

Chapter XV

Architecture as Art*

By choosing as one of their general “umbrella” themes for a seminar on architectural education in Islamic countries the topic “Architecture as Art,” the organizers have, it seems to me, implied several very different kinds of issues, each of which leads to its own set of questions pertinent both to the training of architects and to scholarly or critical thinking. There are intellectual or theoretical issues going back to Vitruvius on the nature of “beauty” in architecture and, at least since the Renaissance, there has been in the West a profuse discourse on the *art* of architecture. The questions here are primarily those of the aesthetics of the art of building.

There are moral issues such as whether it is appropriate to talk about art when the obvious problems facing future architects and planners are those of housing and of basic infrastructure. Or perhaps it is suggested that art can and should be brought into these essential but aesthetically irrelevant functions. What is involved here is the judgment of the ways for professional intervention to occur in building. There are pedagogical issues, as the study of art has meant for the most part the study of the history of art, but perhaps philosophy is a more appropriate approach to architectural teaching than history.

There are epistemological issues dealing, for instance, with the appropriateness of the very concept of art within the traditional context of Islamic thought. Are we, as we do so often, introducing an inappropriate Western concept? Should one first straighten out the social and cultural parameters of whatever it is one is trying to define?

I could easily go on, as the whole subject of “what is art” has been severely unhinged by the intellectual, social and pedagogical changes of the last hundred years. To some, everything built is art, which also means that nothing is and that the category itself has become meaningless. To others, art is always in the past and what we are talking about is the relationship between history and today’s creativity. To others yet, a work of art is identified by its conformity to one of several sets of rules or canons. Within this

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terminological and conceptual confusion, I saw my task precisely as one of trying to clear the air for our overall objective of thinking about architectural education. To do so, I have taken two judgments as premises. One is that, whether we call their results art or not, we all make qualitative choices within whatever it is that we know of the built environment; we act and judge according to these choices; and we expect others to do the same, thus justifying the inclusion of the topic within education. The second premise is that, at this elementary stage of our knowledge of aesthetic theory within traditional Islam, we have no choice but to use a procedure which is not as yet culture bound, but it is possible to use examples which are culture bound and thus perhaps begin to know what to look for when we eventually turn toward the texts of the Muslim faith and of Islamic thought.

I shall first develop four largely unrelated series of observations and then propose a few themes for subsequent discussions.

1. At a recent seminar held in Dhaka on regionalism in architecture, one speaker, a Bangladeshi practicing architect, gave a rapid overview of the *history* (that is, the chronological sequence) of architectural remains within the boundaries of a new nation state. Non-Islamic, Buddhist, Hinduist or contemporary Western monuments were included together with Islamic ones, and in fact the brochure–manifesto issued by a local study group highlights a sequence of major architectural ensembles, beginning with the earliest remaining one, a Buddhist *stupa* surrounded by living and educational quarters, and ending with Louis Kahn’s Assembly Hall. This sequence with its emphasis on the earliest and the latest was set up as the backbone of a permanent national tradition. Within the sequence, Mughal- or British-inspired buildings were criticized as inappropriate and intrusive within a linear tradition which thus became both a norm against which new buildings are to be judged and the treasure of built forms which strengthens national identity. The task of the historian or of the critic becomes then to extract from these “national” monuments principles of design or formal ideas which could be transferred to contemporary techniques and functions. For the historian, however, there is yet another consequence of this reading of the past. [34] In the case of Bangladesh, it has given pre-eminence to a hitherto little-known architecture of small mosques with, some larger exceptions notwithstanding, one to three heavy cupolas, because these mosques developed before the impact of Mughal architecture in the seventeenth century. Thus, a type of simple and effective but rather limited and austere brick architecture is highlighted which, in a richer architectural context like that of Egypt, for instance, would be relegated to appendices.

In other words, the identification of works of architectural art is made less through real or alleged intrinsic values of a given building than through contemporary cultural and ideological decisions. Quite often, as in Iran immediately after World War II, in the Turkey of several decades ago (where

the issue is in fact much more complicated), in Iraq and in Central Asian Soviet republics, the pre-Islamic past of a new nation was or is even preferred to the Islamic one. In short, architectural self-identification and the choice of characteristic works of architectural art are made by whatever is available (and the older the better) on a land defined by contemporary political boundaries and colored by cultural and ideological decisions or tastes which may vary but which are always reflective of today's needs, not of the past's. With these examples, art is not the attribute of an object but the result of social and even political decisions about a national past.

