

Why is Contemporary Islamic Architecture Risking Banality?

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Architecture in the Islamic World underwent a series of major shifts in the last two centuries, which is, significantly, the period of Western colonial dominance and its aftermath. In fact, the definition of an Islamic architecture itself is a European idea that owes its genesis to the post-Enlightenment project that aimed to collect, classify, and codify all available knowledge about all cultures. That early conception of Islamic architecture was rather romantic and essentialist, aside from not having bothered to differentiate between the various historical strands of architecture within the Islamic world. It managed, nonetheless, to inform most of the architectural production of the 19th and early 20th century in the recently colonised Islamic countries as well as the fantastic Oriental follies in Europe. But the historically eclectic and heavily ornamental architecture it created lost a lot of its appeal by the middle of the 20th century with the waning of direct colonial rule. National independence movements brought with them the more vocal and more aggressive categories of modernity, nationalism, and, later, socialism to represent the architecture of the recently established states. The new framework engendered some grand architectural and urban projects, such as commemorative monuments, large governmental complexes, and whole new administrative and industrial cities. It also generated extensive debates about regionalism and vernacular architecture as authentic illustration of the nation's spirit, which produced idealistic villages, residential suburbs and community centers, in addition to villas for the artistically minded nationalist elites. This progressive stage, however, was succeeded and somewhat supplanted by the no less passionate discourse on religion as framer of identity that sprang forth in the 1980s primarily as a response to the failure of the nationalist regimes to fulfill the aspirations of their people. An indirect consequence to this ideological twist was that most new architecture built in the Islamic world after 1980, though still following some international standards of form and function, began to pay homage to some notion of 'Islamic architecture,' even if sometimes only in the form of pastiche.

This last stage, which we are still going through, runs the risk of completing a conceptual cycle of sorts and returning us to where we started, i.e., a narrowly defined, historically predetermined, and formally homogenised 'Islamic architecture'. This possible, though probably never intended nor anticipated, outcome finds its causes in various trajectories.

Some are political and socio-cultural and can be summed up by the question: What do Muslims today, or at least the patrons among them who are dictating the current demand for an 'authentic' architecture, want their buildings to express and why? Others have to do with the profession of architecture and its current politics and demographics, as well as its changing conceptual, financial, technical and ethical parameters. Still others are economic: they relate to the effects of the unstoppable global late-Capitalism and its regional clones, which promote a glitzy yet monotonous architecture in order to satisfy a business ambition to homogenise all markets. But one little-explored factor affecting this state of affairs is in fact a cultural theory, which, though powerfully present in the current architectural discourse, has its distinct and clear origins outside the domain of Islamic architecture. This article is a concise and somewhat selective review of the history of that particular theory from its intellectual roots in 19th-century Europe to its application in architectural practice today. It aims to understand how a relatively simple and strongly prejudiced cultural theory was able to affect and define the orientation of architecture in the Islamic world and how it was, conversely and unpredictably, bolstered by the reaction of those who are ostensibly opposed to both its premises and conclusions.

It all began at the turn of the 19th century when the term 'Islamic architecture' (or any of its period equivalents such as Oriental, Arabic, Saracenic, Mohammedan, Moorish, etc.) first appeared in pioneering Orientalist tracts on architecture. The initial attempts at formalising a name and definition of that architecture were rather open-ended. This was probably a function of the novelty and peculiarity of the architectural specimens encountered by the first European architects, artists, archaeologists, and draftsmen who came to the 'Orient' right before the first European military interventions. They had little preconceived notion of 'Islamic architecture', other than its outlandishly extravagant allure, which they had imbibed as children from the fantasies of the *Arabian Nights* and other such romantic tales. And although they did not readily find the fanciful architecture of their childhood dreams in the dusty and rundown cities of the Orient, what they came across was strange enough to provoke certain wonderment among them, which they set out to remedy in the best manner available to them. They empirically represented it. They measured and recorded buildings and ruins and illustrated them using all sorts of techniques from freehand sketches to photography and exact *camera lucida* projections. They collected, analysed, and translated all the historical references they could find in the primary sources available to them. They then published impressive architectural catalogs, which began to reveal the rich architectural heritage of the historical 'Orient' (the present was too degraded for their tastes) that was hitherto almost totally unknown in Europe.

