A Search for Excellence …

The following critique on the 1986 Aga Khan Award winners is written by Sri Lankan architect and historian Shanti Jayewardene who researched the projects, and the process by which winners were chosen, and offers her own appraisal of the results. Having placed the winners into groupings based on issues evoked by the Award Steering Committee in its written charge outlining its criteria to the Master Jury, she has chosen to focus on what she believes to be the main implications of this year’s Jury selection.

— Editors

Contemporary Architectural Expression

Three of the six projects which received awards in 1986 might well be grouped together in a category tentatively called “a search for excellence in contemporary architectural expression”: the Bhong Mosque, the Yaama Mosque, and the Social Security complex. Essentially, they represent the outcome of a debate that arose during the Jury’s deliberations on this theme. Receiving an Aga Khan Award was not based on each building’s having excelled in representing its own particular typology, but because each was considered to be a positive indicator in a search for excellence.

Although the debate arose with regard to aesthetics, the projects symbolise a greater depth of meaning than may be gathered simply by examining the images represented here. It is a pity that the Jury citations failed to draw together the threads of an argument that meanders through the Preamble to their selections. The Jury’s unwillingness to relate the citations to the debate in the Preamble, may possibly prove to be of disservice to the Award body and to those of the public who may seek to understand the Awards in greater depth. It seems, therefore, justifiable to try here to extract the main elements of the Jury’s argument for purposes of clarification. The debate is seminal, with wider consequences than may be foreseen at present.

The Jury is to be commended on the ultimately positive, though somewhat inarticulate and ambiguous profile it has chosen adopt on the question of aesthetics. The choices assigned to this category may at first glance appear pompous and euphemistic when judged against the images. Both conclusions would in my opinion be mistaken. The message of the Jury is far more serious than would appear at first reading; we may begin to explore the self-confessed contradictions and dilemmas that confronted this Jury in implicitly assigning projects to this category by examining an excerpt from its long Preamble:

“The Award Jury is aware of the danger of bringing to its task a uniformity of approach and taste. There should be no imposition of middle-class taste and style all over the world, but rather the acknowledgement of divergent tastes and styles, a situation which it feels has existed in all creative periods.”

It is instructive to note that the Jury has linked the question of style to that of social class. They further developed the notion of style related to class by suggesting that “popular” art, which may irritate sophisticated people, “can and often has been a source for high art, in the history of art”. The Jury claims that this “dualistic element of creativity in indigenous societies in the Third World has tended to be eliminated by its Western-orientated component”. These observations are for the best part disconnected, and equivocal, and require further exploration if one is to understand the significance of this cycle of Awards.

“High” art and “popular” art are categories which, at the risk of over simplification, in historical terms refer principally to the distinction in the art produced for the ruling classes on the one hand, and by and for artisans and peasants on the other, during the long period of historical development which characterised feudalism the world over. “High” art is the product of refinement and distillation of both “popular” art and external influence, undertaken by its practitioners in the service of its patrons. Patrons of “high” art are usually the economically dominant social classes and the intelligentsia.

In pre-colonial societies, “high” art usually maintained a dynamic link with its principal source, “popular” art; further it absorbed and adapted external influence according to the dynamic of its internal needs and the mode of intervention of the external factor. Power relationships between socio-economic formations which exchange cultural information have thus determined the degree by which each formation may, or may not, protect and develop its independent artistic identity. The division of the globe into spheres of development and underdevelopment had its impact on art and architecture as well. The post-16th century, nascent, historical process of becoming underdeveloped meant that the “high” art of these regions was forced into an unsolicited intercourse with the art traditions; rulers arrived
with, or gradually acquired, a conquering conviction in the superiority of their own cultures. The fallacy of this conviction was never seriously challenged due to the power relationships of ruler and ruled, until the growth of the national liberation movements of the 19th century.

