

Architecture is art in form, or form in art, or the art of forming, or the performing of art in form. Being art, architecture deals with aesthetic meaning in specific form.

Architecture is culture. As culture, architecture is part of a semiotic repertoire that gives meaning to the world and to the materials used in building. In a way, architecture makes culture of the material world: a stone takes on meaning when it is enclosed in a wall, as does concrete – the result of a chemical procedure – when it is moulded into significant form. In other words, architecture deals with the material world in the same way that human beings use linguistic signs such as sounds and words to produce a phrase by which they interpret the world around them.

But parallels between language and architecture are limited. On the one hand, both employ a set of conventions that are used in expressions. Language, however, is not free in assembling its repertoire of signs: it has to observe grammar, which renders expressions comprehensible. Human beings are not the sovereigns of grammar; they are subject to grammar, which is historical or, as some believe, an innate mental concept.

Though architecture is subject to conventions in the sense that it relies upon materials that are accepted as part of the building process – stone, brick, concrete, glass, wood, component parts, and so on – it does not employ a fixed grammar. Over the course of history, however, building schemes have been affected by traditions or conventions, which may be considered a substitute for grammar. As a result, we might come across building traditions that are called ‘Chinese’ or ‘Muslim’ or ‘Christian’. These traditions are defined not only in buildings that represent the specific meaning of a given culture (a mosque, a temple or a church), but also in buildings whose inhabitants or architects were attached to those cultures in the broadest, most general way.

Architecture has always relied upon the knowledge of specialists and professionals who have learned the art of building; it has never become a mental concept whereby people build according to a cultural tradition that is ‘innate’. Consequently, ‘Islamic architecture’, for example, is not a concept per se: it derives from those professionals who have constantly reinvented building traditions as Islamic. The same, of course, is true for all other cultural traditions.

As language, architecture is a means of interpretation that is based on universals and specifics. The sound ‘b’, for example, is universal – there is hardly any language in the world that does not contain the sound ‘b’. Perhaps some people will articulate ‘b’ in a phonetically different way, but anyone will be able to recognize when a speaker is producing a word by using the phoneme ‘b’. There are, of course, sounds specific to certain languages: the Arabic phoneme ‘dad’ served as a characterization of Arabic speakers as ‘speakers of the dad’. In general, however, specifics derive from the arrangement of the sounds typical of certain languages and from the grammar that arranges words as syntagmata. In architecture, there are also universals: materials, functions (such as shelter) and even forms (if a building is to give shelter, then it must be closed and have a roof). But the specifics are much more visible. As we are accustomed to accepting these universals as standard, our eyes focus on the specific forms: the arrangement of the materials, the proportions, the style, and so on.

As already noted, architecture and language both serve as a means of interpretation. This interpretation may relate to the world in which a building is located, or it may relate to the material used. If an architect wants to give meaning to a certain material and employs it in an original way, then we may say that architecture becomes art. The building itself may be an expression of the architect’s ambition to deal with the material and, at the same time, an interpretation of a specific meaning that is not dependent on the material used.

When we look at a building, we may ask about its ‘artistic’ expression or meaning. If we accept the analogy between language and architecture, then every building may be read or understood as a phrase or a paragraph or even as a whole book, with building schemes based on a given architectural grammar. To read architecture means to reconstruct the (hidden?) meaning that informed the building.

But it is difficult to read the meaning if a building is based on a grammar and a vocabulary that have first to be learned. In the modern age, however, cultural specifics have become paradigmatic for globally accepted universals. In my view, this is the most striking effect of modernity: today, buildings based on a local vernacular do not necessarily express culturally different meanings but clothe universals in tradition.

'Islamic architecture' is architectural modernity using cultural repertoires that are conventionally associated with Islamic traditions. After most Islamic traditions merged with modernity during the course of the nineteenth century, anyone composing large architectural forms in the Muslim world followed the history of modernity. But, being part of modernity, architecture in the Muslim world accepted the disassociation of Islamic traditions from general building patterns. Consequently, we have two diverging processes. First, Islam has become a concept that intentionally gives meaning to a building – that is, a building becomes 'Islamic'. For this, Islam has to be defined on an architectural level. What are the attributes required to make a global public recognize a building as Islamic? This concept of an 'Islamic grammar' of architecture is modern; it differs strongly from the architectural concepts used in building a mosque in a Muslim environment in pre-modern times. Second, buildings use attributes of modernity without referring to an Islamic repertoire. A family home in Abu Dhabi, for example, can hardly be read in terms of a specific cultural tradition. If architects want a building to be associated with a specific cultural environment, they simply include some cultural 'marks', mostly derived from Orientalism. These accessories do not change the modern identity of a building at all.

There is a third alternative process. Modernity has tended to re-evaluate and reify tradition. Architecture is susceptible to reification. Modernity has incorporated traditions as ethnic repertoires that it seeks to ascribe to various peoples. Orientalism is only one example of several discursive procedures that have sought to embody and revive specific ethnic values in architectural form. It has often been stated that this process is important in order to accommodate modern architectural ambitions within local conditions. It should be observed, however, that most of these local conditions are not a historical continuation of pre-modern traditions but inventions of the last 200 years.

Traditionally architecture is conservative and relies mostly on experience and positive examples. In the Middle Ages, for instance, the memory of architects was much more important than written or drawn representations of buildings, because a new building could be considered as a repetition of an earlier successful one. But since no building site is like any other, any new building had to accommodate different conditions and featured slight changes that made it specific. If a third building was built, the master builder then had available two examples to serve as a model. He had to decide which model to use, and in turn adapt his own building to local conditions. Thus, he had to select, copy and accommodate – in other words, to change the initial model.

But, since the eighteenth century, this evolutionary process has been replaced by the creation of abstract styles spliced to traditions. With the establishment after the 1850s of art as a concept through which to criticize tradition, architects began to invent new traditions. Typically, they were not able to rely upon memory, but had to create written (drawn) schemes of building prototypes, which might have been based on their reading of classical buildings such as temples, and so on. By the incorporation of art into architecture, architecture was transformed into a profession and a 'free' art of building. Freed from tradition, architecture started to define its own cultural code – one that played with invented traditions and modern inventions. Thus, modernity has created a new global vocabulary of architecture that includes various interpretations of vernaculars.

This process had already begun in the eighteenth century. Ottoman master builders of the Tulip Period (1718–30) accepted European Baroque styles as global vocabularies and incorporated selected 'Islamic' traditions into this global pattern to render a building 'Islamic'. The process reached its first peak in the second half of the nineteenth century, when not only architectural details but also building types, structures and organizational frameworks were globalized.

Architecture in the Muslim world of today is part of a global history of modernity. It shares the challenges and experiences and the strengths and weaknesses of modernity. Some parts of the Muslim world show a greater affinity with European modernity; others are closer to US modernity. But notwithstanding this internal pluralism, the global history of modern architecture is an integral part of the Muslim world's architectural history.