The next wave of Western architects coming to the Islamic world around the turn of the 20th century carried out their work under colonial tutelage and within the confines of a colonial ethos. Most of them in fact came in search of employment in the colonial administrations or local governments and occupied positions ranging from documentation, research and

conservation, to design and construction, to even intelligence gathering. They had learned about Islamic architecture from the usual travelogues but also from the substantial corpus of elaborate catalogs produced by their predecessors in the late 19th century. But that rather empirical knowledge base did not erase from their minds the tales of yore and their images of Oriental fantasies. Nor did it taper the effect of their conventional architectural education which espoused a canonical view of architecture as culturally circumscribed and linearly chronological, with the architecture of the West ensconced at the core and impervious to any influence by a lesser culture. Thus, despite their serious architectural learning, the Western designers still conceptually, historiographically, and analytically separated the styles that developed north of the Mediterranean, i.e. Western styles, from those that emerged south of it, i.e. Islamic styles. They also, following the Orientalist approach to the study of Islamic history, sharply distinguished between the Islamic past, considered glorious and inspiring, and the decadent present seen as the antithesis of the modern, ordered and advanced world. This translated into two traits that often appeared in the architecture built by these Western designers in the first half of the 20th century. First was the burgeoning of numerous historicist and revivalist styles that borrowed freely from the varied repertoires of the past and blended them with some modern structural, stylistic and compositional modes. Second was an excessive focus on the architectural object as detached from its urban environment with its messy social, economic and political conditions, rendered paradoxically complex by colonial domination.

This culturally and historically skewed conception was formalised when Islamic architecture became a subject of academic specialisation in a few top art history departments in major Western universities in the 1940s and 1950s. With this development, the study of the history of architecture of the Islamic world joined a constellation of culture-specific, non-Western traditions, which made their way into Western academe around the same time. There, these disciplinary newcomers acquired the patina of scholarly authority and professional respectability. But lacking any theoretical or historiographical constructs derived from their own context or developed in their own tradition, they found themselves subsumed by the conceptual framework of Western architectural history. This was methodologically expedient for Western architectural history offered a ready-made classification system that could be adapted to the various non-Western cultures in a clear and comprehensive way. It was also academically advantageous as Western architectural history had a dignified scholarly tradition behind it dating back to the 18th century and had substantially matured through its encounters with various anthropological and historiographical new schools of thought in the 20th century.

But Western architectural history also engendered a hegemonic structure in the sense described by Michel Foucault; that is, it discursively controlled the intricate network that produced and used architectural knowledge. Furthermore, because of its venerable legacy and institutional power, the chronology of Western architecture, from its presumed

Classical origins to its victorious culmination in modern times, constituted the historical core of World Architecture, which has to be internalised by all architects, and relegated other architectural traditions to peripheral places in its ordered hierarchy. This is best exemplified by the famous Tree of Architecture of Banister Fletcher, which appeared as frontispiece in all the editions of his influential book, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method for the Student, Craftsman, and Amateur*, between 1896 and 1961 (see Figure 1). This unabashedly racist diagram reserved the trunk and the upper, healthy branches of the tree to an uninterrupted succession of Western styles from Greece to modern America, and relegated the architecture of all other cultures, both in the Old and New Worlds, to dead-end branches.

