Islamic Architcture: A Debate in Seven Parts

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ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE
A DEBATE IN SEVEN PARTS

This paper is a highly selective compilation of essays intended to give the reader a sense of the important debates and arguments that have sought to define the greatest legacy of Muslim civilisations; its art and architecture. The selections are taken directly from the original essays and arranged to highlight seven themes: A Crisis of Culture; What is 'Islamic' About Architecture?; Confronting Modernity; Critiques and Commentary; The Aga Khan Award for Architecture; A Search for Meaning; and Impact and Insights. The essays were presented in a number of publications as part of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture International Seminar Series. These seminars examine the trends and implications of architectural transformations in the Islamic world. Designed to address developments in the built environments of Muslims, they bring together government officials, architects, academics, planners, social scientists, designers, and architectural writers.

A Crisis of Culture

The Muslim world cannot stand idle while the forces of global change and technology, affecting the political, economic, and social attitudes, gather momentum and re-shape and transform societies. This change and imposition is greater than that of colonialism; it is embedded in the very cultural fabric of society and its tools are media, television, and the Internet. It is therefore important and necessary that Muslims formulate critical and rational responses to these mechanisms that pose a serious threat to local identities and culture. These responses should not be based on nationalist ideologies or religion, but on a clear understanding of the humanistic discourse developed throughout the history of Muslim civilisations. The following passages examine the idea of cultural crisis.

[From Ismail Serageldin, Watering the Garden]
"The world is in the grip of profoundly contradictory tendencies. In the face of globalisation and homogenisation, the assertion of specificity - ethnic, religious, or cultural - is also powerfully

present. Globalisation is driven by the growing interdependence of national economies and the increasing integration of financial markets and telecommunications. The political boundaries that once divided sovereign states and nations are now permeable to the ethereal and ever-present commerce of ideas, as well as funds. Despite these global issues, local forces in nearly every society are asserting themselves, seeking greater voice and power. A negative aspect of this phenomenon is the emergence of nationalism that undermines the legitimate call for identity.

The citizens of the Muslim world face the new and the unknown with profound insecurity and none of the optimism and unbounded confidence once placed in technology. There is very real cynicism about the ability to create utopia, and there is a growing sense of unpredictability about the future. When the future cannot be clearly conceived as a goal, one lives for the present, and if the present is troublesome and disconcerting, there is a tendency to progress to the past, to ethnic, religious, cultural or national roots; to the concept of tribe and clan.

The confrontation of these competing forces is focused upon today's Muslim societies, societies that seek definition in terms of the present and the future, and also to retain their heritage without becoming captives of the past. In so doing, they must confront the hegemony of the images and discourse of hyper-mediated western societies that set the global agenda, from world trade to architectural styles.

Many in the developing world fear the spread of 'westernisation' and seek refuge in an idealised view of their own past, but they are incapable of articulating a cultural framework that responds to the needs of today's Muslim societies. Paradoxically, this is taking place while western societies themselves question their own value systems and fear the 'browning of the West'.

The crisis of values in contemporary society poses a profound challenge to all thinking people and to the societies that they aspire to create and be part of. To rise to that challenge, they will have to reaffirm our common humanity, and it is here that architecture - as a social construct, a critical, symbolising discourse that both affirms and transcends identity

Citadel of and the Southern Qarafa of Cairo, Egypt

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- has a major role to play. It is relevant not only to Muslim societies, with all of today's innate tensions, but also to the evolving discourse on architecture in the rest of the world. To the extent that it successfully addresses the human condition and the built environment, and relates those concerns to a natural and cultural context, it becomes a universal message." [*Ismail Serageldin, Watering the Garden*]

[*From Mohammed Arkoun, The Aga Khan Award as A Process of Thinking*]
"During the 1980s, international relations were driven by the cold war between the 'free world' and the 'communist world'; the 'Third World' — as we called the rest of the world before November 1989 - had to seek help and protection from one or the other of the big two. Muslim societies were torn between the will to restore their 'Islamic identity' and the idea of 'scientific socialism', which was presented as the best revolutionary political programme to emancipate underdeveloped societies from the domination of capitalism. This ideological debate imposed a conceptual frame, a social and historical *imaginaire,* strongly polarized between tradition and modernity, conservation and progress, development and underdevelopment, domination and emancipation, liberal capitalism and socialist collectivism, and so forth. Architecture became an excellent channel for dispensing with ideological polemics, exploring concrete issues and deepening consideration of urgent problems in culture, the environment and the urban fabric in societies deprived for centuries of human, scientific and material resources." [*Mohammed Arkoun, The Aga Khan Award as A Process of Thinking*]

[*From Ismail Serageldin, Faith and the Environment*]. "As the Muslim world shakes and stirs in a fitful search to reaffirm its independent identity, it confronts the cultural as well as the political realities of a world dominated by the West generally and the United States specifically. This has lead many in the Muslim world to define their identities by emphasising the "otherness" of the Muslim being from the hegemonic world context. Doubtless, there is much truth to this otherness, but emphasising it at the outset leads to a rejectionist approach which is narrow and constrictive and in fact does not do justice to the richness and variety that Muslim culture has achieved in the past, and can achieve again, by the more self-assured process of adaptive assimilation that characterised its confrontations with the Greek and Roman cultures at the time of the early Muslim conquests." [*Ismail Serageldin, Faith and the Environment*].

