunisian children draw their house. They lay out first of all the square courtyard space and arrange the rooms around it. Students with Western training to whom the same request was made to draw their house, attempted to represent the exterior perimeter of the dwelling and then divided the space to form the rooms. In the first case, the court served the function of giving order to the household space, whereas in the second case it was the result of giving order to the house. This is fundamentally different.

It has become a habit to say that Arabic thought and logic operates by ambivalence. The inclusion of contraries in the same expression is something that cuts across even the language barrier, for the French spoken by Tunisians is often a literal translation from Arabic; expressions are permeated with Arab thought patterns. This manner of speaking with ambivalence presents difficulties but is nevertheless comprehensible, even though a foreigner may not always grasp the meaning immediately. This logic does not rely upon the use of binary, antinomical choices but associates these in the same thought. Thus, there exist in the city, as well as in the dwelling, a certain number of systems which assume the incompatibility of spaces that are pure and impure, clean and dirty, visible and hidden, public and private, etc. These groups of opposites are not perceived as being mutually exclusive but as two aspects of the same phenomenon, one which does not interrupt the unity of space. Such an operation would be impossible without this movement from the centre towards the limit that creates a hierarchy ranging from clean to dirty, pure to impure; in other words, that which is rejected as foreign, as a prostitute, or is considered a dirty profession (such as tanners or metalworkers) is located at the limits of the city, near the walls. The limits contain these activities, and regroup them yet they belong to the centre at the same time. The same thing holds true for the dwelling: the kitchen and the toilets are next to the exterior wall but they are part of the central space; this allows all of the contradictions to be acceptably integrated, thereby participating in the identity of the house.

Each figure is therefore generated by its centre, contained by its limit. This centre does not need to be designated; it is all the stronger when it is empty. But everything must refer back to it, and everything does implicitly refer back to it. The symmetries — and here we must speak of the concept of geometry in Arab Islamic space — the symmetries designate it but in a discrete manner. Except in certain very precise cases, the centre is rarely as such. This remark also applies equally well to the manner in which the courtyard space in a Tunisian house is occupied during a party or a celebration. No one explicitly takes up a place in the centre; the centre remains emp-



Plan (detail) of medina of Kairouan, Tunisia.
Plan: S. Santelli/B. Huet.

ty, available, but extraordinarily pregnant with potential. It is exceptional to find an object located at the centre of courts. The palaces, for instance, in which there are central fountains very often are of Italian or Turkish inspiration and there they amount to a sort of cultural contamination.

The *boundary*, the enclosing element is the area where things that are rejected are located, but the rejection does not mean exclusion beyond the limits which define the figure. The boundary harmonises the incompatibilities between public and private, sacred and profane, but allows just the same for their coexistence and their juxtaposition. At the same time that the limit serves to identify the form of a space, it does not refer only to that space. The space is introverted, as are the facades. The public space between the houses, the mosques, the bazaars, in other words street spaces in general, is residual. It is not conceived as such, and I would go so far as to say in fact that the street in the medina does not exist; it is not an autonomous entity as it is in our world. The street is a necessary area, a link between buildings, but it is not an area onto which facades project an image of what happens within the building itself. The only time that an edifice does become important in terms of the public space is when the boundary is interrupted for the sake of passage between interior and exterior. A house mainly relates to the outside world through the doorway; the latter discreetly expresses

the function of the building, or the type of occupant and his fortune. However, a doorway is not part of the same autonomous expressive system as Western facades, for example. Doors are extraordinarily difficult to read for someone who is not familiar with their code. I believe, moreover, that this refusal to be ostentatious, rhetorical and even decipherable is one of the fundamental tenets of Islam. Arab Islamic domestic architecture does not convey the public monumentality of buildings in the West. Exceptions are the rule in this respect.

Repetitiveness

One of the obvious consequences of circularity is repetitiveness. The concept of housing typologies which we employ is not easily applied to this architecture because the differences of fortune, or between social classes, are not discernible through fundamental typological differences among dwellings. There is only one typology for the house. Differences are to be found in one of three ways: dimensions, repetition and saturation of various elements.