2. Historical Ottoman presence is usually easy to recognize. From Hungary to Iraq or Algeria, a large or small stone mosque, dominated by a single large dome, usually accompanied by an elongated, thin minaret, and at times preceded by a formal court indicates that, at least at some moment in history, the dominant political or cultural (as with Muhammed Ali's mosque in Cairo) power in a given city or region was that of the Ottoman sultans. There is much academic discussion about the origins and early steps of this characteristic type of building, but it clearly was established by the second half of the fifteenth century and continued to be used until the nineteenth; in fact it is still today the model behind hundreds of new mosques throughout the Arab world and occasionally elsewhere. The Ottoman mosque obviously became a *type*, that is a standard form with numerous possible variations in size, quality, proportions and decoration. Although there is, to my knowledge, no systematic comparative study of the probably two hundred mosques belonging to this type, it is clear that a small number (the Süleymaniye in Istanbul, most emphatically the Selimiye in Edirne, Sultan Ahmet's mosque also in Istanbul, to name but three of the best-known ones) transformed the type into something else. To take only the example of the Selimiye, the inordinate diameter of the dome, the height of the minarets, the carefully studied economy of supports, the overwhelming inner space bathed in light coming through nearly diaphanous walls, are but a few of the features which, in Edirne and under the expert direction of the aging Sinan, transformed a type into a unique work of art. What this means is that all or some of the attributes of the type have been honed and stretched to a point where they cannot be imagined differently. But the result is that the Selimiye can be copied but not imitated. The type, on the other hand, precisely because it does not exist in reality but is assumed by a set of buildings, maintains its potential for replicability until such time as all of its possible combinations have been transformed into works of art.

I do not know whether this happened or not, because so far neither the type nor its possible variants have been analyzed together from all points of view ranging from statics [35] to aesthetics. Where the problem lies for our purposes is in deciding whether it is the abstract type or its unique versions which are works of art. Or, rather, as the unique version cannot be replicated, only cloned, its value lies in itself, in its own appreciation, in whatever

satisfaction it offers its user or observer, at best and most extremely in whatever symbolic meaning it may have as a culturally cherished treasure. The type, on the other hand, can be manipulated to meet continuously changing demands or technical opportunities, but it only exists in theory or as an imperfect form.

Or, to put it yet another way, the point of this set of observations is that any objective identification of a building as a work of art implies its non-replicability, whereas a subjective (national, cultural, personal, emotional) identification introduces into the argument or discourse about buildings other criteria than architectural ones and, therefore, restricts the appreciation or even understanding of the work of art to those who share or who have learnt those criteria.

3. The case of Ottoman mosques is a relatively rare example in Islamic architecture where type and work of art issued from it can be identified, at least hypothetically. But we can establish yet another series: Dome of the Rock, plan of Baghdad, Alhambra, Sultaniya, tomb of Tamerlane in Samarkand, Akbar's tomb in Sikandra, Taj Mahal, the palace of Fatehpur-Sikri. All of these monuments are acknowledged masterpieces of Islamic architecture.

Technologically or as carriers of decorative programs, these buildings or ensembles are, for the most part, characteristic of their time; they belong to coherent stylistic sets. Yet they are all unique, even when it is possible to propose an ideological or thematic connection between some of them or between any one of them and some other monument; even if some were copied occasionally, as when Awrangzeb copied the Taj Mahal, their forms are hardly alike and they never, or so it seems, created or were part of a tight typological system of forms and design. There are many explanations for this state of affairs, out of which I would like to [36] single one. It is that all of them, even the earliest two, were primarily responses to individual or dynastic need and vanities: in cultures other than Muslim ones, they would be considered primarily as secular buildings. Muslim culture permeated most of them, especially through inscriptions, with a uniquely Islamic tone, but they maintained an identity concretely associated with specific individuals or events: the point of these buildings was to express or commemorate the singularity of a person or of an event, not to meet the continuing need of a consistent cultural tradition. It is, therefore, relatively easy to explain these monuments within their time (even though the task of doing so has not always been carried out), but difficult to draw from them any diachronic principle, because their synchronic meaning predominates. They are masterpieces of architectural creativity, they are works of art, but it is difficult to see what significance they may have for the formation of culturally sensitive practitioners today.