[*From Mohammed Arkoun Islamic Cultures, Developing Societies,*

Modern Thought]
"Today, when Muslims claim to restore the 'authentic', 'original' Islam, they all actually refer to a monolithic, impoverished, narrower Islam, cut off from the rich intellectual debates among powerful thinkers during the classical period. This historical fact is quietly ignored by the overwhelming majority of architects and planners who claim to rehabilitate, preserve, restore, or create an architecture, an urban environment, 'in the spirit of Islam'. My point is not that they should go back to classical Islamic culture and thought and recreate the medieval context in our modern world. The issue is not at all the current opposition between modernity and tradition with its nostalgic discourse on the lost beauty and grandeur of Islamic civilisation". On the contrary, we have to recognize that the classical expressions of Islam cannot be repeated today. This is a structural impossibility because all the semiological systems through which these expressions – in architecture, urbanism, painting, music, sculpture, literature, theology, law, crafts, costumes, and festivals - have been conceived and delivered are either destroyed or have disintegrated in contemporary societies. The past of Muslim society is very present and active, but only in the form of oppressive ideology. In the name of Islam, this ideology is imposing forms of architecture and shapes of urbanism which are neither relevant to Muslim tradition, nor to modern life and culture. The key question is: How are Muslim societies going to

Aerial view over Shibam, Yemen

express themselves in the decades ahead? In which international "order", in which intellectual and cultural context, will the various expressions of different societies take place?"
[Mohammed Arkoun Islamic Cultures, Developing Societies, Modern Thought]

WHAT IS 'ISLAMIC' ABOUT ARCHITECTURE?

Is there a true Islamic architecture? The architecture of the Muslim world is as diverse as its people. Is there a universal archetype that the great buildings of the past followed? Are there principles that can be distilled from reading the Quran that can lead to an architecture fit for Muslim societies? Are we bound by the signs and symbols of our past or have these become irrelevant as only signals and signifiers of long forgotten traditions? It will become apparent to the reader that it is easier to identify what Islamic architecture is not, rather than offering an agreed upon terms of reference for what it is.

[From Mohammed Arkoun Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture] "Islamic culture is an expression that is used currently today by Muslims and non-Muslims alike to stress the impact of Islam on all levels of social and historical existence in Muslim societies. Since Islam is used as a mobilising reference by many political movements, all important activities in societies are described as "Islamic". That is why we need to question the legitimacy of the expression, "Islamic culture".

It would be enlightening to ask why we speak more commonly of Western culture with its different national expressions — German, English, French, — than of Christian culture. Why, on the contrary, do we use the expression Islamic culture than terms such as Egyptian, Turkish, or Iranian culture? The difference is due to the historical process that generated secularised culture in one case, but strengthened and generalized a religious perception in the other. If we study carefully this historical process, we can correct the false image of Islam that is imposed by Muslim tradition and translated without adequate explanation by many Orientalists.

In the classic age of the history of Islam, that is, during its first five centuries, a clear distinction was made between mundane culture and religious culture practiced as religious sciences. Mundane culture is literature, poetry, language, the wisdom of nations, history, geography, scientific skills, and professional activities. This knowledge and social activity were related to mundane realities or the terrestrial life called *dunya*. Religion or *din*, was, of course, present, but as a general, accepted set of beliefs, explanations, rules, rites, and visions relating to man, the creature, to God, the Creator. The state run by the Caliph, *dawla*, had to apply religious law to maintain the

mundane life along the lines and in the spirit of the three d's — *din, dunya, dawla*; three differentiated but articulated spaces in which all human existence has to unfold.

It is not right to repeat that Islam does not separate religion and politics. Of course, the theological and legal view insist on the priority of religion as the revealed truth to organise and to rule the city according to the divine will, but this theoretical claim did not prevent the development of a mundane culture and a political practice that was actually cut off from religious principles.

Eventually, this humanistic achievement came to be replaced by rigid "orthodox" teaching. The concept of orthodoxy is understood in the Muslim tradition to embody the authentic continuity of the original teaching of the Quran and the Prophet. However, historically, it is the transformation of culture and thought as it has been imposed by political power, by the Caliphate and the various princes, who conquered their position by force.