Let us try to understand the basic differences between the simplest dwelling imaginable, of a poor family, and a vast edifice of someone very rich. The first house contains a very small number of elements: the entrance, the courtyard, the room for sleeping, and the service spaces which, by their nature, orientation and geometric treatment refer to the same space, or the same embryonic typology as the big house. The only thing which really differentiates the two houses is the amplification of these elements, that is, their multiplication, the enlargement of volumes or richness of decoration.

The culminating point of this phenomenon is a total saturation of the dwelling space with rooms, and of the walls with ornamentation. The way of composing is automatically linked to the possibility of developing this phenomenon of repetition. It is based primarily upon the juxtaposition of parts of addition. This principle is to be found everywhere and at all levels. Each part of the traditional North African house in Tunisia functions as a whole, reproducing the image of this whole. Each room functions in an autonomous way; it is in itself a small house, with each part of the T-shaped room being organised around a



Above: Interior of a house in Malidia, Tunisia.

Above, right: Interior courtyard of private dwelling in Malidia, Tunisia. Note traditional use of Nabuel tiles.



central space, reflecting the relationship which exists between the rooms of the house and the central space of the courtyard.

Composition through the addition of autonomous parts is also visible at an urban scale. The medina, experienced as an irregular and unfathomable labyrinth by a visitor, is the result of an orthogonal organisation which could be called a gridiron pattern, or a chequered network; but this gridiron is not the result of division of a surface as in the Western tradition. On the contrary, it emerges through the addition of autonomous squares. Even if the outcome seems formally similar, the generation of the figure by addition alters the basic givens of the problem fundamentally. This is clearly visible in aerial photographs taken of more or less spontaneously-constructed neighbourhoods (the *gourbivilles* in Tunisia). The formation of plots clearly followed this same principle of addition, even where the local authorities had made an effort beforehand to draw up a regular land-use plan.

This system of addition and juxtaposition of autonomous parts is manifest in the decoration of the courtyard and the rooms. This decoration resembles perfectly defined

panels which form autonomous, juxtaposed shapes, covering the entire wall surface to the point of saturation. However, the possibility to introduce decoration in a house, and to develop it progressively across whole surfaces over a long period of time, depends upon the economic resources of a family; this implies a potential availability of space, relative autonomy of each element receiving a decoration, and a definite order in the elaboration of decorated surfaces. In other words, we have here an invisible network which could already organise the entire available space before the first decorative elements have even appeared. The arrangement of furniture conforms to the same requirements. In traditional houses the pieces of furniture are arranged in pairs in a symmetrical fashion. Even in modern houses, we find objects like imported bibelots (originally conceived as single, isolated things) multiplied by two, or more: two commodes, two mirrors, two clocks, two vases, etc. The kinds of objects have changed but their status and representational role in the living spaces have remained the same.

The circularity of space is not as much a geometrical principle as it is a topological device for organising and understanding space. Explicit allusions to circularity as a geometrical shape are rather exceptional, which makes it all the more meaningful. The circle, the cylinder and the cupola only

appear in North Africa, and particularly in Tunisia in certain specific kinds of buildings having particular symbolic connotations: in mosques, *hammams* and *marabouts*. It is linked to sacred things, to purification and to death; moreover, in popular consciousness these levels are mixed up together. The cupola designates the space in front of the *mihrab* in mosques, but since the spaces in mosques tend to be repetitive it is to be found a second time over the central door of the prayer hall giving onto the courtyard — as a sort of exterior *mihrab*; and, in a third place in the very large mosques, the cupola is used over the main door to the outside. It is also employed in funerary monuments for holy men revered in popular culture. The sacred connotation is obvious, and even natural in a sense; less so is finding the cupola in public baths, or *hammans*, over the room for relaxation. We know that part of the ritual of purification takes place by bathing and it is possible to interpret the cupola as signifying the religious aspect of purification. However, this meaning is not explicitly admitted by the users. On the other hand, certain popular tales are edifying: some proclaim that one should not go to the baths after a certain hour of the night because there is the risk of meeting ghosts. There is thus a parallel with the funerary architecture of *marabouts*, but also an indirect confirmation of the religious connotation for baths.

