

An afterword: Places of work within Islamic communities

MOHSEN MOSTAFAVI

The origins of this book are rooted in His Highness the Aga Khan's interest in the circumstances and conditions of contemporary places of work within Islamic communities. In the context of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, there is also an ongoing concern about the architectural characteristics of the types of buildings that accommodate our daily labor, whether intellectual or physical. Namely, how can an office building, a workshop, or a factory best represent the values and aspirations of a society today?

This issue is particularly pertinent within Muslim communities, many of which are grappling with the impacts of various forms of modernization. Historically, industrialization has involved some degree of Westernization, yet the introduction of industrial production has hardly resulted in the establishment of identical spatial practices in different countries. What can we learn from the history of industrialization within Islamic communities that would help guide us in our task of designing buildings today? Are there any conditions related to the program, environment, and habits of a specific locality that make it necessary for an office building in Morocco to be thought of differently from one in Abu Dhabi or, for that matter, London?

To help address these and related questions, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture organized a conference in cooperation with İstanbul Bilgi University at their Santral campus, which is housed in a series of old and new buildings. The older struc-

tures are predominantly industrial, and some have been renovated to accommodate the functions of a dynamic university. Others have been supplanted by contemporary buildings within a landscape that provides a new surface to the whole and, therefore, a new setting for the entire complex.

During the conference, we spent much of our time in a massive new exhibition building adjacent to a gigantic turbine hall, now a museum, that once provided electricity for İstanbul. The interplay between the machinery of the past and the monumental space that housed it made a powerful impression. The museum was a gleaming embodiment of progress. The pristine machinery—old, but in seemingly perfect working condition—helped emphasize the heroic character of the building and its original function. Perhaps this would not have been the case had the building and its equipment been neglected and left to deteriorate. However, the status of the place as a museum helped us—perhaps even forced us—to be more cognizant of the historical significance of the building as part of a much larger architectural and cultural project at a specific moment in time, when the relationship between technological progress and architectural advancement was closely tied.

Many of the essays in this volume address that period of 20th-century optimism during which countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Egypt embraced the new possibilities of technology. During this era of modernization, numerous factories

were built in these countries, often combining the pragmatic and routinized needs of technical organization with an architecture that relied on available local resources and vernacular traditions of construction. In essence, many of the industrial buildings discussed are hybrids that invariably incorporate both Western design planning and local motifs and ornaments. But there is no denying the fact that like the defunct turbine hall at Bilgi University, the majority of these buildings are proud exemplars of a bygone time.

But what are we to do today when—with the passing of time—it is debatable that there is any contemporary version of a vernacular that can be easily referenced in the design and construction of new places of work? Shouldn't we simply consider adopting the best of what is available in the West? This seems to be the position taken by a number of countries of the Gulf region, such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar. But, with a few exceptions, these countries have had a hard time realizing truly innovative versions of Western architecture. It is, for example, difficult to single out office buildings in the area that have challenged the status quo of patterns of use, or the very typology of the office building.

Industrial buildings and workshops, on the other hand—lacking the symbolic significance of office buildings located at the core of most urban areas—are now too frequently reduced to pure utilitarian artifacts positioned along the fringes of the city. Most are buildings that do little for those who spend working days and sometimes nights within their confines, or for those who wish to partake of their meager visual and architectural benefits and pleasures.

We need to challenge this state of affairs by questioning the very circumstances and conditions of our places of work. The arrangement of these spaces must be sensitive to the needs of those who work in them while supporting efficient methods of production. The handling of the interior of these buildings needs to be more carefully considered for their long-term sustainability and productivity. Optimization of production is not ultimately achieved via mechanization alone, but can be fostered by enhancing the environmental qualities of industrial buildings.

Some of the pioneers of industrial architecture in the West made influential contributions not only through the quality and appearance of their buildings, but also through the attention they paid to working conditions. The use of daylight, for example, in the well-known 1929 Van Nelle Factory in Rotterdam was in part a response to the dehumaniz-

ing environments prevalent in American industry. Perhaps ironically, this situation is just as ripe for reconsideration in the West today as it is in the context of emergent and transforming Islamic communities.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, a number of European firms—especially those in Britain—developed an approach to architecture that incorporated the aesthetics and, to some extent, the methods of industrial production. These architects, including Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, and Nicholas Grimshaw, were responsible for the evolution of a new industrial sensibility that was not limited to industrial buildings. One contribution of this approach has been a reconsideration of materials and methods of construction, in particular the use of lightweight elements fabricated off site. The buildings designed by these so-called High-Tech architects are more akin to assemblages from a kit of parts than to structures built using traditional methods of construction such as bricks and mortar. Adapting this type of building to the context of Islamic communities, however, presents a number of challenges, for this method requires a degree of sophistication that would make its use for industrial purposes both technically and financially prohibitive. But this kind of building, which still merits further exploration, has evolved to serve a variety of other functions in ways that respond to climate variations in diverse locations.

It is important to remember that despite their many problems, Le Corbusier's buildings in India were developed with the specific goal of responding to the local possibilities and knowledge of construction. This approach would also extend to the recovery of local traditions as the platform for innovation. For example, the use of geometry in Iranian architecture might be a rich source of new spatial exploration rather than a merely symbolic restatement of traditional motifs. The primary challenge of industrial buildings, and places of work more generally in Islamic communities, is for architects and clients to investigate ways in which local circumstances and contingencies can produce the basis for new forms of design imagination that transcend naïve representations of progress as well as tradition. By embracing the best of what is on offer both globally and locally, as a form of material research, we will be able to construct new places and spaces of work in the years to come. Surely this is the only way we can produce buildings that will not only be inviting workplaces, but also significant contributions to architecture and worthy of the Aga Khan Award.