Architecture, painting, planning were influenced by Byzantine, Persian, Roman, Indian, Turkish, Mughal, and other traditions. That is why it is difficult to speak generally of Islamic architecture. When we speak of architecture in the spirit of Islam, we forget that Islam itself as a religion and as system of thought has been influenced by several traditions of culture that were deeply rooted in the Middle East a long time before the manifestation of the Quran. There is, particularly, a common ancient Mediterranean space that was perpetuated and expanded by Roman, Byzantine, Christian, and Islamic Empires until the time of the creation of the West as a new cultural entity, one characterized by modernity. Islam cannot be presented as a purely Oriental religion and culture, isolated from the Mediterranean world of myths, archetypes, systems of thought, tradition of knowledge, ways of representation, rules of life, types of forms, urban fabric, and rural exploitation.

This broad historical and anthropological view of culture in the Islamic context is rejected and negated by the strong and widespread ideological vision of Islam that has been imposed

Abd al-Aziz Khan Madrasa, Bukhara, Uzbekistan

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throughout the present Muslim world by political movements labeled 'Islamic' movements. The most impressive architectural projects performed in the last twenty years are either just produced by modern technology or are influenced by the conventional, formalistic, standardised representations of a co-called 'Islamic' culture or tradition than by the pluralistic and rich trends which characterized cultural life during the classical period." [*Mohammed Arkoun Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture*]

[*Oleg Grabar, The Mission and Its People*]
"Muslims created nearly all the masterpieces of Islamic architecture, from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem to Fatehpur-Sikri near Agra. Cities, from Damascus to Samarkand and Granada, were reshaped by the new faith and the society engendered by that faith. And, most particularly, it was the time of the creation of several languages of architecture which all shared some features, yet were not all the same, but which, in the aggregate, created a formally recognised architectural family of its own. To some contemporary thinkers and critics the history of this lineage became independent of the history of current traditions elsewhere and grew or changed exclusively according to internal rhythms.

To others, its history is always intimately connected to what happened around it, for Islamic culture alone shared frontiers with all the discrete cultures established before the discovery of the American continent: and participated, sometimes unwittingly, in the political or cultural events and the psychological or emotional make-up of western and northern Europe and Africa.

The contrast between these two interpretations of the history of an architecture, and culture, is not merely an academic debate, for it raises the first of the deeper issues; whether the originality and the integrity of the great centuries of Islamic creativity derived from the maintenance, even if occasionally

flawed, of the purity of a single minded purpose and of an internally generated process for making decisions about the arts and the environment, or whether these very qualities are the product of remarkable powers of cultural assimilation. The will to adapt and the ability to do so creatively derive from a deep-seated certainty about one's destiny and about one's identity.

Two factors led to the disruption of these traditions that had survived so many centuries. One is the apparent inability to face up to challenges and to find solutions to internal or external problems. The other factor is European expansion, which began in the sixteenth century and ended by controlling almost the enitre planet after World War I.

This expansion was politically and economically exploitative; it was also cultural in that it provided a ready made and pre-packaged model for living, learning and social behaviour and interaction. These models came with several doctrines, from hedonism to communism, which, on the one hand, justified these models morally and philosophically and, on the other, claimed universal values for them. European models in everything from clothes and cooking to buildings and art became the operative norm for Muslims all over the world.

The character and the rhythms of these factors of rupture have varied enormously from place to place and it is almost impossible to establish a unified chronology in their formation or development. The apparent result: a Muslim world that has been reproducing alien forms for nearly all purposes and which did not develop intellectual and aesthetic mechanisms for making choices capable of giving authenticity to the continuing changes to the modern built environment." [*Oleg Grabar, The Mission and Its People*]

[*From Ismail Serageldin, Faith and the Environment*]
"The Islamic essence of any building or set of buildings is much more subtle than to be captured exclusively by the physical attributes of these buildings. To seek to define any architecture as "Islamic" exclusively through the detailed analysis of the architectonic features of the building would be like trying to measure the temperature or the humidity of a room with a

Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem

Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, India

yardstick. The yardstick is a useful tool to capture one aspect of the reality of that room, but temperature and humidity are equally valid aspects of that same reality even if they totally escape the yardstick's ability to interpret them.

This analogy is indeed suitable for our subject. To the extent that (some aspects of) the suitability of the structure's design can be measured by the comfort of temperature and humidity, the specific materials, layouts, dimensions of the physical structure must be well adapted to geographic localism to achieve it. So it is with a truly successful Islamic architecture: its physical attributes will be primarily determined by the specificities of geographic localism, but the end product will produce a certain spiritual harmony and facilitate a pattern of social interaction that are truly in conformity with an Islamic worldview.