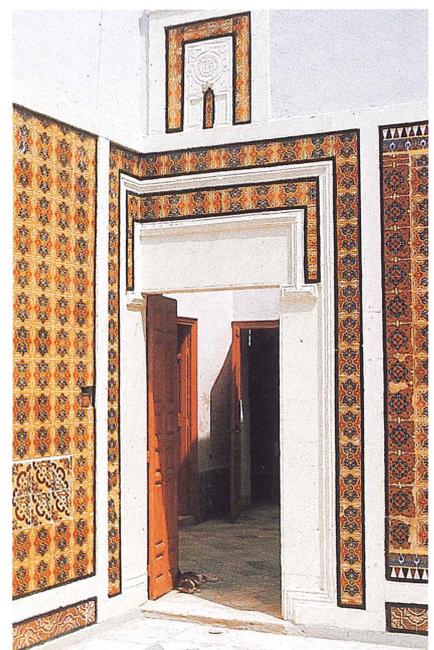
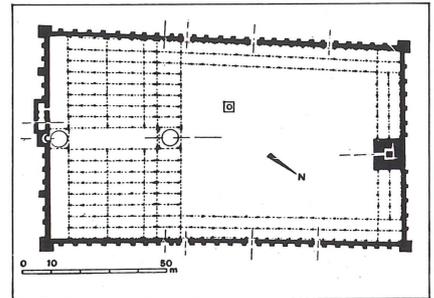
The Square and the Cube

Apart from the case of the cupola, the principle of using orthogonals is absolute. The square remains the absolute touchstone as far as geometric shapes are concerned. Why? There are probably numerous explanations, some of which are clearly pragmatic: it is the most rational form for distribution of space, but this answer does not take into account the special cultural choice which is so apparent. I believe that the square, and perhaps the cube, are forms whose topological characteristics come closest to these of the circle. One has the identical nature of points on the sides, of the angles, of the planes, equidistant from the centre, etc. But, if there are identical qualities there are also, and conjointly, possibilities for differences in relation to a centre; a hierarchy in the distances of angles in comparison to the centre of sides in a square, and of edges in relation to the centre of a cube.

There are two attributes therefore: it is a form which, as it is utilised by the North Africans, has the double advantage of uniting the properties of the circle when one wishes, and of allowing for the creation of hierarchies that take care of rejected spaces. The entrance towards the street, for instance, is located in the corner of the square, as well as the passageway to the latrine, the stairs, the kitchen, etc. In the middle of sides of the courtyard are the openings to the main rooms, emphasised by the symmetrically-placed windows which light the rooms. The square plan of the courtyard does not give preference to any one direction, and in fact reinforces the reference to a static centre of the courtyard. Perception of the square, or even the cube by North Africans is not Euclidian; the square, or the cube, is not identifiable for them as a combination of four sides or four faces. The figure possesses a continuity which allows them not to consider an angle linking two sides as a discontinuity in the plan, whenever this seems necessary. For example, the framing of doors or windows located in the angle of a courtyard can turn the orthogonal corner onto the adjacent wall. At such time the integrity of the door frame is maintained without compromising the angle of the court. The square, paradoxically, is even the basis of reference for oblong spaces such as are to be found in some Moroccan mos-

ques, in certain gardens, or palace patios in Spain. The longitudinal dynamism of these spaces is never utilised to obtain effects of visual perspective as, for example, in Baroque spaces. Quite the opposite, the space is brought back into a kind of stasis of centrality by symmetrically-located pavilions along the short sides of the courtyard, and facing one another.