While this relationship has many historical antecedents, the critical difference in this instance was its involvement of the entire globe, with the resulting polarisation of developed and underdeveloped regions. The indigenous art of the subjugated area thus experienced varying degrees of mutation. After this time, there has not occurred a balanced exchange of artistic ideas between these two contending forces. The aesthetic bias of alien rulers and economically powerful (Western) nations began to usurp or to replace the traditions of "high" art, evolved over centuries, in those regions which they regarded as backward. Culturally and artistically a superior status was assigned to most things 'Western'. The present Jury believes that today, in the domain of architecture, this status quo is facing serious challenge "because nations in the Third World have begun to feel the need for architectures which express their own goals and identities".

Notwithstanding the previous observations, it is important to remember that, despite foreign occupation, many nations still retain a live tradition of popular indigenous art. Even though examples of a dying, indigenous "high" architecture are the chief targets of current conservation and restoration projects, the Jury has expressed its acute awareness of this wider implication of such work. The Jury has thus raised for debate, two fundamental theoretical issues in the history of architecture in the developing world. Firstly, at the international level, the relationship between art and the status of direct or indirect subjugation, of one nation by another; and secondly, the relationship between art and social class within one nation or socio-economic formation. The Jury has demonstrated its position vis-a-vis both of these theoretical issues, not through any serious research but by its debate, and through the projects it has chosen for awards. This applies, not only to the three projects discussed here but to all the awards made in this cycle.

The most far-reaching and profound impact of this Jury's choice in a national context, perhaps, lies in its implicit censure of those who claim to practise "high" architecture in the developing world. The awards imply the need for a critical reassessment of the practice of "high" architecture, where Western-oriented trends dominate and determine overall architectural character. The Jury has been careful to assert that this criticism does not imply a negation of what is modern, or advanced in terms of production or construction, by its inclusion of the Eldem complex, which is aesthetically subordinated, dated, and yet sensitive to its indigenous urban context. And, is the sole representative of 'modern' aesthetics in this cycle. By omission the Jury has raised for discussion, though not elaborated, the role of foreign influence in the development of artistic identity. History has many examples which demonstrate how the subjugation of one social group by another can vitiate the art of the oppressed group; it has also demonstrated mutual artistic enrichment premised upon an exchange of ideas by equals. For these reasons, it is difficult to disengage this Jury's attitude to foreign influence exemplified here, from being anything less than a comment, on the political and economic status of underdeveloped itself.

The Jury appears to advocate the earlier relationship between "high" art and "popular" art, but, it omits to discuss the historical reasons behind the dislocation of that relationship in the first place. We cannot simply 'wish away' the extended historical period during which the "high" art of the developing world succumbed most abjectly to external influence; nor can we escape its pressing legacy merely by offering fulsome praise of "popular" art. In order to overcome the cultural subservience of this period, and evolve new ways of going forward, it seems necessary that we should address ourselves first and foremost to understanding the processes that caused it; and moreover, we should try to comprehend why this debate is occurring today, despite the political freedom enjoyed by most of the Third World. The blatant absence of a parallel debate in the 'developed' world is revealing of itself and surely worthy of query.

The Jury continues in the Preamble by outlining its respect for the varying tastes evident in different cultures. It was unprepared to be associated with "sending messages" in any one direction, being keenly aware that the selections might be interpreted as such. This stance perhaps explains why there is no single 'message', no dominant aesthetic bias, to be read from the projects here attributed to the category of "Excellence in Contemporary Architectural Expression". The Jury's courage in standing implacably by its convictions and inviting reproach on as controversial an issue as demythifying style in architecture (by attempting moreover to discuss its material content), is indeed noteworthy.

None of this, however, should lead to the conclusion that the Jury abdicated its responsibility, or that the selections in this category are a mere gesture to whimsical folk art. It is certainly not fortuitous that these choices once again draw attention to that formidable patrimony of diversity and innovation which characterises indigenous art. The choices are no travesty of excellence in architectural expression; they merely force home the truth that there can be no single, universally relevant criterion, or set of criteria, for assessing such excellence. Because the Jury believes that standards of excellence vary according to taste, which is, itself, historically determined and is class, culture and context specific, it has refrained from being associated with the right to champion any one aesthetic as superior to another in the vast area of the globe that came under its survey of Muslim architecture.