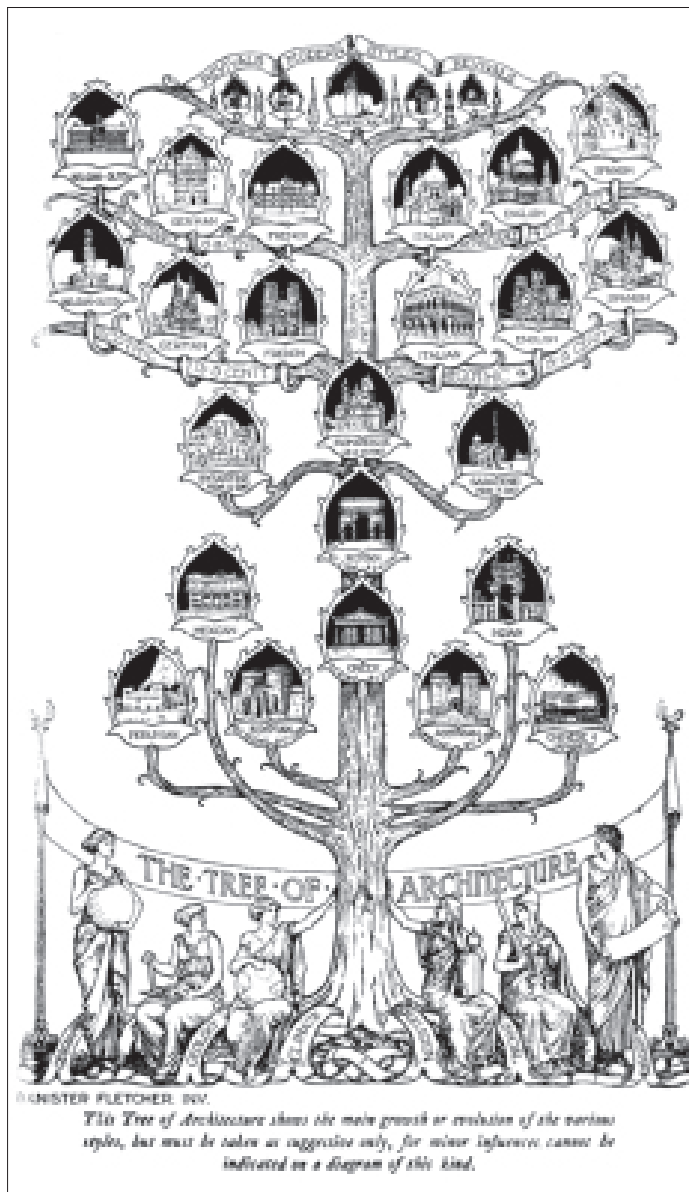


Figure 1: The Tree of Architecture of Banister Fletcher.

This rigid framing of the history of architecture, which owed much to the colonial atmosphere of the late 19th century, reduced all architectures outside the West to endogenous and seemingly self-contained architectural traditions that somehow did not manage to complete the leap toward modernity and remained embalmed in their splendid past. The consolidation of that conceptual separation between past and present and East and West as well as its concomitant conjecture that Islamic architecture was essentially a dead tradition affected the production of new architecture in the Islamic world, as well as elsewhere outside the West, and it still does today. It afflicted any design that aimed to relate to its architectural context with a schizophrenic condition, which lies at the roots of the homogenising impulse that this essay set out to analyse. Architects active in the Islamic world at the height of the colonial age and their patrons were actually futilely challenged to bring together two epistemologically distinct and historically irreconcilable traditions: the modern architecture they learned about and imported from the colonial metropolises, which was a living tradition with a long history, and the historical architecture they encountered in the colonies, which had a long history but was no longer alive. They had one of two choices. They could reject the dead tradition and copy directly from Western models to assert their modernity and up-to-dateness, hence the preponderance of Neo-Classical, Art-Nouveau, Art-Deco, and Modernist architecture in their work. Or they could reference Islamic historical architecture in their design as a way to give it a local flavor. They had, however, to filter their references through established Western revivalist methods, since they were trained to regard Islamic architecture as a heritage of the past that was interrupted and thus in need of revitalization. This is how we can understand the various neo-Islamic styles that flourished at the time all over the Islamic world: they were mostly European styles dressed in sometimes fanciful yet geometrically calibrated Islamic ornaments that represented a nod to the architectural history of the place.

Analogous constraints governed the work of several architects of this generation from the Islamic world who studied in European schools of architecture and applied the lessons they learned to the buildings they designed in their countries. Their work, though formally indebted to the same Art-Nouveau, eclectic-revivalist, and other stylistic innovations of the period that informed the work of their Western counterparts, is usually interpreted as a conscious effort towards the creation of a historically recognisable and legitimising national image. To that end, they tried to identify within the vast Islamic formal repertoire the most representative subset pertinent to their geographically circumspect nation, but still had to maneuver around the incompatibility of the two mega-historic traditions they were trying to blend: the Western and Islamic.

