Reflections on the 1986 Aga Khan Awards for Architecture

The 1986 Aga Khan Awards for Architecture mark the end of three full award cycles and nearly ten years of intense, sustained efforts to encourage and to reward excellence in contemporary building in Muslim societies. This year’s results undoubtedly signify a turning point in the award-giving process itself, primarily because of the challenges to the profession raised by the Jury. A star-studded cast of jury-members, most of them professional architects themselves, abdicated their responsibility to deal with the crucial issue of „innovative design“ in a complex 20th century world.

Was it out of temerity, ideological bias, or lack of consensus that brought them to decisions which, though fascinating in their own for the subjects dealt with, have perturbed more than one critic by what they left out of consideration. And, it took the Jury twenty-five pages of explanatory preamble to attempt to justify why they came (or did not come) to the selections they did. It is this written document that reveals the greatest number of inconsistencies, preconceptions and contradictory points of view on architecture and the profession in the real world today. Before trying to grasp the essence of this document, an understanding of how the 1986 winning projects fit into an overall picture of previous laureates may be gleaned from the schematic chart presented at the beginning of this essay.

An openness and flexibility characterizes the procedures established for discovering worthy candidate-buildings, and for the attribution of awards by a different jury every three years. (A permanent staff is charged with information gathering and processing this prior to presentation to the jury). Hence, the 1980 Jury six years ago was not presented with a series of set categories (e.g. housing, public buildings, etc.) to fill; they were allowed — as others have been subsequently — to determine their own criteria for selection, within the framework of the basic aims and goals of the Aga Khan Award. As it was emphasised at the time, the 1980 awards were considered for the most part to exemplify a „search“ in a direction that merited acknowledgment or encouragement. No one project, and there were fifteen, was singled out as representing the highest possible achievement in any one of the seven classifications (see above) they created for their own purposes. These were not, moreover, suggested or imposed as groupings in 1983 or 1986, yet they constitute an initial precedent and are general enough to provide us with an indication of the directions in thinking pursued by successive Aga Khan juries.

A multiplicity of awards then was justified with the following words: “We found our task a difficult one... Muslim culture is slowly emerging from a long period of subjugation and neglect in which it had virtually lost its identity, its self-confidence, its very language... The present is a period of transition...” Of the seven headings, three of them had three winners each: Search for Consistency with Historical Context, Restoration, and Search for Contemporary Use of Traditional Language. Other categories had one or two prize-winners. In all 15 cases in 1980, professionals of one kind or another, architects, planners, or technicians were involved in the projects, and could be identified as having brought recent theory and technology to bear in solving a building task.

While no single theory, of architecture, of planning or of restoration, was given preeminence six years ago, all projects demonstrated the importance which the Jury attached to the role of tradition in formulating new “identity”, “self-confidence” and “language”. If there were no new doctrines premiated, the Jury discerned at least “searches”, which implies critical thinking. However, three of the 15 winning projects, the Mekkah Alomar Hospital, the Mopti clinic, and the building system applied in Senegal can be related to the theories and architectural production of Egyptian Hassan Fathy. And, the latter received a special award that same year from the Chairman of the Award Steering Committee (Chairman’s Award) for his lifetime contributions to the field. To this extent, a trend towards encouraging indigenous building (types, materials, systems) could be perceived, reinforced by the Indonesian Kampung and pesantren winners which depended heavily on community participation.

It can be said, purely for purposes of the present discussion, that this particular emphasis upon local models and resources, called “Search for Contemporary Use of Traditional Language”, gained further ground in the 1983 Awards when five of eleven projects fell into this grouping.

The most troublesome area for the 1980 Jury was that of a “Search for Innovation”. Watertowers in Kuwait and the hotel/conference centre in Mekkah were seen as representing attempts to assimilate new technology with existing traditions in a creative manner. From a theoretical point of view, one might say that reliance upon strictly indigenous sources had been superseded by efforts to innovate with traditional values and imagery in harmony with modern technical needs and resources. Sherefeddin’s White Mosque from the 1983 Awards probably fits most adequately into the line of thinking “Search for Innovation,” and while one is tempted to situate the Haj Air Terminal, Jeddal in the same category, it is our feeling that it comes closer to the criteria spelled out previously in “Search for Appropriate Building Systems”. Its at least partial replicability, in technical terms, has already been manifested elsewhere in that country and elsewhere in the region.