What they professed to do instead was to highlight trends and sources which may encourage the development of more relevant and sympathetic, formal architectural languages which might prove to be more meaningful to the populace in general, by relying less on foreign than on indigenous inspiration, and on public rather than private or elite tastes: "... the evolution of taste in societies that are transforming themselves should be a public affair" states the Jury's Preamble.

Since political independence, indigenous cultures have received varying degrees of revival and recognition by patrons of "high" art. It appears that the 1986 Jury has nonetheless an explicit, if multi-layered, message to convey via its choices (or lack of them) which are closely linked to questions of development and cultural renaissance. The Jury, by refusing to
agree upon a set of criteria for assessing excellence in contemporary architectural expression, has on the one hand, declared the assessment of style in multiple cultures, by a single body, to be an invalid exercise; and, on the other hand, they have focussed on those areas which, it believes obstruct indigenous cultures from producing their own standards of architectural excellence, deriving from their own historical roots. The Jury asks for a redress of the imbalance between "high" art and "popular" art experienced since the 19th century, in those regions of the world which also, not by chance, embarked upon their long and difficult journey to underdevelopment around the same time.

The Jury did not end its commitment to the subject at this point. It expressed considerable concern for the processes governing the "evolution of taste" in specific contexts and made a plea for public awareness and debate of such issues in order to counteract what they believe to be, the present monopoly of taste enjoyed by those in power, be they architect or client. This democratic plea was reinforced by drawing attention to the process of public participation which it felt may prove to be a source from which "a better design culture might begin to crystallise". The provocative absence of any overt "modern movement" aesthetics (excluding the Eldem complex) in the six Awards and five Honourable Mentions in this cycle, is perhaps not unreasonable evidence in this regard.

Of the five Honourable Mentions only one bears inclusion in this category — the Said Naum Mosque, Jakarta, Indonesia. The form of this building only confirms the debate discussed above. The slight difference, if any, being that the modernity of this building is obvious, while the modernity of the Bhong Mosque, for example, cannot be read immediately or simply by examining its form alone. Though both buildings are mosques, the common denominator for roof forms and structural components, as confirmed by the Jury citation: "The design responds to the customs, creeds and climate of the region, drawing on local examples for roof forms and structural components."

Public Housing
It is inspiring and encouraging to note that public housing has finally been deemed worthy of an award for architecture. It registers a widening of the scope of the Award's perspective on architecture and will doubtlessly be welcome by many practitioners the world over. The Jury has selected only one scheme for awards in this category. One of the five Honourable Mentions, the Shushhtar New Town, Iran, may also be assigned here. Both projects fall within the Jury's parameters of assessment, for the reasons to be discussed.

The Jury records in the Preamble its reservations with regard to mass housing programmes, initiated by agencies operating from abroad; especially due to their "...misjudgement of the priorities of the local population. In particular, the introduction of alien forms and materials of construction was a major cause of the rejection of the scheme by the people, because of adverse formal associations — they felt that the houses produced had nothing to do with their culture".

Dar Lamane was locally inspired, designed, managed and constructed, using local labour and materials. It has been commended on its low cost and sensitive planning, which has affinities to traditional Moroccan patterns of urban design. It is useful to understand how the planning of this scheme varies from, advances or disregards modern Arabising tendencies of urban design, initiated as early as 1917 by Laprade, Cadet and Brion. The most obvious departure of course, is the colonial inspiration of the former, whose response to traditional habitat has been criticised as an attempt to break all the organic links that kept an architectural tradition alive. We hope, that the differences between the two approaches and the lessons to be learned, may be shared with other Third world designers, in a spirit of mutual respect and exchange.

