

We are narrators
of sweet and happy tales
Tales of the
dense bush
With a mountain behind
a spring in front
Tales of
the warm hands of a friend
in cold nights of the city.

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Opening

Having studied attentively close to 400 projects submitted for this cycle of the Aga Khan Award, listening carefully to the evaluation criteria of architect members of the Master Jury, making a great effort to bear in mind what was presented to us as the accumulated experience of many cycles of the Award, I have not become opinionated about architecture and the internal debates concerning it. At most, I feel a bit less ignorant in this very rich field, and am experiencing greater sensitivity towards it in my daily life. My views, including those expressed here, remain those of a person on the edge, on the margin. This position of being on the margin – not geographically but epistemologically – remains very dear to me. If my understanding is correct, by including non-architects on the Master Jury, the Award's Steering Committee intended to enlarge the scope of arguments beyond the field of architecture in a narrow sense, in order to reach a more comprehensive view.

Meanwhile, the specificity of architecture as a field, intimately linked to our existence in this world, and the depth of the debates surrounding architecture, the accelerated speed of its changes, the growing impact it is having on our personal, social, cultural and aesthetic experiences, and its emergence – at least on the symbolic level – as one of the ingredients of contemporary globalization, are giving architecture a greater capacity to influence, or at least to find an echo in, a broader social context. Put differently, as a field, architecture has its own 'gates' – important, specific and consciously maintained gates. But because of its capacity to resonate in the lives of non-architects, it has become paradoxical to build and maintain walls that delimit architecture from other fields in society. It seems to me important to recognize architecture as a field by acknowledging its gates, but also to scrutinize the field from its margins, allowing its appropriation by non-architects, conceptually as well as paradigmatically. Can we hope that architects will accept having wall-less gates, indicating the existence of a field but also inviting outside views into it?

Analogy

I feel that it is important to explain my use of the term 'field'. Conceptually, my critical understanding of 'field' starts with the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). In *Homo Academicus* (1984) he became a systemic denunciator of social arrangements in the production of contemporary knowledge in the academic and professional worlds, by opening perspectives beyond the gates to outsiders. Please bear with me: I intend more to mention a trajectory than to provide a conceptual demonstration. With Bourdieu's concept of field, the guardians of the gates of the academic and professional fields became more visible. These guardians intend to define the exclusivity of their fields with the purpose of establishing personal power bases within academia and, through it, within society at large.

1



Portal near Le Croisic, western France

This first conceptual unveiling of the 'gate' was completed through semiotics, emanating from a different perspective and, interestingly enough, because of architectural monuments, another interpretation of 'gate' was offered. This interpretation has three monumental references. One is a secular portal in a remote area of western France, more precisely in the Loire Atlantique region, close to the village of Le Croisic. This gate is in the middle of nowhere, near a road, and it delimits nothing; it stands in a kind of no man's land and is, at best, a landmark.¹

Another 'gate' without any apparent walls is the *torii* in Japanese Shinto shrines. The *torii* – a gate built with a wide variety of materials, shapes and colours – indicates the beginning of a sacred, divine space, which is inhabited by the god of the shrine. It indicates the symbolic border between two worlds. The power of the deity located beyond the *torii* is supposed to make itself felt in the profane world outside the shrine. Physical openness, here, represents the enclosure of the sacred ground. The *torii* gate without any wall is, in fact, the gate of a powerful invisible wall. Passing through the gate signifies an act of submission to the transcendental senses that the gate designates.^{2/3}

The third example is closer to my reading of the possibilities for interaction between architects and non-architects within the field of architecture. This is the story of a Buddhist temple on the outskirts of Ome, a city to the west of Tokyo. The name of the temple is Monshuin, derived from the school of Buddhism that is based on the principles of *mon* (listening to the teaching of Buddha, or, in my interpretation, knowing), *shi* (which can also be read as *omou*, understanding), and *shuu* (mastering, action or practice – again in a simplified interpretation). This temple, built between 1532 and 1555, is based on these principles and is intended to be a place for different people to meet, a place for people to experience the transcendental, and a place that allows those who enter to express themselves, to feel a sense of emancipation. From the time of its inception, the gate of the temple was designed and built not to have any walls. To my knowledge, it is unique in Japanese Buddhism.⁴

I have a concept of a 'gate' that indicates lines of demarcation but is also open to inclusion. From this perspective, I tried to clarify my own stance towards the deliberations of the Award Master Jury, prompting the following thoughts.