Clearly, however, the application of these principles will be far from homogeneous throughout the Muslim communities of the world, and the quality of the results within each community will themselves show a very large degree of variability ranging from the absurd to the sublime. There, are no simple answers. Self-knowledge developed through painstaking analysis of past achievements and present realities must enrich the collective intellectual resources of architects practising in the Muslim world. The myths, images and stimuli that they can bring to bear on any design problem must be enriched with concepts that transcend the simplistic physical reading of a monumental heritage and promote a deeper understanding of self and society within the context of an Islamic world view. Only thus can we hope to promote a greater harmony between the built environments of Muslims and the eternal message of Islam."
[Ismail Serageldin, Faith and the Environment]

CONFRONTING MODERNITY

When we speak of Islamic civilisation, we are usually referring to some long-forgotten golden age without a real understanding of the past, and the historical circumstances which gave rise to those civilisations. When we speak of Western civilisation, we are talking about what we know and how we live today. This is a disadvantage when approaching the Muslim world. Our lens is tinted. We must remove it, and realise that the processes of modernity that engage and affect societies in the west are also present in the Muslim world. This engagement, present since the 19th century, is today, a sourse of rising friction and tension both external and internal to Muslim societies. Internal debates within Muslim societies have not had the intellectual space and freedom to develop critical responses to these forces. Are the so-called Islamic values incompatible with modern aspirations? How can the heritage of Muslims in the sciences and arts be made meaningful in a modern world?

[From Ismail Serageldin, An Agenda for the Future]
"Because the Muslim world is one with both a diverse regionalism and a unifying universal identity, it is one where local/regional issues can be, and are, overlaid on the broader issues of the relationship of the Muslim identity vis-a-vis a rapidly westernising world. To varying degrees, the intellectuals and artists of the Muslim world confront the same issues: striking an appropriate balance between the demands of modernity and the requisites of tradition; reading their legacy and heritage through contemporary eyes; decoding the symbols of the past to identify and retain the elements of permanent value and to discard those of ephemeral or doubtful value; dealing with the tension between the integrative and disintegrative forces in society; accommodating and enabling the accession of the masses to the formation of, and identification with the total ethos of the societal cultural output; the allocation of priorities in their developmental efforts, and the preservation of a balance between the options and ligatures that circumscribe what

Interior of a mud mosque, Timbuktu, Mali

Hajj Terminal, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

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Dahrendorf has called 'life chances'." *[Ismail Serageldin, An Agenda for the Future]*

[From Mohammed Arkoun Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture]
"The question confronting architects practicing in the Muslim world is: How should one approach modernity itself in order to bring into our knowledge of Islam and of design practice, creative methods and new exploration? A key concept to keep in mind when dealing with Islamic history is the concept of *rupture*.

All aspects of our existence in contemporary societies is ordered and produced by what is called modernity. Modernity characterised by a continuous and rapid technological and intellectual change is our present way of life and thought. All societies are not equally concerned with and affected by modernity, and modernity does not have everywhere and for all groups in a given society the same components and expressions, but no society, no group, is totally untouched by modernity, whether positively or negatively.

Because modernity is among us and in us, we need to make a special effort to subject it to a critical evaluation. We are used to perceiving tradition in opposition to modernity, primitive and archaic cultures in opposition to modern civilisation and knowledge. During the colonial period and even today, Western thought developed a theory of modern civilisation based on a Eurocentric outlook that has been used for legitimising Western domination over under-developed, traditional, primitive societies. This outlook is still evident in the way in which aspects of Muslim societies are described today, and many Islamists insist on the opposition of Muslim tradition to modernity.

The central characteristic of this opposition is the negation of history and the disguising of procedures in order to transform social, psychological, and political realities into idealised images of the eternal Message. This has lead to three key ruptures in Muslim societies:

- The process of articulating political power to the Authority of God was reversed and began to use the Authority of God as an idealised image to be manipulated;
- Classical, pluralist thought started to be neglected and forgotten under pressure of "orthodoxy"; and,
- The introduction of Western modernity to Muslim societies in the 19th century."

[Mohammed Arkoun Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture]

[From Ismail Serageldin, Commentary]
"Philosophy, if conceived in the broad sense of *fiqh*, contemporary thought, is what gives society a sense of identity. The society knows itself from the way it perceives itself, and that is reflected in its political system, its social goals and its semiotic system. This in turn governs the way in which its physical built environment is developed. With that, I am saying that architecture is really the image or the reflection of the social, economic and cultural organisation of society.

In contemporary Muslim societies almost everywhere there are what are called 'modernising' influences. They are influences that impose a different way of life on people at the level of social

Muslim Day Parade, NewYork City, USA

Al-Faisaliah Center, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

praxis in terms of their economic interactions and the secular system of laws between people and nations. Accommodation is required of the individuals in contemporary Muslim societies. Invariably this leads to a sense of shaken identity and ambiguity, a lack of knowing who you really are. It is reflected in our architecture today and in our sense of the environment. I think that perhaps one of the fundamental tasks required of intellectuals in all of the Muslim world is to reverse the standard, and to absorb these modernizing influences up to the level of practical ethics. In order to determine criteria that can help define what kind of contemporary architecture would be most meaningful in Islamic terms, we will have to rethink our political systems, our economic laws and our societal laws. We must consider, for example, the balance between private and public spaces, the orientation of forms, rights of privacy, the proper role and function of communal living, the type of family life prevalent in society and its impact on the plan of houses, the proper mixing of land uses and the separation of these uses between sacred and profane.

