ANOTHER MOORE

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Charles Moore was an enigmatic figure of contemporary architecture. I can think of very few architects who were as busy as he was over the past decade – 'stretched to the limit' is a phrase that comes to mind. His long and important involvement with architecture and teaching is well known but what is not was his interest and contribution to the architecture of Islamic and developing countries, mainly through the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, a relationship that began in the early 1980s. A scholarly and more exhaustive article should be written abut this, but at this moment of remembering Charles and his work, perhaps a few anecdotes are the best way in which to record it, and the sense of humour that was his hallmark.

If I remember correctly, it was Mildred Schmertz, then with *Architectural Record*, who suggested that the Award contact Charles Moore. She suggested that as Charles was always travelling, the best opportunity to make his acquaintance would be on a trip with him: which is how she herself began to know him. Like most people, she enjoyed his wit and sense of the absurd, and recounts how, when on a bus together in Yemen on the way to visit a town called Hadja, a fellow passenger asked, 'Where is Hadja?' Moore promptly answered, 'Five minutes from Gotcha!'

Moore's real interest in the architecture of non-Western cultures had been a long-standing one from an academic and touristic viewpoint – South-East Asia being one of his favourite regions – but a more systematic involvement came with the invitation from the Aga Khan Award to become a member of its Master Jury in 1981. (The Award, one recalls, is the triennial prize of $500,000, selected by an independent master jury, and is given to winning works that make a contribution to the contemporary architecture of the Muslim world.) Moore, with his usual enthusiasm, accepted and immersed himself in the task of looking at the architectural production of a set of buildings which he tried to understand as an outsider. This indeed became his strength and contribution: to examine architecture of another culture, to not only judge 'good design', for which he had strong views, but also to understand the cultural contexts and means of production, be it from the craft tradition or that of modern technology. His willingness to understand different design approaches, and his personal standing as an architect, brought to the decisions of that 1983 set of Awards a sympathetic evaluation of smaller projects based on indigenous models that might well have been overlooked otherwise. One such project was the Cakirhan holiday house in the Akyaka area of Turkey, designed using the vernacular, not by an architect but by a poet. The Secretary-General of the Award, Suha Özkan, told Charles that this decision would be most controversial in Turkey because it was not in the modern image and that it had been designed by a non-architect in a folklore manner. Charles commented that this then would be even more important as a lesson because it would signal that local values and traditions could produce elegant buildings which related to their contexts and lifestyles better than those seen as 'high design'. Charles understood, perhaps intuitively, that good architecture and its reflections of culture were important and not necessarily the result of professional interventions. How this is reflected in his own architecture is another story.

Moore was also fascinated by, and admired His Highness the Aga Khan's vision and efforts to improve the quality of life for Muslims throughout the world and to express new, appropriate and contemporary architecture. From 1987 to 1992, Charles served as a member of the Award's Steering Committee – the body that oversees the Award's policy and concerns. Diligently he attended all the meetings in Geneva and several of its international seminars. On one occasion, after a long day of meetings he was having dinner at the exclusive Hotel Richmond's dining room with Muhammad Yunus, the Chairman of the Bangladeshi Grameen Bank and a fellow Steering Committee member. (The Grameen Bank is an extraordinary institution which provides loans to the poorest sectors of the Bangladeshi population, and mainly to women, to help improve their living conditions through the development of a simple kit of parts to build stable homes.) Yunus, whose concerns were with people and building at a very basic level, could not help remarking that the dinner they were having could probably house two families in Bangladesh using the kit that they had developed. Charles, who was interested in housing and housing standards and costs, expressed his concern and began to reconsider some of his own perspectives on the subject – as did Yunus.