I have mentioned the problem of axiality in Arab Islamic spaces of the Maghreb. Axes, the hierarchies of axes, and symmetrical ordering are used regularly in composing shapes. We find them as the basis of composition in most plans of mosques, *hammams*, or simple dwellings. However, what is different from Western thinking about space, where axial views, single-point perspectives, strongly emphasised symmetrical hierarchies are glorified, is that Arab Islamic tradition dissociates layout, hierarchy of composition, vision, and movement patterns. The view is always blocked; axialities can only be perceived in a fragmentary manner, space after space. When nothing blocks the view, as in the case of mosques, the *mihrab* may be seen as a focal point along the axis of the court, at the end of the prayer hall; but to do so is to forget that all the spatial hierarchies weaken this central axis. It is the wall, the *qibla*, which gives order to lines of columns in the prayer hall and on the facade itself. The indications of this central hierarchy are subtle. It is equivalence which pervades everything. Only in following a sequential movement does one discover the main axis. In the case of the *hammams*, where a series of rooms are often located along a main axis, the zigzag path of circulation is in complete contradiction with the axial composition in plan. For a Westerner, this labyrinthian confusion makes normal orientation impossible and hinders one from imagining the marvelous geometric logic and astonishing clarity of the plans of *hammams*. We have observed that spatial hierarchies are hidden, almost non-existent in the courtyards of houses in order to preserve the centrality, in order to respect the equivalencies found in the square. A few subtle signs provide the necessary orientation of space towards the main room, but this kind of orientation implies a deficiency because, as soon as money and circumstances permit, all directionality disappears in favour of totally equal treatment of the



Top: Plan of the Great Mosque in Kairouan, Tunisia. Note the placement of domes over the entrance and over the mihrab.

Above: Detail of door treatment in courtyard house in Mahdia. The door framing turns the 90-degree corner.

facades in the courtyard. This is the case of palace courts in Tunis where each of the four sides gives onto a T-shaped room.

Present Orientations

There is an enormous amount of traditional building still in North Africa. This production sustains a certain know-how that a few craftsmen and the population at large have been able to retain. However, it remains cut off, scorned by officialdom and besieged by "modernist" forces, in the form of en-

“The assault upon traditional architecture is taking place at all levels; it is consciously organised to ensure that western-type architecture has a monopoly.”



Recent Tunisian villa construction Garden facade.

gineering firms, architects and contractors who are excluded from the realm of traditional production. A conflict exists between this kind of architecture and that which is imported and imposed by those in power. Everything lends itself to this opposition, the ways of thinking about space, the division of labour, the use of materials, etc.; the one is killing-off the other, and there is really no other term to describe this. There are obviously economic and political stakes behind this cultural genocide, but that is another problem.

I would add simply that it is not so much the projects by foreign architects or those bound to the West, nor so much the villa designs taken from catalogues and foreign magazines by draughtsmen and geometers that are eliminating traditional

architecture, but it is the constant pressure brought to bear by the prevailing ideology, repeated in the schools and promoted by the media with ever greater insistence. It is, even more, the control exercised through bureaucratic, technical and regulatory agencies such as the obligation for individuals to acquire a building permit. In concrete terms this means that to design a project, to have to draw up an abstract representation, to depend upon a technician, to break completely with the manner of conceiving traditional architecture (*without* drawings), is to take away from the master mason his knowledge and to impose additional financial charges upon the cost of a dwelling. What can be said about the urban planning

codes and the land-use plans which forbid party-wall construction, forbid courtyards, and require set-backs? The assault upon traditional architecture is taking place at all levels; it is consciously organised in order to ensure that Western-type architecture has a monopoly, and above all to allow unproductive classes of society to benefit from this new division of labour.

The rupture between traditional and modern has not been complete since one can see everyday that the regulations and technical devices have been ignored or circumvented and that people have adapted themselves in order to resist. Moreover, I have hope that the Arabic conception of space will survive in any case, perhaps in another form, even though everything is being done in the architectural schools and

“A new type of hybrid culture is emerging, in which architects have no part, which comes from the clients who retain control of decision making.”

in the media to ignore such conceptions.