Once the relative distribution of winners within the grid formulated by the first Jury has become apparent, the purpose of our exercise should be clearer: to illustrate rather pointedly where the biggest gaps are to be found. Discounting the facile reproach that with only six winners this year it would be impossible to fill seven classifications, it should be noted that the 1986 Jury not only avoided the crucial subject of contemporary professional contributions but created a new “category” with distinctly “populist” overtones. While exercising its legitimate prerogatives, this Jury has confused architectural debate on historical, and above all theoretical, levels for some time to come.

An award-giving exercise, like a diploma jury or a written examination in any other field, is an educational enterprise of the highest order, and should be interpreted as making an evaluation at a particular moment in time. The results should not be construed as being final, absolute, complete; but they ought rather to reflect what progress has been made to date. Unfortunately, one of the leitmotifs running through the 1986 Aga Khan Jury’s report is that Islamic societies are going through a “transitional” stage, are in a period of “crisis”, “dilemma” and continuous “transformation”. Such remarks, read in the light of the choice of winners, suggest that they are offered as an excuse for not grappling with the real problems of new architecture in urbanising, industrialising societies. Each award cycle should be an assessment of production at the time.

In addition, the repeated reference in the report to “external”, “Western”,...
“foreign aid” elements as threatening cultural continuity in the whole of Asia and Africa seems to be the perennial ‘whipping boy’ trotted out to assuage guilty consciences in some sectors. We don’t live anymore in a world that is made up of isolated, polarised cultures — in spite of extremism in some parts — and the notion of “identity” (especially as relates to architecture) is pretty much of a “mixed bag” of influences.

The personalities, architectural ambitions and ideological biases of individual jury members this year coloured the revolutionary process, which are frequently more clarity and unity which might be concerned with the search for a logical language of the architectural qualities, versus the over-tensions and ideological biases of individual architects’ ideological propensities and persuasive capacities. Similarly, one might surmise that the non-Muslims left it to the Muslim interpreters of the Faith to judge the importance or relevance of a given project to modern Islamic culture. On the other hand, all seemed to have joined hands to settle certain accounts with the “modern movement” (which means the West of course), something which is already “in the past”, not to say out of fashion, in most critical circles today. For example, they state in their report:

“At the same time the Award Jury was aware that schemes might justify an award for quite different reasons. For instance, by serving as an example of the evolutionary process, or alternatively by serving as an example of a revolutionary process when appropriate. Throughout, the Jury placed emphasis on making its assessments on basic elemental architectural qualities, versus the over-simplistic, bombastic, or ideological qualities that are sometimes labelled in contemporary and “vernacular” architecture alike. In making its judgement the Jury was concerned to note conflicting philosophies between the approach of the “modern movement”, which is often concerned with the search for a logical language of clarity and unity which might be universally applied, and the results of the continuing evolutionary process, which are frequently more concerned with diversity and vitality, with joy and engagement.”

Indeed, we are brought back again to a veiled excuse for not having picked a truly contemporary building.

It is perfectly logical within this line of reasoning to turn instead to buildings which express “naive vitality” and “truly celebrate devotion, contemplation or commemoration”, as the Jury did. What is ultimately most alarming, particularly in the case of the Bhong Mosque, is the ‘populist’ attitude subscribed to by some, but not all, jury members.

“The Award Jury felt that the quality of the Awards might be enhanced by producing a wide-ranging list of recommendations that take into account the vitality of the “popular” movement in architecture. There is an architecture which is expressive beyond our rational understanding. One of the responsibilities of the Award Jury was not to impose but to be alert and observant to what is there. Given the range of achievements in the world it is important for everyone to learn to adjust his values to be able to experience the full benefits of creative variety in each country and region ... Architecture has a central role in creating and keeping alive a high level of taste. But this “popular” taste which is kept alive by the ingenious craftsman may have equal significance for future vitality in ‘creative arts. In other words, there is a dualistic element of creativity in indigenous societies in the Third World that has tended to be eliminated by its Western-oriented component. Diversity is a necessary element for regeneration, reinterpretation and creation.”