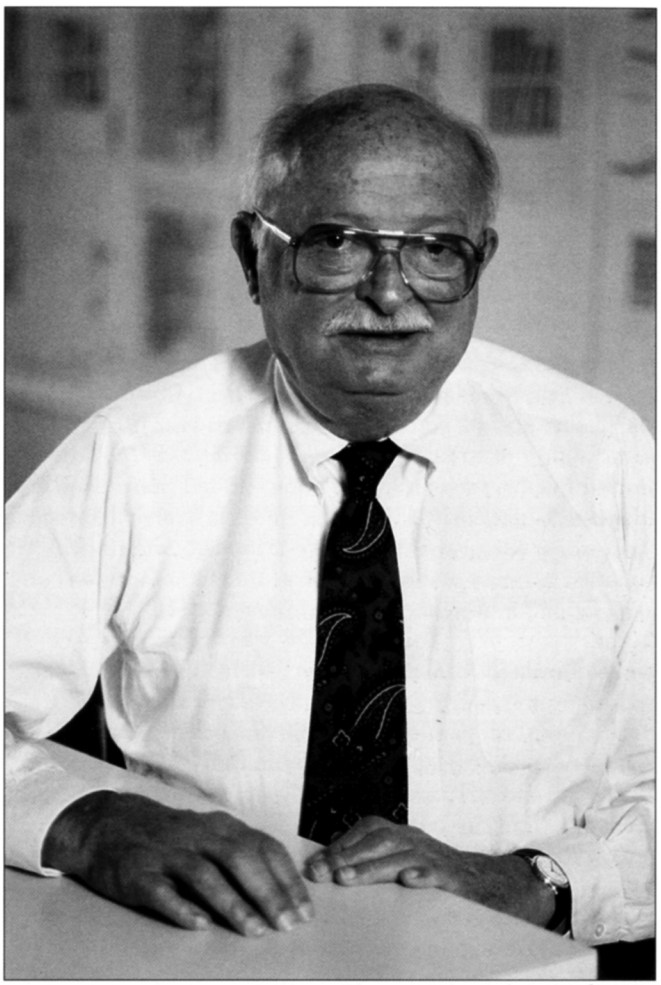
For a seminar to be held on housing in Zanzibar in the autumn of 1988, Charles and I were to make a presentation on the importance of the individual house to the architecture of the Third World, where informal sector and mass housing and planning were considered the major issues. It was unfortunately the time when he had just a heart operation and we had to develop the theme of the presentation over the phone. He made just three points which I incorporated into the presentation. He observed that single family houses in the late twentieth century seem possible only for the very rich and the poor – everyone else is expected to fit into anonymous slab blocks. He stressed the importance of the indigenous house as being one that is 'an extension of the human body, an outer layer of clothing, not altogether like other people' but capable of accommodating self-expression and lets its occupants inhabit it'. He also recounted how some

seventeen years earlier he had taken a class of architecture students to Istanbul to look at dwellings made by people who could have exactly what they wanted. He asked his students to return to the USA to rewrite the minimum property standards of the American Federal Housing Authority, but the experiment did not work – most of the students never did see the connection and he decided not to push this analogy further. In conclusion he called for a reappraisal of housing when he said, 'sixty years ago cities seemed airless and Le Corbusier dreamed of skyscrapers in the parks. We have learned to do the skyscrapers but the parks have eluded us . . . we can dig into traditional memory to try and find in our new programmes the intimate scale, the variety and the complexity, the qualities of the single family house that will give a chance for the inhabitants of mass housing truly to inhabit their dwellings'.

Charles always had time for students and young architects and on several occasions he talked about his work to the young in the Third World. Not much of a public speaker, he would pepper his presentations with images which made interesting and thoughtful connections with history and other works, giving everyone food for thought.

I remember the time he gave to the architectural journal *Mimar: Architecture in Development*, which I edited. He first contributed to it in 1983 – without being paid anything because he believed in what we were trying to do. Years later he hosted a few of us in his house at Sea Ranch on the Californian coastline where we were judging a student competition for the publication. 'It never ceases to amaze me', he said, 'just how strange and impractical each generation of student work can be'. Then he chuckled, 'but I guess that many people think that of my work today!' Those few days and later occasions spent with him in Austin and elsewhere were always good fun and memorable.

The last time he came to Geneva he spent a couple of weeks at the Trust's offices writing up, with his colleague Selma Al-Radi, project descriptions for the 1992 Award book, published by Academy Group, entitled, *Architecture for a Changing World*, bringing to bear his wise observations and extracting the elements of projects he felt important to stress in communicating Award winners to a general and wide public. He remained generous with his time to the concerns of Islamic architecture (which seemed to find some resonance with his own sense of the varied use of materials and colours) even though he had – and expected – no commissions in these regions. He always said that the Award gave him a rich set of unusual experiences, the last of which was his visit to the venue of the Award ceremony in Samarkand in September



1992. By then he moved slowly and with difficulty, but he gamely visited the sites with other participants, took delight in seeing new things and people and kept up his good-humoured banter even when he was so unwell.

When Charles passed away last December, those in the Islamic world who had been touched by his presence felt his loss; others simply knew him as one of the major twentieth-century architectural figures. And in the West, where his work is located and best known, little do people realise the warmth and affection with which he was held in cultures remote from his own and the contributions made by his open-minded view of different architectures. He was an architect regarded with much fondness by those who knew him, and to paraphrase a eulogy of many years ago, 'May God keep him and enjoy him as much as we did'.