We heard that recently the increased specialization of buildings has resulted in robbing the mosque of its great communal purpose and has turned it into a much more narrowly defined edifice. The presence of aesthetic sense, grace, decoration and so on is an overlay on all that. I suspect that the heart of the problem of finding a harmoniously balanced urban environment comes from defining basic concepts which govern society and from which we can develop the criteria and feelings for articulating an architecture." *[Ismail Serageldin, Commentary]*

[From Ismail Serageldin, Faith and the Environment]
"The built environment, as it relates to Muslim societies and to the natural environment, has been subjected to a search for authentification, widely interpreted as 'Islamisation'. Strident cries have arisen to reject foreign "imported" models of architecture and development, and to return to the sources, unfortunately within the same narrow general conceptual framework that has guided many other aspects of the contemporary Islamic revival.

I do not believe that any reading of the Quran, at any level, or a study of the *Sunna*, will provide detailed instructions on how to design a house in Morocco or Indonesia, or how to design the thoroughfares of Cairo or Istanbul. Those that have tried to derive specific examples from these sources are doing both themselves and the sources a disfavour. Themselves by ignoring the wider context in which we live and which must provide the major "givens" of the problems to be addressed, and the sources by demeaning them to the level of a 'handbook' or 'textbook' rather than treating the Quran as the eternal message of inspiration and guidance for all times and the *Sunna* of the

Prophet as the embodiment of exemplary behaviour. If God had desired to give people specific instructions on how to build structures in the twentieth century, He could certainly have done so explicitly.

What then is the return to the sources likely to produce? Surely no instructions as to the size of rooms or height of doors. Rather, this systematic review of the sources should produce a general set of principles that should help guide the searcher towards what is an appropriate response to the problems confronting Muslim societies today and tomorrow.

In developing this appropriate response to contemporary problems, the past experience of Muslim societies must also be taken into account. Not only is it the basic determinant of the "heritage" which provides Muslims with exemplars of the achievement of past generations, but also it serves as the basis for defining the elements of a cultural continuity, which are essential in any search for authenticity and assertion of self-identity. Nevertheless, one must be wary of accepting the actions of past generations too readily. The history of the Muslim peoples (like all other peoples) is one that is replete with failures to live up to the ethical and behavioural norms of their avowed credos. Sifting the wheat from the chaff is the task of the historian, the philosopher, the jurist and the theologian. Suffice to state this as an issue and proceed with our search for these general principles and our attempt to spell out their application to the problems confronting contemporary Muslim societies.

In researching the sources, the following principles can be distilled that will help give us an understanding of how man should address the environment: Stewardship of the Earth; Relationship with Nature; Relationship between Men; Justice; The Public Interest; Concern for the Poor and Weak; and, Individual Behaviour.

The absence of discernible specific physical attributes of the architecture these principles imply, which could he seen as a weakness by those seeking cookbook recipes and simple answers, is in reality a very real strength. A strength because this is precisely what allows Islamic culture to be adapted to the cold

Courtyard of the Prophet's Mosque, Medina, Saudi Arabia

climates of the Himalayas and the hot tropical forests of Indonesia as well as the deserts of Arabia. It is this subtle overlay of Islamic principles over regional particularism, the former fully recognising and working with the latter to help improve the inhabitants' response to it, that have enabled Islam to have its true universal impact creating the 'diversity within a unity' that the flowering of Muslim culture has demonstrated through the ages." *[Ismail Serageldin, Faith and the Environment]*

[Fazlur Khan, The Islamic Environment: Can the Future Learn from the Past?]
"Today, as at no other time in the history of Islamic civilization, there is a critical need to reevaluate the essence of Islamic environment and architecture to successfully meet the demand for new environments in many Islamic countries. A new economic reality has engendered unprecedented programmes of building new cities and total environments for living, working, studying and praying. The force of modern technology, whose base is primarily Europe and America, is so overwhelming, so deceptively attractive to these countries and so responsive to their desire for fast construction of unprecedented scale and volume that it is almost impossible to resist the temptation to copy by and large their methods, forms and technology. This technology has hardly had time to be filtered through the Eastern and Islamic philosophy and to emerge in a form, which could adequately transform and translate the experience of the West into a relevant planning and architectural basis for the East and Middle East.

As a result, buildings of steel, concrete and glass are mushrooming all over these countries almost overnight, perhaps especially in the Middle East, all looking very much like their counterparts in the West. Unless one is aware of the actual site of a given building, it is indeed virtually impossible to guess its regional location. The technology of mass production is a significant\ contributor to this phenomenon. It has evolved in the West, and Western lifestyle and urban character have had time to evolve with it and to adapt to it. Its direct application outside the West, without proper modifications for the local culture heritage, climate and building tradition, can only express a barrenness of spirit and create an environment that is irrelevant and inefficient.