It is strange and inexplicable that the Jury's comments on the aesthetics of this scheme are at best, naive and romantic. "The visual aspect which is an outcome of the construction process has not yet found definitive expression. It will be the product of the people who inhabit it". This observation is rather difficult to digest, especially since, the 4000 units were built and in occupation by 1983. There are several unanswered questions about this project, but undeniably, it is worthy of an award, even if its only merit was that, it reached its targeted low income occupants in the incredibly short time of thirty months. A formidable achievement, with far reaching benefits to very large numbers of people.

Conservation and Restoration
The Jury selected two projects for awards in this third category. The award for the old town of Mostar, Yugoslavia, being made for the remarkably conceived and realised conservation of the entire sixteenth-century centre of this historic town. The Al Aqsa award was given for the high quality of the conservation work done on the mosque and the Haram-al Sharif area.

It does not consider conservation and restoration as acts of nostalgia or sentiment. The need for such work and presumably, the priority accorded it, is seen as an "intelligent assessment of the state of civilisation". Ignoring the obviously wide generalisation inherent in such a remark, it may be considered the Jury's way of distancing themselves from accusations of over indulgence in history and past glories.

The preoccupation with the need to evolve a better design culture in the Third World is premised upon the belief that this requires a greater understanding and reassessment of tradition than is practised at present. "The reassessment of traditional values in modern contexts and in ways that respond to modern challenges is something that goes beyond questions of architectural aesthetics and functions, and becomes a key role in the professional ethics of the architect." Traditional values and cultural continuity in a contemporary building context can be developed only by examining the history of building in the various regions under consideration. Therefore, every effort of sensitive and dedicated conservation or restoration, is of inestimable value for guiding future trends of architecture in the Third World.

Special to these two projects, is the degree of community control and local, as opposed to foreign, inspiration evidenced, factors which no doubt operated as important indices in the selections. The Jury's consistent emphasis throughout the Preamble, on the need for a dynamic relationship between past and present is fulfilled in these two examples, which are living storehouses of historical data, and are simultaneously a part of the organic fabric of daily life of the communities they serve. They have the potential to inspire and encourage respect for the indigenous and local, and thus have a vital contribution to make towards evolving meaningful directions in contemporary architecture.

Shanti Jayewardene
Bhong Mosque
Pakistan, 1930-1982.

"... the Jury wished to make an acknowledgement of the diversity that
enriches society. "Popular" buildings might be a little different from
buildings derived from indigenous craftsmanship. The populace might
love them, and, therefore, they have an immense significance for
ordinary people — in spite of the fact that architects might hate them.
Bhong represents a monumental achievement in these terms. It enshrines
and epitomises the "popular" taste in Pakistan with all its vigour, pride,
tension and sentiments. Its use — and misuse — of signs and symbols
express appropriate growing pains in transition, and yet may prove
significant for the future.” — Master Jury

Project Data
Completed: 1982
Patron/Designer: Ghazi Muhammad Rais,
Karachi.
Master Craftsmen: Abdul Ghani, Wahid
Bukhsh, Allah Bukhsh, Nabi Bukhsh,
Ahmad Bukhsh, Faiz Bukhsh, Rahim
Bukhsh, Haji Rahim Bukhsh, Allah
Dwaja, Hafiz Anwar, Mohammad
Alam.
Cost: Estimated at Rs. 10 million by the
patron.
History: Completion of the large mosque in
1982 in this town of 5,000 in the south
eastern Punjab concluded the complex
which was begun in 1932. Rais Ghazi
Muhammad, client, designer, patron and
landlord conceived, directed and funded the
entire building programme. Over the 50
years of its evolution, the complex has
generated jobs and trained up to 1,000
workers and craftsmen in indigenous
crafts. Its development included the
growth of infrastructure, among them a
market, roads, installation of electricity
and running water, irrigation, and bus
and railroad lines. Until the development
of secular education
in
the 1960s, the mos­
quarry was the principal regional centre for
education.
Construction: The structural system com­
bines brick masonry and cement mortar
with brick and stone arches and reinforced
concrete. Brick domes are set as indepen­
dent units on top of reinforced concrete
roofs.
Materials and crafts range from the tradi­
tional (teak, ivory, marble, coloured
glass, onyx, glazed tile work, fresco, mir­
ror work, gilded tracery, ceramics, callig­
raphic work and inlay) to the modern and
synthetic (marbled industrial tile, artifi­
cial stone facing, terrazzo, coloured ce­
mment tile and wrought iron). Rais Ghazi
used modern materials freely
in
the ancil­
lary buildings, such as the gates, the small
mosque and the porch of the large mosque;
he applied only traditional materials and
craftsmanship to the mosque interiors. His
intention was to represent as many forms
of vernacular craft and Islamic religious
architectural features as possible using a
combination of traditional and modern
materials.
Above: Site plan of the Bhong mosque complex.
Right: Plan of the large and small mosques library, and entrance gate to the Bhong complex.
Below: Section of the mosque.
Left: Detail of one of the minarets of the small women's mosque. Tiles of every nature have been utilised.