A rather new phenomenon has occurred spontaneously. Officially speaking, social advancement goes hand in hand with abandoning the traditional house. The functionalist arguments raised in favour of abandoning this type of dwelling are well known: they are all based upon the predominant ideology, since the real reason is that only poor people live in traditional houses. Thus, they reflect an image of underdevelopment, of poverty and worthlessness. Some people easily put their cultural conscience to rest by saving a few palaces in order to transform them into museums or picturesque backdrops for tourists. For the rest, these houses are declared unhealthy, uneconomical, ill-adapted thermally and generally bad for habitation, without any scientific study whatsoever. This is, of course, the official line of modernist architects. People who have money and who want to acquire social status build themselves Westernised villas in the middle of a lot — even if there only remains 1.5 metres of garden space around it. It is a total reversal of the traditional, with spaces that are completely extroverted. Beyond the exterior appearances of villas, with symbols of Westernisation on the facade, it is possible to perceive that the thinking behind the organisation of spaces, and the decorative compositions, remains traditional. The plans are drawn up by technicians under the control of the owner — and these plans are clearly modified in comparison to the Western plans which inspired them originally. The notion of centrality reappears with force, not in the organisation of a court but of a central room which dominates all the other rooms. A new type of hybrid culture is emerging, in which architects have no part, and which comes simply from the fact that the client (future owner) uses the draughtsman and pays him for his work in exactly the same way that he did with the mason. He retains control of the decision-making about spaces which correspond to his lifestyle — all the while projecting the fictive allure of a modern house. This does not happen without contradictions such as those which women endure in being deprived of an outdoor but enclosed space like the courtyard of traditional houses. Nevertheless, this evolution warrants further observation.

This kind of modification can even be

verified in cases of villas proposed by a trained architect. At the time of construction, these projects undergo radical changes at the request of the owner in order to adjust the house to his needs and tastes. The traditional mode of production tends in this fashion to re-establish itself, by eliminating the role of the architect as authorised agent for the client and restoring the direct relationship between user and master mason. The project really exists, in the usual sense, but it is only a device for satisfying the regulations without conforming to the spirit of these. It is a false project because it does not truly aid in defining ahead of time, and in an unalterable way, a building and all its aspects.

There is also the case of the thousands of collective housing units built by national agencies that totally rely upon the procedures and structures of the same type of French agencies for reproducing this housing: same type of financing, same engineering offices, same contracting system, etc. These so-called “economical” dwellings for the poorer classes have three serious drawbacks: they are more expensive than traditional houses built according to conventional procedures because of all of the charges for investment, studies, control and management which the traditional house avoids. The housing is built less well, is poorly insulated and less durable than traditional housing. It practically never answers the needs of inhabitants who must immediately modify this new housing in order to recover the habitation model to which they are accustomed. These modifications are so regular and extensive, hence expensive for poor people, that one wonders why the engineering offices of the building societies do not integrate them into their new projects. It is easy to observe, as a result of the modifications, the latent conflict between the cultural and spatial model still projected by the inhabitants, and another, imported model forcibly imposed for ideological, economical and bureaucratic reasons.

Education

The last point I should like to raise in conclusion is linked to what has been raised above. It is the problem of the training of architects in North Africa, and in Tunisia particularly. We know that teaching of architecture in the schools reproduces, even caricatures, the type of training and ideology of architecture, as well as the concept of