What can be done to modify this trend? It is only possible to do something about it if we can identify the primary essence of the Islamic architectural heritage and then examine whether it is at all possible to retain the essence and the meaning while using contemporary technology. On the other hand, if the essence of the Islamic contribution to architecture as a whole is not at first understood by each country and region, and the forms of well known older buildings are simply copied, the result

will be false in meaning and irrelevant as contemporary architecture. It will neither be truly Islamic in character nor contemporary in technology.

To talk about Islamic architecture we have to define what is Islamic that may affect architecture itself, the real details, the real orientation, the real forms, the real spaces and the real relationships and, finally, the environment that may be called Islamic. As Islam spread from Central Arabia to Morocco and Spain in the west, and India and Indonesia in the east, these edifices adopted many features of the local pre-Islamic architectures, but blended them into the basic form and space with an emphasis on symmetry and continuity of space in all directions. A sense of unity, equilibrium and peace emerged. The commonality of the architectural attitude from the beginning of the seventh century to the end of the eighteenth century is founded, on the one hand, in the willingness to adapt to local materials and local image, to respond to local climate and, at the same time, to hold onto the thread of the basic principles of Islam. Teachings of the Quran and *Shari'a*, which affect the concept of overall Muslim life, ultimately shaped the Islamic environment. What then, are the most significant principles of Islam and their interpretations which determine the character of architecture? A study of mosque architecture and palace architecture from the classic Islamic period reveals the following characteristics of Islamic architecture: Symmetry and centrality; Water; Responds to environment; Sense of vertical space; Unity of the ground and the sky; and, Adaptation of local materials.

Islam has brought its unifying philosophy to many cultures throughout the last thirteen hundred years and its architecture has adapted and responded to these cultures while maintaining the fundamentals of the Islamic way of life. In its stride, it has adapted to a wide range of new materials and methods of construction. It is in this spirit of the past that we must look to the future of Islamic architecture." *[Fazlur Khan, The Islamic Environment: Can the Future Learn from the Past?]*

[From Dogan Kuban, Symbolism in Its Regional and Contemporary Context]
"No 'universal' Islamic architectural forms exist without a degree of ambiguity. Nor can we expect to attain a modern and universally valid Islamic architecture through the repetition of such forms. On the other hand, there are elements of Islamic life and culture where continuity is an important concern. The quest for cultural continuity and cultural identity requires identifying the necessary linking elements. In architecture these links are presumed to be the old forms. If one wishes merely to imitate an old mosque, the problem of continuity can be solved in a straightforward way; no discussion is required except to determine the methods of imitation.

The universal, all-encompassing characteristics of Islam as a way of life have not been sufficient to create an all-embracing world of forms. The number and variety of forms, therefore, is not a product of an Islamic world view but the outcome of

varying regional and cultural interpretations. Changing attitudes and a plurality of traditions have found different expressions in various phases of Islamic history. There is no doubt that universal Islamic values are incorporated into the life of every Muslim society. These values, in the form of social behaviour, emanate from the Quran and *Sunna*. Nevertheless, no body of writing attests to the symbolic content of any architectural form. In a sense this is proper, because a dependence on any implied value in forms is inherently anti-Islamic. Forms are transient. Only Allah, who is formless, is eternal. Thus the perception of any continuity of form is not a religious but a cultural attitude.

To differentiate a religious attitude from a cultural attitude so thoroughly shaped by religion would seem difficult. But religion does not condition all aspects of behaviour; it only sets limitations. The tradition does not say the hajj must be made on donkey, on camel, on foot, by car or by airplane. If the Quran and *Sunna* had prescribed physical forms, nobody could ever have added to Mecca and the form of the pilgrimage would have remained unaltered. At Mecca, overwhelmingly practical considerations totally eclipsed symbolic intent, if indeed any ever existed. It is certainly difficult to define the symbolic content of traditional Islamic forms if so radical a change in environment can occur in the very heart of Islam and in close proximity to the symbol of symbols.

Obviously there is no reason to insist on a (vis-a-vis the physical forms of life) should not lead us to reject historical forms. Although they may lack deep religious meaning, traditional values embodied in some forms and spatial relationships continue to be cherished. It is to these cultural traditions, then, that we should look when seeking symbolism in the architecture of Islamic countries.