Left below: Principal portico entrance to the mosque compound from the markets of the village.

Above: A local craftsman at Bhong elaborates a decorative motif in wood.

Below: Detail of the wooden door frames inlaid with mother-of-pearl on the entrance to the mosque.

Centre: Hand-painted tiles used as surface decoration. Craftsmen of this region, near Multan, are famous for their tilework.

Bottom: Machine-produced tiles are also widely employed in the Bhong mosque.
Social Security Complex

“A most significant building in terms of its inherent architectural quality and its particular sensitivity to urban context... This building must be one of the earliest and most refined examples of contextual architecture in the international modern movement — its modulated forms, its scale and rhythms and proportions — deriving as much from its exterior setting as from its interior determinants.”
— Master Jury

Right, above: Overall view of the Social Security complex which, although overly modern, is carefully integrated into the existing urban fabric of ancient Istanbul.
Right: Site plan showing the buildings' position in the neighbourhood, and roof plan revealing the arrangement of different volumes on the site.
Elevation on the large boulevard.

Longitudinal section.

First floor plan.

Left: View from the narrow older street that passes behind the complex of buildings. Below: Corner detail illustrating the variety of materials employed (reinforced concrete, different colours of brick, etc.) and the articulation of structural and infill elements.
Left: Detail of the main facade of the buildings, or 'pavilions' as they appear in the context of older structures in Istanbul’s urban tissue.

Below, left: Detail of the buildings on the site, with the pedestrian passageway (top of the stairs) visible between the different pavilions.

Above: View of the complex from the angle of the site. The passageway created between the pavilions begins with the stairs to the right in the photograph.

Below: Detail of a facade on an upper level. Each floor is cantilevered out slightly above the lower floor.

Bottom: Interior of the cafeteria.
Yaama Mosque

"There is a manifest will to use traditional techniques in a creative manner, to experiment with them and to achieve results that induce a new awareness of their possibilities."
— Master Jury

Project Data

Client: The religious community of Yaama.
Master mason: Faké Barmou, Yaama.
History: In 1962 the village elders decided to build a Friday mosque in Yaama, which until then only had small neighbourhood mosques. Having defined the characteristics of the future edifice, the community appointed a local mason/farmer Faké Barmou, to erect a mosque on the present site during the next dry season. The original edifice was then expanded and embellished in 1975 with an arch-supported roof and dome. Corner towers, which enclose a two-storey gallery were added over the period 1978-1980.

Site area: 567 square metres.
Built up area: 500 square metres.
Cost: The building was financed by the village community in a traditional way, with payments often made in kind so that conventional cost estimates are not possible.

Construction: The structure is primarily of mud brick, which was used for outer walls and the interior columns of this hypostyle building. Originally, the roof was composed entirely of wood branches and matting covered with earth; then, arches made of bundles of sticks, bent and covered with mud or cement-stabilised mortar, were created as well as a dome over the central section of the mosque. Lime wash is employed in some instances. Decorative motifs and, in some cases, the structural solutions used in the second and third building campaigns are the result of the mason's pilgrimage to Mecca (which took some 2 years) and the various styles he observed enroute.
North-south longitudinal section.

