The Master Jury of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture took a bold stance to pass on a strong message about the importance of craft in the making of architecture, both as a marker of community identity and as a process of producing excellence in design. At the risk of seeming nostalgic and having a very narrow vision regarding the scope of architectural practices within Muslim communities, the Jury opted for a shortlist and a final selection that brings the role of craftsmanship to the very core of the question of modernity. Modernity has for so long been defined as antithetical to the small-scale production techniques often ascribed to traditional building processes. The Jury’s decision is an invitation to revisit the paradigms of authenticity, identity and environmental harmony that so often stereotyped the discussion. By shifting attention to accountability, process and sustainability, we have an altogether new vantage point to evaluate craftsmanship in the built environment.

To reframe the question of craft we need to look beyond the traditional aspect of technique and social meaning. This has evolved through the ages, albeit in small increments, making it rather difficult to see its evolution from one generation to the next, which leads to the misconstrued idea of tradition as something fixed in time. Most of the debate about craft in recent years (perhaps since William Morris) has evolved about its cultural relevance. We had to imbue it with cultural significance and valorise it to exact funding for it to thrive. Most arguments for craft revolve around our way of life, identity, spiritual link to the past, authenticity, naturalism, fear of the modern and so on. In essence, we find justifications for its continued valuation beyond its economic obsolescence, at best as a moral prerogative. To that extent, paying for craftsmanship (a not so rational economic activity in the modern world) has fallen under the categories of luxury, the arts and the cultural; categories that have been reified to justify their keep. The sustainability of funding for craft was thus left at the mercy of excess in society, and as part of the political debate over the allocation of that excess.

Craft has always been part of a complex economic and social environment in constant transformation. The moral value of preserving craft must be placed within that evolving framework if we are to avoid the nostalgic portrayal of craft within the dual paradigm of tangible and intangible heritage. Notions such as “living heritage” are themselves modern constructs and part of the reification tool kit. Preserving craft must look at the whole cycle of supply and demand and the influence exercised by one over the other. Influencing that cycle is beyond the realm of intervention of most practitioners of the built
84 BUILDING CRAFTS IN THE MODERN WORLD

environment: architects, conservationists, restorers and so on. Yet, the economic rationale of preserving craft is now creeping into the discourse (creating jobs, attracting tourists, increasing demand and such like) mostly at the elementary discursive level and rarely in tangible economic terms.

Revising the idea of craftsmanship as a technique can be a difficult undertaking. There are lost skills, lack of incentives for young apprentices, disappearance of primary materials, not to mention that the process requires huge investments in time and money to jump-start the cycle. But often that is the end of any planned intervention for preserving building crafts. The economic rationale for the survival of craft is often driven by one of two forces. On the one hand, a considerable part of funding for the preservation work comes through the generosity of some donor. The nation state is increasingly behaving like a donor. Supporting the preservation of intangible heritage is framed as part of the national undertaking of creating an imagined community. Intervention takes place on the symbolic level, an investment in nation building, often in one-time disbursements.

On the other hand, the most successful programmes for preserving craft have taken place in underdeveloped economies, often with the informal sector dominating the production and consumption cycle. The demand for traditional building crafts has survived because there is still a critical mass of consumers that cannot afford an alternative. In countries where networks for modern economic activities have not been successfully established, old markets have survived both because they represent the only alternative, and as a sign of resistance to the formal economic sector and the introduction of formalised economic flows and credit-based financial systems. The formal economy engenders fees and taxes, extractions that are not acceptable without the accountability of the state to its constituencies in terms of representation and services.

There are three areas that need to be fully explored to understand how craft can be sustained in the modern world beyond the nostalgia of heritage preservation. First, there is the incessant issue of understanding the value chain within which craft is situated. As the process of producing the built environment increases in complexity (competition, availability of supply, the sheer quantity of demand, its quality, affordability, willingness to pay, environmental costs, market trends, delivery networks and so on), craftsmanship is reduced to a gradually smaller portion of the net final value of the product. Whereas in most pre-mechanised and semi-mechanised processes the value of labour could account for as much as two thirds of the final product, in today’s world it can often amount to no more than half of that share for the building crafts and often well below that for other types of crafts.

This sliding of the share of craftsmanship down the value chain was accompanied by an intense competition reducing the net sum of the product itself. The viability of craft must be foremost contextualised in this regard. When the old master builders regret that their way of life and work is no longer attractive to young people, they are often lamenting their own failure to keep up with the economic reality of their trade. Discussing the survival of crafts with old master builders often inadvertently begins with someone saying: “I don’t want my child to be in the trade”. This can be understood as a reference to the increasingly poor standing of the building trades in the social ranking, while, quite literally, the master builders were lamenting their reduced fortunes in a world that they can no longer influence. The value chains extend well beyond the local context where the value of craftsmanship was traditionally negotiated. How do you price a square metre of mud plaster, or a wooden ceiling? Funding for the work is now structured in these terms. Funding in the past was structured around the value of work put into the job. It is not just a question of reconciliation between two different measurement systems; the epistemological gap is huge.

Architectural preservation often ignores that whole paradigm. Most successful preservation projects (including award-winning projects) work on the basis of upholding old pricing techniques; the typical dialogue between expert supervisor and craftsman is negotiated on the basis of past practices, available budgets and required quality. Funding is always taken for granted once made available for the job, work ending once funding is finished. Of course the process might have secondary effects (externalities). A good product will encourage future demand; often the assumption is that preserving craft makes it replicable once everyone realises how good it is, and its propagation will happen by osmosis. How often do we hear donors wanting to fund pilot projects, with the underpinning message that a positive practice will be replicated somehow? In more advanced situations we are starting to hear terms such as handover, local ownership, sustainability plan and exit strategy. We are still missing the point. Value chains can only be sustained once they are considered from beginning to end.