‘Populism’ as a term has historically very specific origins and connotations, apart from general association with popular forms of expression: born of a political movement in 19th-century America, its use today retains implications of rurality, conservatism and anti-intellectualism. Moreover, the anti-urban connotation of populist sentiments should not be forgotten.

In the 1983, an Aga Khan Award was attributed to a master mason for the construction of a mosque in Niono, Mali; the 1986 jury has not only made a comparable award to the Niono Mosque (Yaama Mosque) but gone a step further, with the Bhong building: it is not simply traditional, vernacular architecture receiving recognition, it is glorifying a building conceived, and paid for, by a person lacking any pretensions of theoretical background in a society with architects, schools of architecture, and long, distinguished history of great building. That the patron at Bhong employed some of the best local craftsmen to execute parts of the building is beside the point; it is a project which does little to advance the debate on architectural theory, economic and social dimensions of building in Pakistan, or even in the nebulous realm of popular taste. In the end, one must deduce that partisans on the Jury of certain ‘post-modern’ trends in international architecture combined forces with advocates of indigenous building materials and...
craftsmanship to send a populist ‘message’ to the world.

A dissenting minority on the 1986 Jury has registered (in a separate report) their objections to the abovementioned trend, reflected in certain of the winning projects, and also expressed regret that some entries, such as the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Bangladesh, by Louis Kahn (see MlMAR 6), were set aside on a technicality. However, there was reportedly unanimity on the Jury for the one building by a contemporary architect that demonstrated excellence in adaptation to an existing historical context: the Social Security complex by Sedad Eldem, which dates from 1970. While it was an incontestably modern solution at the time it was conceived, and one which is highly respectful of the traditional buildings surrounding it, the sense of history and the theoretical tenets embodied in the building have been developed and applied elsewhere since then. The Jury skirted the issue of truly contemporary design innovation by focussing on what they term a ‘contextual’ approach to new building but in a previous era.

The other modern complex among the six winners that had involvement by professional designers is the 4000 units of mass housing in Morocco: Dar Lamane, Casablanca. Responding to the Award Steering Committee’s statement that “it follows that the single most important criterion in assessing the viability of a scheme dealing with the problem of mass housing for the poor is its replicability on a sufficiently large scale,” the Jury has cited this project more for the technical, economic and organisational planning of those responsible for achieving Dar Lamane than for the excellence of the design. Again skating close to the edge of populist attitudes, the Jury Citation reads: “The developing aesthetic of the project can be observed in the vital activity from within, even if the visual aspect which is an outcome of the construction process has not yet found its definitive expression. It will be the product of the people who inhabit it because it has been conceived as an open system.”

In other words, the people’s subsequent treatment of the houses will determine (or not) whether the Jury was right...

For all their individual, and collective, merits, the 1986 winners leave us with a yearning — even more so than in previous years — to know the full range of nominees for this cycle, precisely because of the ‘voids’ in our retrospective chart. As far as building-types are concerned, where are the schools, universities, hospitals, factories, public administrations, or more rarely, the gardens and monuments of our time? Distinguished as this Jury has been in its composition of members, its deliberations and selections will undoubtedly prove to be a watershed: future juries will face the challenge (and meet it) of recovering contact with the mainstream of the profession in countries with significant Muslim populations, and their progressive efforts to forge a superior production based upon theoretical reflection encompassing traditional values and contemporary requirements.

Brian Brace Taylor

The 1986 Master Jury was composed of the following individuals:

- Doruk Pamir
- Abdel Wahed El-Wakil
- Soedjatmoko
- Zahir-ud-deen Khawaja
- Fumihiko Maki
- Hans Hollein
- Robert Venturi
- Mahdi Elmandjara
- Ronald Lewcock