Ground floor plan. Towers and gallery on the north built in 1978-80, on the south in 1980-82.

Site plan of the mosque in the village of Yaama, Niger.

Far left: East facade of the mosque, with the mihrab (right) and the two southernmost towers (left). The differences in surface colour are the result of recent replastering with mud and straw mortar.

Left: View of the roof facing east, with the central dome and mihrab tower (at right) and northern tower (left). Yaama village can be seen in the distance.

Below: View of the mihrab during prayers. The effect of the architectural space has been likened to "entering a dimly lit forest of unusually elegant columns from which the arches spread like branches."
Left: View into the dome constructed upon arches of wooden branches bent and covered with mud mortar.
Left, below: Detail of one of the facades and entrances to the mosque. Note the decorative patterns on the wall surface.
Above: Photograph of the kind of straw and mud bricks, dried in the sun, used in constructing the mosque.
Below: Drawing of the Yaama Mosque by the architect-builder himself.
Dar Lamane Housing Complex

"It represents a successful example of housing low-income families with great cohesion and character ... Public space has thus been integrated within the domain of housing in a harmonious manner which respects the cultural needs and aspirations of the population ... It proves that a proper mobilisation of the creative, social, cultural and economic resources can provide a workable answer to the challenge of housing-low income groups in an urban context."
— Master Jury

Project Data

Client: Compagnie Generale Immobiliere, Rabat.
Architects: Aderrahim Charai and Aziz Lazrak, Casablanca.
Consultants: Promoconsult, Casablanca, commissioned to undertake co-ordination and project management with a decision-making model aided by computer.
Site Area: 37 hectares.
Built-up Area: 285,000 squares metres.
Cost: 420,000,000 dirhams (US$100 per square metre). On a comparative basis it is claimed that the cost of 800 dirhams per square metre at Dar Lamane is 5-10 times lower than parallel middle-income housing costs.
History: At the time of construction, Dar Lamane was the largest single public housing project ever attempted in Morocco. The client was a wholly government funded body for whom the project was a learning experience with replication potential. The site was an abandoned stone quarry in the industrial district of Casablanca and was acquired by the client in 1979. It was prepared for construction in late 1980. The proposed objective of constructing 4,000 housing units and ancillary facilities for low-income families, in less than thirty months, was achieved in 1983. All units were sold and are now occupied by low-income families from the population targeted by the project.
Construction: Reinforced concrete is the chief structural material used for foundations, columns, beams and load bearing walls. Infill materials are concrete blocks and bricks. Plaster and paint were used on the exterior. Glazed tiles and terracotta were employed for decorative purposes. Construction technique was in-situ with prefabricated walls, beams and staircases.

Right, above: View of the main plaza from the mosque. Casablanca’s industrial area is seen in the distance.
Right: Aerial view of the entire Dar Lamane housing development. (Courtesy of the client.)
Site plan of the 4,000 unit housing complex. Six clusters are located around the main plaza.

Partial plan at ground level of one sector, showing separation of pedestrian and vehicular movement, a hammam, and various apartment types.

Top: Detail of apartment units and ground floor shops on the main plaza, next to the mosque. Above: Arcades surrounding the main plaza with the mosque in the distance. Below: Festivities in Dar Lamane's streets prior to a wedding ceremony. The bride's gifts are displayed on a horse-drawn cart for the neighbours to admire.
Left: View of the esplanade next to the mosque.
Above: Small 'Festival' Hall for reunions and community activities.
Left, below: A pedestrian way between two rows of dwellings. Note the privatisation of garden spaces next to entrances.
Below: Rooms from two different apartments span a roadway in a few instances.
Bottom: Interior of an apartment, showing modifications made by inhabitants who have here added 'traditional' style mouldings in the sitting room.
Project Data

Client: The Community of Mostar.
Conservator: Stari-Grad Mostar, founded in 1979 to deal specifically with the restoration and preservation of the old town.
Site Area: Core area of the old town, 742,000 square metres.
Cost: All rents, taxes, dues and income from advertisements, cinemas, etc., collected from the core is assigned to Stari-Grad and forms part of their annual budget. Each year's work is planned according to this budget. The present annual budget is over US$20,000. Recently 40% of the estimated value of any new building project outside the immediate zone was granted to the organisation.