To break the demand cycle, the second important aspect of preserving craft is about accountability. In the current thinking about valuing craftsmanship, progressive advances have been made in the production of transferable goods through the fair-trade network. The idea here is to ensure through a revaluation process that a substantial part of the value chain is retained locally by readjusting the production process and ensuring that an increasing part of the value-adding activities are carried by the craftspeople, to increase their share in the final value of the product. The key word in this regard is “fair”. How we assess fairness is very much related to how we justify the level of investment we put into the structural readjustment of the production process, but, more importantly, in justifying how we price the product. In most fair-trade situations, we are augmenting the share of the craftspeople in the final product by shifting the burden of the surplus cost to an external market, slightly larger than the local one and capable, because of excess in consumption power, to absorb the additional cost of “fairness” both in financial and moral terms.
In the built environment, that transfer is not as practical. The only way to externalise the cost is often indirectly through tourism, which, to a certain extent, provides a comparable economic process to export and is often classified as an export industry. If properly restructured, revenues from tourism can be structurally readjusted to allow for a “fair” share of national revenues to return to the craftspeople. The building up of the national accountability towards the production of crafts and intangible heritage is a very complex, if not impossible, economic and political process. Even in the most advanced and enlightened economic discourses on heritage preservation, we see a wide gap. National and international donors still fail to understand the valuation of craft as a question of fairness of distribution of burdens and revenues.

The dominant discourse is still defined by the issue of subsidy to the public realm versus subsidy to the private realm. We often ignore that the economies of scale needed to preserve craftsmanship for the public realm are not possible without the same crafts being supported in the private realm. And yet, how do you make the spending on craft in the private realm accountable or even justifiable? Very clearly, the extended value chains needed to sustain crafts can no longer be limited to local contexts. Fairness arguments cannot be limited to the contribution intangible heritage makes to the national tourism bottom line. Even in countries where the state taxation system is quite capable of recuperating the indirect benefits of tourism and of refocusing them to the preservation of the heritage assets (that generated the tax base in the first base), the process is hardly transparent.

In other countries, that rationale is almost impossible to sustain. The state hardly collects taxes and can hardly attribute the taxes it collects to direct or indirect sources. The process of taxation is a complex issue and in many countries it is simply not an economic topic. The whole issue of the accountability of taxation is at the core. Democratisation, social contracts and transparency are hallmarks of the discussion on taxes and fairness in the distribution of state rents. The state is often happy to subsidise some aspects of preservation, albeit at a limited level, to avoid the discussion on accountability of public funds. The preservation of a market place becomes a compromise to avoid the issue related to the reform of the economic performance of the state. The traditional is transformed into a strategy for eluding formalisation. Preserving intangible cultural heritage is subsequently framed as an act of reconciliation between the formal economic power of the state and the informal resistance to that power, a process that is hardly sustainable even if one can celebrate its success in temporarily preserving “heritage”.

On the reverse side of the accountability issue is the responsibility of the craftspeople themselves to the final consumers. We fantasise about the old days, where craftspeople used to produce quality work because of ethical norms, mystic devotion and mutual reciprocity. In reality, crafts were always regulated through the guilds, the official controller (the muhtasib) and the legal system. Today, in the desperate attempt to preserve the last vestiges of crafts, we tend to exempt them from being accountable to anything but the expert opinion of the conservationist who authorises the payment. By actually removing the crafts products from formal and informal accreditation processes, we are contributing to their devaluation. Part of reinvigorating the value of crafts is to re-immerse them in accreditation systems and not shield them. In the past, craftspeople used their accountability as part of their marketing strategies. Of course traditional crafts will not survive the scrutiny of most modern building standards. Or will they? That is a question that will require considerable discussion. One thing is certain: without accountability, the only value of the crafts will be aesthetic and will endure only as far as demand fancies its relevance.

The last point that needs to be discussed in the context of crafts is whether craft can withstand the need for change and continued relevance? Can it adapt? Can it be innovative? In reality, any acute art or architectural historian will readily jump to provide the answer. What kind of a silly question is that? Crafts have continuously evolved and adapted, have always been innovative, have been influenced by trends and generated innovations in their own rights. The framing of crafts under the rubric of tradition has, by contrast, created a halo of sacredness around these production processes. They justify their keep within the current funding structures by adhering strictly to an imagined and idealised form. Innovation becomes the antithesis of preservation. As heritage is codified for symbolic consumption as a signifier of national unity, innovation becomes synonymous with the fast-changing modern world. “Inspired by tradition” is another compromise that has emerged as part of the reification tool kit. It softens the control on the rigidity of symbolic preservation, albeit still within the framework of mystifying the past as a separate category than the present.

What are the determining factors for ensuring that crafts do not become a mediocre pretext for curbing innovation and adaptability? Most of the projects that were shortlisted and all the projects that were premiated by the Award this cycle have had to respond to this question in one way or another. While asking the deeper questions about process was at the core of the Jury discussion, it is not preservation that dominated the discussion, I believe. But, how do we ensure that form-making is accountable to questions of sustainability, relevance and creativity? In holding onto the crafts as tradition, many parts of the Muslim umma are simply avoiding the deeper questions of modernity. How do Muslim communities fit in the modern world, economically, socially and culturally? We have the Jury of this cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture to thank for reopening this question once more. Beyond the classic formula of heritage preservation, the question of craft was brought to the surface in old and new contexts alike. Its economy of scale and accountability to social processes, as well as its ability to compete and continuously adapt and innovate, are at the forefront of a discussion that must be carried to new levels.