To what extent should we seek historical antecedents of modern, symbolically imbued form? My own inclination is that there is no need for an historical perspective at all. For those who believe in the validity of such a regeneration, I cite the following cautionary example, The Prophet's house in Medina served as a mosque. There was no minaret, no mihrab, no minbar. Since the life of the Prophet represents the ideal life for a Muslim, all the auxiliary forms, which are now associated with a mosque may be taken as superfluous. Of course, no Muslim will accept this, because in Islamic tradition the accretion of forms and changes in their symbolic content are accepted. Our problem lies in our capacity to control the rate of change of this symbolic content. If it is too fast, a vacuum in symbolic meaning will result. A lack of communication between past and future accounts for the veritable cultural chaos of today's Islamic world, but neither should we retard changes in symbolism by looking longingly to the great monumental buildings of the past or by excessively cherishing domes, arches and courtyards.

Today we face a dilemma. How can Islam as a potential source of symbolism be reconciled with the modern international architectural forms, which introduce their own symbolism of technology? Contemporary symbolic forms are so readily accepted that even alien techniques and foreign authorship do not appear to have slowed their adoption by Muslims. The masses are happy to destroy their old houses in favour of new apartments. The rulers are satisfied when international designers build their palaces, government offices, airports and universities. As a social consensus, nobody seems to be bothered by these forms borrowed from foreign cultures. And so against a background of acceptance, on what authority do we denounce the lack of Islamic symbolism in these buildings?" *[Dogan Kuban, Symbolism in Its Regional and Contemporary Context]*

[From Seyyid Hossein Nasr, The Contemporary Muslim and the Architectural Transformation of the Islamic Urban Environment]
"The major modern urban environments of the Islamic world are suffering from a crisis which is most directly reflected in their ugliness and is in stark contrast with the serenity and beauty of the traditional Islamic city. Islamic architecture has been eclipsed by a conglomeration of often hideous styles or at best bland ones, in both cases imitated from foreign models with the pretense of universality and world-wide applicability.

To understand the process of change and transformation fully, it is necessary to review the two effects associated with Westernization upon Muslims: the first, being the spread of secularization; and the second, related to both internal and external factors, the narrowing of the tradition *(al-din)* to include only the principles of human action as embodied in the *Shari'a* and not the principles of wisdom *(hikma)* and the norm of making things which is contained in the principles and methods of Islamic art.

As far as secularization is concerned, the effect of Westernization has been to reduce the Islamic conception of *ilm*, according to which all knowledge including mathematics is considered as sacred, to the conception of science as a purely profane form of knowledge. The intellectual change also has been depleting such fundamental realities and concepts as space, light, rhythm, form and matter of their sacred content. They are transformed into post-Cartesian Western concepts bearing the same name, and they are experienced on only a limited material level. Space is then no longer the symbol of Divine Presence, nor Light of the Divine Intellect. Architectural rhythms which reintegrate multiplicity into Unity are forgotten.

Islamic architecture remained faithful to simple building materials and employed the elemental forces of nature such as light and wind for its sources of energy. It brought nature into the city through the recreation of the calm, harmony and peace of virgin nature within the courtyards of the mosque or the home. The modernized Muslim, whose spiritual sense has become dulled by the force of secularization, has forgotten the ephemeral quality of human life on earth and the peace and

harmony pervading nature. The secularised wish is to create an ambience in which God is forgotten, which means creating an urban environment in total disequilibrium with the natural environment.

The secularizing tendency causes certain Muslims to become completely indifferent to their own religion, whether reflected in the *Shari'a* itself or its sapiental teachings. The reformist tendency reduces religion for the most part to its juridical aspect. Through its belittling and even disdain for wisdom *(hikma),* it accepts the secularization of both art and nature and makes inaccessible those very elements of the Islamic tradition of which the Muslims are most direly in need to recreate an authentic Islamic ambience.

There is no way of discussing Islamic architecture and evading the problem of the principles of Islamic architecture and what Islamic architecture means. There is no way of avoiding meaning. God is meaning *(ma'na).* We have to be at the quest of this meaning. This meaning is impossible to discover, unless there is enough of a critical faculty within the Islamic world among architects and artists to be able to appraise what is coming from the outside and to rebuild according to those principles with the new conditions which the modern world presents." *[Seyyid Hossein Nasr, The Contemporary Muslim and the Architectural Transformation of the Islamic Urban Environment]*

CRITIQUES AND COMMENTARY

The following section comprises a broad range of voices commenting on the positions staked out by Seyyid Hossein Nasr and Dogan Kuban in the previous section. These voices include architects, social scientists, and philosophers. In reading their criticism, it becomes clear that any position taken on the subject of what constitutes an architecture of Islam is likely to be very controversial.

From Dogan Kuban, Commentary]
Dogan Kuban: "I think the essential feature of Nasr's paper is putting aside the social, political and economic factors which are the core of the changing dimensions of our physical environment. The relationship between the elements of a spiritual and intellectual nature and the shape of architecture that Nasr wants to make us believe is hardly convincing. He starts with the common observation on the degeneration of Islamic cities, their actual physiognomy that so sharply contrasts with the serenity of the traditional urban environment. But with this first statement he posits an isolated view of Islamic history.