History: Stari-Grad is a semi-autonomous organisation approved and subsidised by the Ministry for the Protection of Monuments and Nature of the Republic of Herzegovina, Sarajevo. The inner zone central core of the old town, was the first area to be handed over, but the ongoing programme has been extended to include more of the Austrian town. Mostar is the second largest town in the Republic of Herzegovina and has 85,000 inhabitants. It is located in the Neretva Valley, rich in agriculture with many orchards, farms and vegetable gardens; some light industry is also found in the area. The region is noted for its many crafts, some of which are still practised in Mostar, like tanning, leather work, jewellery, wood carving, embroidery, copper smithing, etc. Mostar began as a settlement 500 years ago and its main expansion dates from around the Ottoman period in the 16th century. Austrian rule spanned 1878-1918 and many buildings from both periods are now represented at Mostar. The attempt to revitalise the town as a business centre has been successful, as indicated by the long waiting lists for shops and offices. All workers and craftsmen were local.

Construction: All historic buildings in Mostar were built either of a conglomerate mixture of rock and river pebble using lime mortar, or with oolitic limestone blocks and lime mortar. Partitions were sometimes of baked brick and interior finishes were of lime plaster. The exterior was usually left unplastered (except in houses). Much detailing was in wood. Stari-Grad uses traditional building methods with discreet structural reinforcement to combat earthquakes, as required by Yugoslavian law. Major rebuilding, when required, is performed with concrete frame, brick infill and stone faced facades. All new roofing is of slate tiles over a wooden frame, with overlaps sealed with lime mortar.

Conservation of Mostar Old Town

Top: Aerial view of the ancient town of Mostar, the core area along the river being the focus of the renovation process.
Above: Plan of the town of Mostar, indicating the different types of intervention for renovating the old structures.
Below: Partial site elevation drawing.
Above: View of the celebrated old bridge in Mostar.
Right: Detail of the porch with the new roof of the Hadzi Mehmed Karadzoz Beg Mosque; in Mostar.
Below: Major rebuilding of some houses and workshops involved replacing the stone roof tiles with new ones.
Below, right: Detail view of renovated row of shops and craft ateliers.
Bottom: Detail of the interior of a restored wooden ceiling.
Restoration of the Al Aqsa Mosque

Al Haram al-Sharif, Jerusalem, 1983-

“The award is made for the high quality of the conservation work on this mosque and in the Haram al-Sharif generally.”
—Master Jury

Top: General view of the Al Haram al-Sharif area in Jerusalem. Al Aqsa Mosque is on the left, with its dome newly covered in lead, and the Dome of the Rock with its gilt dome on the right.

Above, left: Detail of the restored Al Aqsa dome covered in lead.

Above: Detail of the repair to the inner wooden dome of Al Aqsa. Cedar from Lebanon was employed, as it was originally.

Left: Section drawing of the restored dome on the Al Aqsa Mosque.

Project Data

Client: Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock Restoration Committee.
Architect: Isam Awwad, Jerusalem.
Consultants: ICCROM, International Centre for the study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property.
Site Area: 140,000 square metres (area of Haram is one sixth area of the old city).

History: The current restoration of the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Haram complex in old Jerusalem is the most recent in the series of restorations that date back to the 12th century. The mosque was built in 711 A.D. and suffered from earthquake damage on several occasions. Restoration of the dome and other parts of the mosque is part of a significant, comprehensive programme to renovate and revitalise the entire Al Haram ai-Sharif area. Although 20th-century restorations were made during the British mandate by Turkish architects and then by Egyptian engineers in the 1950's, much of the work is now believed to have seriously altered the character of the dome and its decoration. The most acute damage, however, occurred during the explosions and fire in 1969.