Although many ideological constructs crumbled after the end of colonial rule in the mid-20th century, the bluntly Eurocentric stratification of world architecture survived to exert a considerable influence on the national architecture of the sometimes hastily formed states of the decolonised Islamic world. In their zeal to purge their emerging national

identity from any compromised influence, be it colonial or pre-national, the nationalist architects and architectural historians bought into the cultural autonomy paradigm, so as to reconstruct a 'pure' and 'authentic' architectural heritage. As noted long ago by Franz Fanon,¹ the nationalists' heartfelt resistance to the hegemonic Western model did not translate into their rejection of its conceptual and methodological premises. On the contrary, they embraced them in their own work and ended up structuring and categorising 'their' architecture and 'their' culture in general, from an exclusive and ultimately narrowly defined perspective.

The first architectural signs of this nationalistic impulse appeared in countries that experienced radical rupture with their past such as Turkey after the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire or the Islamic Khanates of Central Asia after their annexation by Tsarist Russia. Digging up ancient civilisations and abstracting their architecture in modern renderings was a favorite path. Next were those modern states, such as Iran and to a lesser extent Egypt (but also Spain, Portugal, and Greece, though they had already been admitted to the Western club), which sought to revive a pre-Islamic past as a means to construct a presumed historical continuity of a quintessential national identity. The rediscovery of vernacular architecture is the most revealing case in point of that process. Idealistic architects saw vernacular architecture as the true, honest architectural expression of traditional culture that successfully addressed both contextual specificity and formal diversity. This, however, was not culture in an anthropological or historical sense, but rather culture in a militant and passionately ontological one: culture as a marker of identity and a framer of national unity. It is therefore no accident that the rediscovery of vernacular architecture as the embodiment of cultural identity coincided with the age of decolonisation and independence. Its revival was a direct outcome of a rising nationalism that located its identity in the original, authentic culture of the homeland to which it laid claim. To the nationalist and culturally sensitive architect, vernacular architecture was in fact a sign of the vitality and depth of native culture that existed before and would, hopefully, be restored to its former glow after the overthrow of the tarnishing colonial experience. It was both an affirmation of an active, pre-colonial traditional architecture and the foundation for a postcolonial national architecture.

No architect has accomplished this more passionately, more gracefully, and more steadfastly than the pioneering Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900–1989).² He challenged the mainstream modernist architecture of his training by advocating a return to the vernacular as a source of architectural and even social rejuvenation. The design principles he proposed are seen as expressions of indigenously developed architecture with clear cultural and environmental contours and place rootedness. But the ideological references of Fathy's

¹ Fanon, F. (1967) *A Dying Colonialism*. New York: Grove Press.

² Fathy, H. (1973) *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*. The University of Chicago Press.

vernacular architecture did not remain fixed over time. They expanded, and even shifted with the changing national identity of Egypt as it went through the long and torturous road from colonial domination to independence to development and its aftermath entangled with grand dreams of regional supremacy.



Figure 2: New Gurna village, Egypt, Hassan Fathy (1948–1961).

Fathy's discovery of the vernacular had its historical roots in the struggle against the British colonial rule in the 1920s and 1930s and the rise of an Egyptian national identity. He presented his first experiments in New Gurna as the embodiment of an authentic Egyptian architecture, albeit of an unlikely mix of Mamluk and Nubian styles that he admired (see Figure 2). But what started as a visual marker of an Egyptian national identity was transformed at least twice during Fathy's lifetime. After his return to Egypt in 1962, Fathy himself modified the interpretation of his architecture from a manifestation of a primeval Egyptian model to an essentially Arabic and later an Islamic one with ambiguous universal applicability. He first identified a 'ubiquitous' Arab house with a spatially ingenious response to the harsh desert environment as the model for his own architecture. A few years later, the model became the Arabo-Islamic house, and ultimately an all-encompassing Islamic concept of domestic space with references to notions of the serene and protected family life and the conception of unique God and the images of His promised Paradise as the normative paradigms of his architectural model. His last grand project in Abiquiu, New Mexico (1981–86), when his trademark design crossed the Atlantic to be implemented in the southwestern American wilderness, was predicated on an idealistic universalism that was nonetheless recognisably Islamic in forms, meaning, and aspirations (see Figure 3). This process paralleled the changing dominant ideology in Egypt, and elsewhere in the Islamic world, from the pre-and post-independence liberal nationalism, to the various experiments in supra-nationalism and/or socialism of the 1960s, to the populist Islamism of the 1980s, which was underwritten by various groups primarily for political ends.