2

A *torii* gate, Japan

3

Different designs of the *torii*

4



Gate of the Monshuin Temple, Ome, Japan

Place and time for living

If the central question of modernity – the quality of human presence in the world – is still valid, then architecture represents this inquiry in a multitude of ways, sometimes consciously. Universal as it is, this question takes on more specific meanings according to time and place. Here place is understood in both senses: in physical terms – places where living occurs; and as a space where subjectivities, tastes and consciousness meet. Time also refers to the contemporary – living in the twenty-first century – and to duration in time, the depth of historical awareness. In these terms, the profession that conceives places becomes responsible for acts of civilization.

Is it too much to claim that architecture is a reflection of the accumulation of ten thousand years of human knowledge and experience? Maybe not, if we consider the multitude of levels at which architects willingly intervene in the contemporary ‘matrix of aesthetics’ – a matrix that tries to deal with diversity, heterogeneity, even a certain hybridity, while at the same time retaining a certain harmony.

But the quality of our lives, which remains the fundamental aspect of our presence in the world, has become in part confused because of the quality of the spaces that we are building and inhabiting. This confusion and the problems it generates are such that we are forced to say we have become a society at risk. Does naming this confusion ‘Post-modern’ help to resolve this aspect of our human condition?

The need of the contemporary ‘matrix of aesthetics’ for a sense of beauty in our daily life is forcing the transcendental sense of space, manifested in the past in sacred places, to become part of our immanent life. Daily life requires ethics and invented spaces must establish, rejuvenate and reflect these ethics.

How can we maintain flexibility in the interaction of humans with nature and avoid alienation, while remaining open to innovative approaches in building private spaces and retaining a public sense of belonging in our shrunken but fragmented world? How can society’s rising awareness of issues such as accessibility for the elderly, children and people with disabilities be a focal point in the design of buildings when economic disparities are creating urgent issues such as homelessness – an acute problem for large parts of the earth’s population? Furthermore, how can this latter issue be resolved without giving rise to the dehumanizing social conditions of a modern quasi-ghetto? And all of these issues exist in a broader social context in which large-scale corruption, including corruption in the field of architecture, renders regulations rather cosmetic. Need we be reminded that schools in Turkey and hospitals in Iran, destroyed over the heads of children and patients during earthquakes, were mostly recent buildings designed by certified architects? One could add the partial collapse of Terminal 2E at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris as a more recent case. Rehabilitating an ethic of non-pretentiousness and of rigour, forming a mechanism of checks and balances, making it possible to create a beauty that is simple but can invoke complexity, and keeping in mind a sense of our presence in the world – these are our major challenges.

Expanding

My experience on the Master Jury has enlarged the above concerns. Arguing about some of them goes beyond the intentions of this essay, but I shall mention just a few.

Fragmenting

Can the practice of architecture at the beginning of the twenty-first century, through the contiguities that it establishes, consider itself above the social fragmentation that it is generating – a fragmentation that is making living together more difficult? Or does architecture consider itself not to be bound – to be free of any social identity? If this is the case, the only elements that count should be the materials used and the styles chosen.

Tool for a mirage

Another concern is modernization, which in my vocabulary is the opposite of modernity. Modernity is understood as the social acceptance that human beings have the faculty of questioning everything and anything. This faculty is the most emancipating factor for human beings individually as well as collectively. In contrast with modernity, modernization is an attempt by the state to substitute itself for society, and to impose a model of what it would like society to become – a model borrowed from a different society with another historicity. In the last sixty years, policies of modernization, coupled with all categories of development theory, have been the major cause of acculturation. Architecture, linked with urban planning (a link that unfortunately exists only rarely) and landscaping, has been very active in this process of cultural amputation, whereas all three have the means to become active engines for enculturation – for generating hybrid creativity and life-enhancing experiences.

Castrated myth

Myth, as a living factor, appropriated by social actors, could have powerful capacities. A castrated myth is one emptied of its vital, flexible and relevant character. Traditionalism, by extracting traditions from their historical context and transforming them into ideological references with which to discipline society, acts as a castrated myth. Traditionalism, as a fake replica, prevents the invention of traditions as the only ways that societies can negotiate being and living together. Here also, architecture and urban design have been instrumental.

Neophyte

I entered the Award Master Jury discussions with many doubts about the possibility of making any contribution. Those doubts remain intact. Meanwhile, the experience has sparked new enquiries; for example, how to integrate issues related to architecture, urbanism and landscape more actively into my own research and teaching practices. Concepts such as the public sphere, public space, inter-subjectivity and empowerment have become much more relevant. What are the possible new grounds for dialogue, from my position at the margin, with architect colleagues?