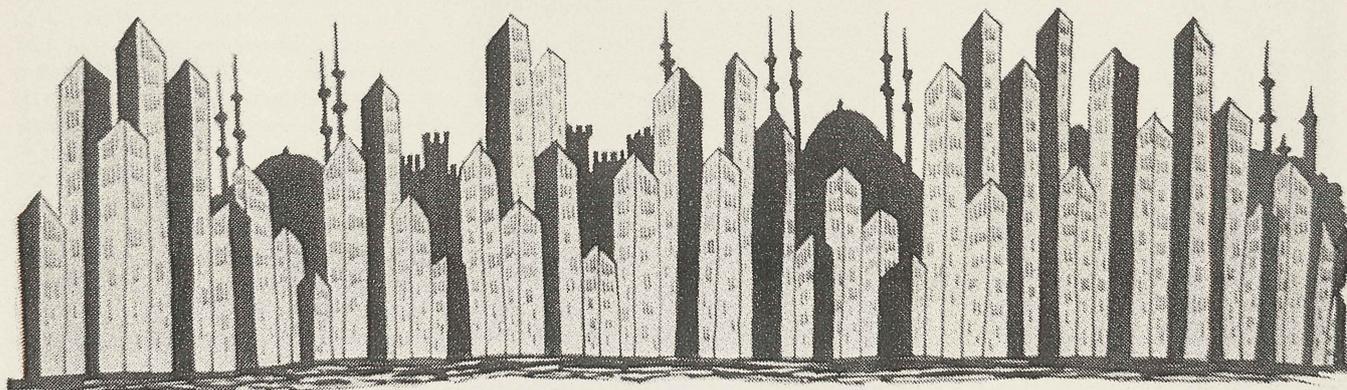
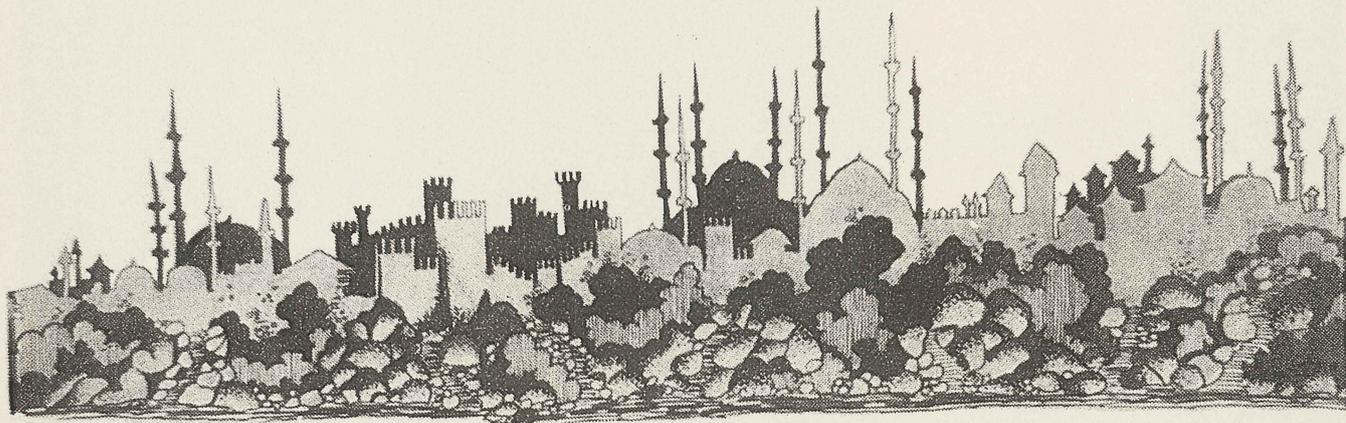
status of architects in the developed Western and Socialist countries. The results are catastrophic, not only because the intrinsic quality of the technicians is poor, but above all because they are completely ill-adapted to the needs and social demands of these countries. Quite objectively speaking, these are agents of economic neo-colonialism and the grave-diggers of traditional culture who are being trained in the schools. To reflect seriously upon the education of architects today in Africa and Asia, involves a certain number of conditions. In the first place, students have to be culturally “decolonised”. To do so means raising these questions about Arabic conceptions of space, and organising them into a discipline and deducing the proper teaching methods.

Afterwards one must try to recover all of the technical, construction and geometric know-how that tradition has preserved, learn from the master masons (*maalem*), and explore the marvelous architectural heritage that has come down through the centuries. Finally, one must question the role of the architect in Arab Islamic society, his status with regard to the traditional masons, his social function and the limitations to his efforts in the field of housing, for example. This should be done in place of training architects as “artists” in the somewhat ridiculous and anachronic image of the architects in industrialised countries who, as we already know, are experiencing an identity crisis themselves concerning their discipline, status, and profession. It would be possible to give these new technicians the task of reconciling themselves with their own culture, of rediscovering the modernity of what is traditional, and of rethinking with continuity the problems affecting their development: what kind of hospital, of school, of work space, of secular institutions specifically for North Africa of today? For a culture which knew how to create such rich and complex architectural typologies as mosques, *medersas*, *hammams*, bazaars, *fundouks*, *oukalas*, and *keserias*, future workers ought to rise to the heights of this heritage.

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