

The Shortlist

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Triannually over the last 30 years, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has solicited nominations for projects from around the Muslim world that deserve special recognition. The Award receives hundreds of nominations for every cycle, and some 20 to 30 projects are normally shortlisted before the final winners are announced. After the selection of the winning projects, however, the shortlisted project material has been relegated to the archive, accessed only by interested researchers. For this cycle of the Award, a new policy was adopted: The list would be made public. The shortlisted projects would both be honoured by public recognition and contribute to a fuller enunciation of the Award's overall message.

For this cycle, 19 projects were selected for the shortlist. The nominations represent an important spectrum of projects from around the world, exemplifying the diversity and breadth of Muslim presence. Some projects were nominated from traditional Muslim hinterlands; others were identified in places where Muslim communities are a minority—perhaps even a recent addition to societies where Muslims had little presence in the past. This demographic distribution is of course but one small part of the paradigm of defining a Muslim *Ummah*. Diversity in customs, economies and ritual practices all add to the complexity of identifying an overarching cultural ethos that would include all Muslims. It also enriches the possibilities for undertaking such an enterprise.

This time, the Award decided to publish its shortlist partly in response to the need to expand the definition of the Muslim realm and broaden the scope of debate concerning cultural specificity, and partly to address the wide range of innovative solutions available for addressing similar problems. The shortlisted projects reinforce the messages promulgated by the winning projects, but they also enrich these messages by shedding light on the complexity of the built environment. A myriad of technical, economic, social and political concerns are embedded in these projects. The winning projects can epitomise certain values, but can never alone address all issues.

Despite the fact that the shortlist was announced some time before the jury selected the winning projects, there is always a sentiment that a shortlist is secondary. We tend to forget that the issues brought forward by the winning projects come from within the shortlist, and not the other way around. The shortlist is what generates the winning projects; the values of the winning projects were already embodied in the wider selection. The three themes addressed by the winning projects were identified as: the expansion of the presence of Muslim cultures within the framework of globalisation; “treading lightly on earth” as an attitude towards affecting the built environment, regardless of the scale of intervention; and inclusiveness as a strategy for addressing the need to live together in a complex world. These themes are as relevant for the shortlisted projects as they proved to be for the winning projects.

The Tulou Collective Housing complex in Guangzhou, China, is learning from traditional building types found in another part of China; it challenges the very notion of tradition as something indigenous, but manages to redefine a traditional typology to meet modern needs. The Bridge School in northern China is situated between two traditional Tulou structures, yet opts to address its context with a simple modern building. The two projects were not designed with paradigms of Muslim values, but together they reflect an essential theme in Muslim political and cultural discourse today: Is tradition resilient enough to meet the challenges of the modern?

Two projects address post-disaster reconstruction: the post-earthquake rebuilding of Ngibikan village in Indonesia, and the post-tsunami construction of a community centre in Yodakandyia in Sri Lanka to facilitate the integration of refugees from the coastal lowlands into the hinterland. The first invoked an old Muslim value of collaboration to rebuild the village and recycled communal assets to preserve community wealth. The other project reacted to the needs of a non-Muslim community with the same diligence and sensitivity. In the face of disaster, all humans have basic needs and must embrace similar modes of solidarity to recover.

Yet the process of recovery is bigger than any one community can achieve on its own. Perhaps the key issue here is to be always prepared for disaster. Preparedness is now a challenge for all governments and communities across the world. In that context, the Wadi Hanifa Project sheds some light on how governments are taking the initiative to lessen the future dangers of floods and environmental disaster. In the case of Wadi Hanifa, the issue of mitigating environmental disaster is resolved in a way that addresses the very fabric and identity of the city. Genuine responses come from investing in developing a deep understanding of place on all levels and crafting appropriate solutions.

Defining local identity in the face of globalising normative forces was the theme of many projects. Some of the projects addressed the issue in the conservation project format. The Karaouine Mosque in Fez, Morocco, is one case where local expertise cultivated through years of working on the historic preservation of the city took up the most challenging task of not only restoring a physical structure but integrating it into the social life of the city, while reasserting its role as a leading religious learning centre for both men and women. Another case at hand is the preservation of the city of Gjirokastra in Albania, where reclaiming the heritage of the city necessitated the assembly of scores of local and international experts. The work succeeded in forming a broad coalition of partners. The two projects highlight different approaches to understanding heritage as either a local tradition to be continued or a physical asset to be preserved. Each attitude had strengths and shortfalls. The debate on conservation should be enriched by such juxtapositions.