The basic aims of the present restoration programme are technical, aesthetic, cultural and political.

Construction: Work on the dome itself was accomplished in three phases; a) improvement and covering of the outer dome; b) restoration of the timber structure of the inner dome; c) restoration of paintings of the inner dome with other decorative elements of the drum. In the first phase, the outer dome covering of aluminium sheets over reinforced concrete which were damaged by the fire were replaced with the original covering material of lead. Secondly, the timber boards covering the timber ribs were damaged also by the fire and had to be replaced. The gaps between existing boards were filled with twist made from vegetable fibres soaked in glue. New boards were fixed with brass screws to the ribs and seams were sealed with epoxy glue. In the third phase, consolidation and restoration of the decorative features of the mosque was pursued. Consolidation and reattachment of preparatory layers of plaster, where the pictorial surface was flaking, by means of a synthetic resin emulsion. Removal of painting and stucco that concealed the original decoration was then done, utilising special paint-removing compounds. Pictorial reintegration entailed a complete and exact reconstruction using fine vertical lines to demarcate the original. Foreign and local technology and manpower were harmoniously combined in the restoration effort.
Top: Stone decoration being restored on the exterior of Al Aqsa.
Top right: Restoration of decorative panels in marble inside the mosque.
Above: Among the restoration undertaken, the leaded, coloured glass windows of the mosque were redone based upon patterns by Turkish architect Kemal Uddin, from early in this century.
Right: An example of restored mosaic work in the mosque.
Below: Workshop where mosaicists are reconstituting new mosaic panels as part of the Al Aqsa restoration programme.
Below, right: The "tratteggio" technique employed in reintegrating painted wood decoration. This is used to distinguish the recent repainting from the original that did not need restoring.
A special award known as the Chairman’s Award has been given to Rifat Chadirji. This recognition has been given once previously to Hassan Fathy in 1980. It is different from the rest of the awards in that it is given to an individual (instead of a building) for a life-time contribution to the built environment. The award is made by the Aga Khan upon the unanimous recommendation of the Award’s Steering Committee. The citation reads:

To Rifat Chadirji, Iraqi architect, critic and teacher, for a lifetime dedicated to the search for an appropriate contemporary architectural expression that synthesises valuable elements of a rich cultural heritage and key principles of architecture in the twentieth century.

The exemplary dedication and tenacity, the intellectual and personal integrity, and the constant concern for teaching and communicating that have characterised this intellectual and artistic journey of over thirty-five years deserve the world recognition and appreciation.

For the guiding principles of this search to produce an authentic regionalism are an important contribution to the universal cultural achievements of our age. They exemplify an openness to time and its imperatives, along with a deep appreciation of the Ancient, Islamic and Arab cultural heritage of Iraq, generating a distinctive corpus of work, relevant well beyond the borders of Iraq, relevant wherever thinking architects practice.

Chadirji’s architecture reflects his attempt to reconcile contemporary social needs with new technology. The proposition that has guided his work since 1952 states that trade and international development have the tendency of creating a common base for today’s architecture which serves as a priori knowledge for a universal architecture which shuns local, regional or national architectural styles. On the other hand new building technologies are essential to the socio-economic and cultural evolution of developing countries, and since each era has its own constituents, each must beget its own forms. Chadirji’s perception of the need to use technology to ensure appropriate solutions to specific environmental locations has been to advocate what he has called “regional modernism”.

Besides, his actual works, it is his ideas and writings that convey the breadth of his thinking and contribution to “Architecture in Development”. Very different in nature and intent from the first Chairman’s Award winner, the choice of Rifat Chadirji, as recepient of this award, brings a worthy successor to Hassan Fathy, to international attention and recognition.