This badly understood and still-unfolding process evolved intermittently during the late 1970s and 1980s in the vast majority of the Islamic countries. Spurred by the triumph of Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in Iran of 1979, and vaguely conceived as a response

to the perceived failures of the national edifices built after Western cultural constructs, the Islamicist movement sought a return to more authentic cultural, political and social foundations. This search ultimately gave rise to an ideology that saw Islam as identity and, tangentially, Islamic architecture as an expression of that identity. Several culturally and politically dissimilar, though ultimately mutually reinforcing social elite groups promoted that development. Their wealth and their fervent quest for political and cultural identity combined to create a demand for a contemporary, financially beneficial, yet visually recognisable Islamic architecture. Sincerely at times, but opportunistically at many others, scores of architects responded by incorporating in their otherwise postmodern designs various historical elements dubbed 'Islamic', which they often used as basic diagrams for their plans or splashed on the surfaces as ornament.

Thus, the 1980s and 1990s became the decades of readily identifiable Islamicised post-modern architecture everywhere in the Islamic world. There were the post-traditionalists

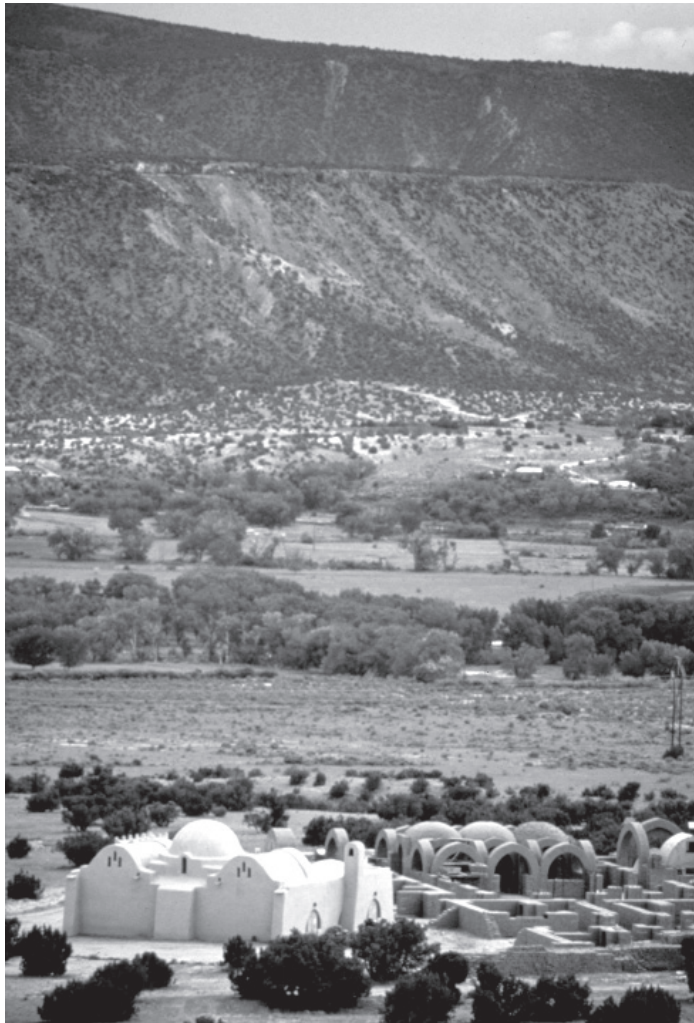


Figure 3: Dar al-Islam, Abiquiu, New Mexico, Hassan Fathy (1981–86).

