

Ecological Urbanism

The Aga Khan Awards for Architecture are generally intended for projects that are transformative in nature, that make an important social contribution to their respective communities and in the process make a significant contribution to architecture as well.

Apart from some examples of historic preservation, however, many of the selected buildings are built outside the context of a vital urban condition. In the absence of such context, the autonomy and the typological uniqueness of the buildings frame the primary parameters for their evaluation.

Buildings in dense urban settings therefore feature more rarely in the awards, as do public spaces that provide citizens with new spaces for interaction and socialisation. In the formation of contemporary urban developments in the Islamic world, it seems that less attention is given to the space between buildings, the very glue that binds the elements of a genuine public space. Why is that? Why is it so hard today to conceive of a compact, dense urbanism that would in some way parallel the best historic examples of the Islamic city?

It is true, of course, that the concept of the 'Islamic city' itself has been questioned by some scholars, who have drawn our attention to the local, site-specific origins of the older cities. Such cities are not based on a singular identifiable model, but have hybrid characteristics created by the way they cultivate the existing urban fabric through a process of addition and modification. This practice offers some challenges as well as some possible solutions to the contemporary situation.

In many respects, the conditions for testing new conceptions of urbanism seem unpromising. Some degree of experimentation does exist – a response to the unbridled opportunities offered to many international architects – but the results are variable. On the whole, development has been focused on branding a garish emulation of western modernity. There has been no systematic attempt to take up the challenge of constructing an alternative form of urbanism – one that could be inspired by the best of precedents, whether from the western or the Islamic worlds, one that would be innovative but, where necessary, specific to the region.

As testimony to what can be achieved in a very short time, architecturally and urbanistically, we have Dubai, an artifice capable of providing a futuristic oasis based on pure consumption, a cornucopia of gaudy luxury that already uses almost three times as much energy per person as the US – itself one of the worst culprits in terms of per-capita energy consumption. What is at stake here is not simply a shift from the tectonic to a thermodynamic paradigm in architecture, but a new form of practice that explores the reciprocities between built form and energy consumption at both the urban and the regional level.

More importantly, to anticipate, plan and take part in such a practice requires a new mind-set – what Guattari called a process of re-singularisation of existence. By this he meant that we, as individuals, must be ready for dissent. A social and political ecology, he argued, depends on the collective production of unpredictable and untamed 'dissident subjectivities' rather than the mass movement of like-minded people.

The future architecture of the Islamic world needs to take place within such a context of sustainable and ecological development. Urban ecology cannot be reduced to the single issue of cutting energy use (however important that may be). Rather, an ecological urbanism needs to incorporate an ethics of size, of social mix, of density and of public space. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that the wealthier portions of the population are continually expanding the size of the areas they inhabit. These supposed 'improvements' in lifestyle have a significant impact on the consumption of resources; they also aggravate the long-standing inequalities between the rich and the poor. Dubai, with its emphasis on signature architecture, has so far been rather good at concealing these disparities, but one has only to visit a city like Mumbai, where the worst shantytowns lie in the shadow of the most expensive developments, to see the stark contrasts that emerge with uncontrolled development. Perhaps the mere visibility of such a contrast is a more honest picture of reality. After all, who knows where they house all the workers who service an economy like Dubai's? It may be better to face the uncomfortable realities of the city than to present it as a simulacrum – a gigantic desiring machine not so different from Disneyland.

At the larger scale, it is the infrastructure of our cities that provides the best opportunities for constructing the framework for an urban environment that is spatially equitable and open to the participation of all citizens. If urban development is left primarily to the private sector, it is hard to envisage an appropriate funding of this infrastructure. Collaboration between public and private initiatives is thus one of the key mechanisms for the articulation of a public sphere of institutions and spaces that are networked to benefit the populace.

The design of such an environment – of an ecologically grounded urbanism – is itself a new form of research endeavour that relies in part on our understanding of earlier precedents, combined with new forms of collaboration between clients, users, architects, urbanists, landscape urbanists and other consultants. This situation is not unique to the Islamic world, yet the fact that many Islamic societies are only now undergoing significant and rapid development provides an important momentum for articulating an urbanism that can match the best traditions of architecture and engineering of the Islamic city.

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