Another attempt at tackling the question of heritage comes from an unconventional project. The Souk Waqif in Qatar is a broad gesture for preserving local culture facing the rapidly globalising nature of modern cities. It is not a conservation project, because much of the original physical fabric was beyond preservation. But through thoughtful planning, the urban morphology was recreated and a major investment ensued to assure that this very rare sample of an urban heritage is preserved for future generations. A place

was created to celebrate the diverse cultures that contributed to the creation of a modern state. An alternative to the generic shopping mall was opened to the residents of the city.

In contrast to the projects striving to preserve a national asset, a tradition or the memory of a local culture, other projects challenged the whole notion of the indigenous. The Master Plan of the American University of Beirut and the Revitalisation of the Hypercentre of Tunis both aim to preserve heritage assets that reflect Western architectural traditions in cities with strong Muslim heritage. Yet both projects worked with the local populations and the end users preserve an essential part of the city. Choosing to recognise, celebrate and to preserve it marks not only a reconciliation with the colonial past but an acceptance of the city as a valid place to be. The whole world can learn from these two examples of how to carefully reweave the fabric of the city. At a time where instant history is being created by importing global brand-name developments on the fringes of sprawling conurbations, these two cases are shining examples of commitment to a genuine sense of place.

In an opposite direction, the museum of Madinat al-Zahra epitomises the need to view Muslim historiography as an integral part of the story of civilisation, and particularly Western civilisation. As shown by these last three examples, cultural history can be understood only by recognising its multicultural trajectories.

Treading lightly on earth is another theme that emerged from the shortlist. Projects posed very subtle questions to their contexts, whether it is the environment, the local culture or the city. They chose to open dialogue with their surroundings, and through a humble positioning of their built forms they contributed to challenging their local contexts. Rather than shouting, they whisper, which speaks eloquently to the modern world by exposing its limitations.

The Nishorgo Oirabot Nature Interpretation Centre in Bangladesh is a delicate insertion of a relatively large structure in the middle of the forest. It helps to communicate the need to preserve the natural environment to both locals and



Bridge School Xiashi Village, China



tourists. It borrows from a local building tradition the notion of raising itself on stilts, minimising its footprint. The Palmyra House on the western coast of India also provides a simple structure that blends with nature and demonstrates that luxury does not have to be intrusive. The same lesson can be learned at the Green School in Bali, Indonesia, where natural bamboo was used to develop a first-class learning institution, by simply raising major roof structures on armatures of bamboo.

The Dowlat II Residential Building in Tehran faces the street with a frontage of 6 metres, yet by refusing to succumb to the commercial pressure of middle-class housing, this humble porous facade supported by a simple framework challenges the whole city. In a similar gesture, the Chandgaon Mosque in Bangladesh opens up its geometry to accommodate the community through its sanctuary, challenging symbolic language by introducing innovative gestures based on a new reading of traditional forms: transparency as opposed to closure, scale rather than proportion and passage rather than destination.

While discussing the museum project at Madinat al-Zahra, the jury was reminded of an important cultural feature of Andalusia that is the context of the project. Historians often speak of a culture of *convivencia*, or living together, to describe the Muslim presence in Spain. Architecture can play a major role in bringing people to accept each other and to create spaces where living together is possible.

The Ipekyol Textile Factory in Edirne, Turkey, represents this important value of living together. Here people have to work closely together; they share the same space and breathe the same air. The architecture opens up the space and involves itself with the smallest details of the production line. Edirne is a city located at the crossroads between the Muslim and Western worlds, and the building defines a new age of economic complementarities between these two worlds. Its strength, however, stems from the fact that it can set standards of sensitive design for both. The building as a shared space is also exemplified by the Rubber Smokehouse in Malaysia. Through bringing together young people to work on recording the history

of the small town of Lunas and its heritage, the building became a focus for ethnic reconciliation. Likewise, learning to explore the conditions of living together was exemplified in the Burkina Faso Women's Health Centre. The functions of the building are about coping with different perceptions of gender roles in a society, but the architecture also provides a symbolic umbrella that unifies the various rooms distinguished by different colours under the shade of the overarching roof. Forms and functions reinforce each other to create a space of empowerment for women.

The issues facing Muslim societies today are very diverse. The Award jury opted against recognising typologies or classes of building activities and favoured instead a deep exploration into why architecture and building activities take place. The celebrated projects have demonstrated a sensitive research into the ethical values that architecture faces today. But they were selected only when these sensitivities managed to produce an architecture of excellence in terms of design, meeting the needs of users, realising an impact beyond the site and involving the wider social and cultural milieu.