who, like Hassan Fathy before them, looked for inspiration in vernacular architecture. But unlike Fathy, they did not build on the social, environmental, and economic underpinnings of the revived traditional forms and restored material and construction techniques. Instead they brandished their architecture as a kind of native response to both the blandness of international modernism and the Eurocentrism of post-modernism and, in some cases, exported it as an expressive Islamic style. There were also the free, and often arbitrary, *mélanges* of diverse historical forms and patterns from the full range of Islamic styles, and even un-architectural symbols sometimes. This trend culminated with grand structures by large international firms, which re-interpreted visual symbols and historical motifs and used them in otherwise ultra sleek designs. Parallel to this historicist process, and following a similar socio-economic track, was the adoption of regional references that originally appeared in nostalgic small projects all over the Islamic world, to be appropriated by large real-estate and tourism developers and translated into mega-projects, especially in the Arabian Gulf cities (see Figure 4). In these later projects however, thoughtful regionalism was given up in favor of compositions that loudly, and perhaps even too loudly, bespoke the desire to endow a global pursuit of luxury in architecture aimed at the wealthy, with sanitised but recognisable local referents.



Figure 4: The Burj al-Arab Hotel (designed by Atkins, 1999) seen behind the wind catchers of Madinat Jumeirah (designed by Creative Kingdom Inc., 2004), Dubai.

Despite their different social, political and economic backgrounds and their diverse architectural output, the proponents of all three phases of historicist architecture in the modern Islamic world – the Orientalist/colonial, nationalist, and neo-Islamicist – share the same cultural theory on ‘Islamic architecture’. They all accept the paradigm of cultural autonomy developed in the triumphant colonial Europe of the 19th century that casts Islamic architecture as a tradition that ran parallel to the Western architectural tradition but almost never intersected with it throughout the Middle Ages until it dissolved into it with the onset of modernity, loosing all creativity in the process. The only difference between the nationalists and the neo-Islamicists is that they emphasise different historical trajectories. The nationalists stress the point in time when their putative nation – i.e. Turkish, Iranian, Arab – rose to prominence under Islam or broke away from its hegemonic grip. They sometimes search for some anchoring roots in the distant, pre-Islamic past and postulate some latent continuity between that past and the awakening of their nation to its true identity in the modern age. The neo-Islamicists, on the other hand, subscribe to the notion of an Islamic Golden Age, stretching from the high Caliphate in the 8th century to the Gunpowder Empires’ high tide in the 16th century. They hold that age as the fountainhead from which their architecture derives, jumping right to the present where they try to rebuild that romantically remembered architectural utopia using purely postmodern compositional and formal techniques and leaving out all that they consider ‘foreign’, i.e. the age of intense interaction with the West after the 16th century. The end result is that both nationalists and neo-Islamicists conceive ‘their’ architecture from an exclusionary, reductive, and eventually ahistorical perspective, which they unwittingly inherited or conveniently appropriated from their Orientalist predecessors and sometime teachers.

The historical exclusivity and referential reductiveness delimited by the theory of cultural autonomy are among the most critical root causes of the potential for homogenisation in architectural production in the Islamic world today. For as long as architects responding to the demand for a contemporary Islamic architecture turn uncritically to either the nationalist (and by and large modernist) or the neo-Islamicist (and resolutely postmodern) interpretation of the Orientalist paradigm, the pool of conceptual and compositional possibilities available to them will remain limited. Nor will further documentation and assimilation of little-studied specimens of historical architecture in the Islamic world, or even the inclusion of the hybrid styles of the colonial age in their referential repertoire help much in increasing the diversity within the realm of Islamic architecture. What is needed is a true re-conceptualisation of what Islamic architecture is; a reappraisal that goes all the way to challenging the dominant paradigm of the entire discipline of architectural history. Organisations such as the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA), the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA), and individuals concerned about architecture in the Islamic world will have to once and for all transcend the polarising dichotomous conditions, such as East vs. West and modern vs. traditional, that have restricted their

discipline's scope and self-image for so long. They will have to cast the illusory notion of cultural autonomy aside and espouse the full range of world architecture with all its wonderful cultural multiplicity and interconnectedness as their rightful domain of learning, inspiration, and, in the final account, belonging.