4. The Masjid-i Jami' of Isfahan has been praised in many books and articles as a masterpiece of Iranian Islamic architecture in the eleventh and

twelfth centuries (the so-called Seljuq period). To a historian, however, it is an astounding hodge-podge of unrelated features from many centuries, essentially covered up in the late seventeenth century with a veil of colorful tiles, and it is almost impossible to know what the building really looked like at any time before the late Safavid period, least of all in the twelfth century. In other words, *either* the initial judgment is wrong and it is a late Safavid building that is praised which may contain earlier elements such as the proportions of the court or the celebrated North dome *or* the praise is not addressed to a style or to a formal arrangement typical of a period but to the successful continuity of use of a mosque within an urban context. This second suggestion raises the intriguing possibility that the quality of use rather than of forms may be an appropriate criterion for the judgment of architecture, but the more immediately important point is that the acceptance of the early mosque of Isfahan as a major masterpiece of Islamic architecture was more or less independent of the knowledge anyone had of its history.

The point of this example is a fairly simple one and the opposite of the previous one. It is that a building can be [37] considered to be aesthetically outstanding – there is some rapturous writing about it – even though nearly every one of the arguments for its time of construction and historical context is wrong. This is possible because the continuity of its history and use has given a diachronic value to the building which surpasses by far a history which is unknown and, when known, hardly remarkable.

The broader points made by these four series of observations on Islamic buildings are, on the whole, not peculiar to Islamic architecture. All countries, except for China and Japan, and most particularly newly formed ones like all the “nation-states” developed in nineteenth-century Europe or in Latin America (and the problem is bound to occur sooner or later in Africa), have sought to identify their national architecture and have had to deal with more or less significant architectural remains from other cultural moments than the ones prevailing today, rejecting some and worshipping others. Gothic architecture poses constantly the question of the relationship of a type of any one specific cathedral, although I am not aware of one Gothic cathedral that could be considered as the ultimate Gothic in the way the Selimiye is the ultimate Ottoman mosque. Series of unique masterpieces can be drawn from any tradition, especially in secular art, and Chartres certainly leads to conclusions comparable to those of the Great Mosque in Isfahan.

To argue for the universality of the issues and of the paradoxes that these conclusions imply is, however, not necessarily to find explanations for them. The reason lies less in intellectual failure than in the more positive and fruitful fact that no valid answer can be given to the question of what makes some buildings works of art. It is a fruitful fact, because it

acknowledges, like most of the examples given earlier, that architecture is inseparable from the people who use it or who talk about it. Thus, any formal masterpiece of the sixteenth or any other century can be turned into an atrocity, as happened with the restorations in and around the Mosque of Damascus or as was the case with the Mosque of Ibn Tulun and with several of Bukhara's *madrasas* before relatively recent repairs which have turned architecture into museum pieces. Alternately, mediocre or inappropriate works of architecture can be transformed by ideological or national needs into active symbols of a country, of a place, or of a doctrine, if not always into works of art, as happened overtly in most totalitarian states regardless of the dominant ideology, and covertly almost everywhere else (consider, for instance, the Arc de Triomphe or Disneyland). Works of art, in other words, exist only in the eyes of the beholders and the attribute of art is bestowed on buildings for other reasons than their own initial quality and function.

For the purposes of our seminar about teaching, the propositions I would then make are three, and I slightly exaggerate in order to stimulate discussion.

1. It is the complex mechanisms of political and ideological power and of social taste (at times of market economy) which in effect decide on whatever it is that will be called a work of art today. It is not necessary to see this process exclusively in negative terms as the imposition of the will and taste of a boorish and unsophisticated leadership on cultivated elites or innately sensitive masses, even if such is frequently the case. For the decisions and the choices involved in the process are frequently quite genuine and reflect a kind of aspiration for contemporary authenticity which has simply not been sufficiently analyzed and discussed to be criticized and rejected. The best the historian or the critic can do is to educate the public and the decision makers by making alternatives visible and accessible and by sharpening the visual, psychological and intellectual tools for understanding architecture. Otherwise, the historian or the critic is simply relegated to the role of observer and recorder.
2. Within the confines of an educational establishment, the role of the historian of art is twofold. He is the representative of the past empowered by his knowledge and competence to explain whatever has existed in the world or in any one land in order to protect that past and also to make it meaningful today. But he is also the champion of continuities, who can explain the distinctions between an inescapable universal civilization and an infinite number of discrete cultures. Whether, in the manner of nineteenth-century historians in Europe and twentieth-century ones nearly everywhere else, he should also argue for the appropriate equilibrium between civilization and cultures remains an open question, for it is perhaps no longer his role to choose models for the contemporary world, only to make them available for others to use.

3. What needs to be better articulated is, today as in the past, the relationship between buildings and society. But, in addition, one should begin to think about a relationship between new buildings and those buildings which could allow intellectuals or teachers to identify the processes whereby decisions are made about the quality of architecture.