History is not an addition of smaller histories; it is a total process of continuous change. When we discuss modern Islam, we cannot isolate it from the rest of the world. To focus on one or several factors as the source of certain situations is used as a method throughout his paper. As Nasr sees it, the transformations that disrupted the Muslim world are the work of a Westernized elite. It is true that the modernising process has been led by an elite. But disruption is not the result. The modernization efforts are the results of a disrupted Muslim world.

In his interpretations everything universal becomes specific. For example, to say that the concepts of space, light and rhythm were the appanage of the traditional Muslim architecture, and that Western materialism made our architects forget about them is a similar statement. The poor quality of architecture in Islamic countries is something we can agree upon, but the above mentioned qualities of architecture defines good architecture everywhere at all times. They are not specific to any tradition, and the same argument can he paraphrased for every country. It is true that "the traditional symbolism filled with divine love" is forgotten. But forms never lose their symbolic values, whether divine or something else. And it is difficult to assert that the traditional symbolism was only of divine origin. Nasr underlines the difference between traditional architecture based on crafts and expressing a specific cosmology versus modern architecture based on industry and expressing the material interpretation of the world. Again, this is neither a Muslim phenomenon, nor a fashion to be dispensed with.

There are other aspects of Islamic architecture on which it is difficult to be in agreement with Nasr. The transient aspect of Islamic architecture or environment should not be generalized. For simple dwellings and the general city structures, we may speak of an Islamic spirit which saw, or had to see, the world in its transient, changing form. But the great works of architecture, where we find the creativity of Islamic culture at its best. Are not the outcome of this spirit. Remember Mshatta, Fatehpur Sikri, the great mausoleums like the Taj Mahal, Mamluk madrasas and caravanserais. To speak of the characteristics of an Islamic city as an extension of the natural environment is, also, not always true.

Nasr underlines secularization as the main cause of all the chaos of our modern physical environment. According to him, we created the modern city to forget God. This city has no unity because the unifying effect of *Shari'a* no longer exists. It is difficult to claim, or to prove, that when *Shari'a* exercises its power, everything goes well, and unity is installed by itself. One can read any medieval Muslim author to find contrary claims.
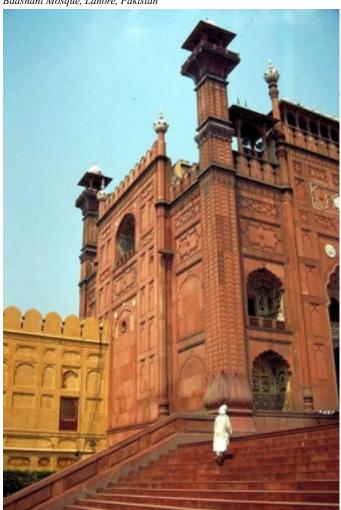
Does a direct relationship between the Islamic quality of an environment and Islam as defined in the Muslim doctrine really exist? I think this is an oversimplification. Faith, whatever way organized in a society, and whatever way accepted as the source of behaviour, cannot control the whole life pattern. The automobile is not the product of Islamic culture; but it is now a permanent element of Islamic life.

I have to state my own opinion on the creation of an architecture based on the spiritual heritage of Islam. The

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relationship between a culture and the formal character of its architecture is not easy to formulate. Sometimes we believe that architecture symbolizes certain values pertinent to a specific culture. But, which values? An Englishman builds a modern hotel in Riyadh, in the very centre of Wahabi spirit. What does this building express? It certainly does not express a break in religious fervor, but it does express that more important factors for the definition of the building process are at work. We assume that the building is fit for local exigencies, it is even difficult to discuss its qualities foreign to Islam, because the client asks for it; he is satisfied, probably even proud of it.

Islamic culture has a basic unity founded on the Quran, as the word of God. But quite a variety of forms of every order have been created during its history. There are oceans between the architectural concepts of Badshahi Mosque at Lahore, of the Selimiye at Edirne and of the Great Mosque at Cordoba. What is important in their shaping is not the common ground of Islamic culture, but the local interpretation of it. What makes them truly

symbolical is their relationship to the soil, to the physical environment on which they were built, the cultural and political environment in which they were created.

We created truly great architecture in the past, and the self-identity of the Muslim world cannot be better represented than by the remains of its material culture. This is our actual concern. This is why we ask the question: What are the qualities of an architecture which will express us? The "us" here is what everybody has discussed: Muslims as they are now, or Muslims as they were; Muslims of Istanbul, Muslims of Tehran, or Riyadh, or Indonesia or sub-Saharan Africa; of the cities, of the villages, living in palaces or in the huts of Bangladesh. This is the Islamic world in its complexity which is real. To define Islamic qualities in this complexity is to build on loose ground.

As long as Muslim societies and their architects learn more about their history, not through faith, but through an objective evaluation of their history and the present potential of their countries, and as long as they learn about the modern world, they will become more aware of their tradition. This never means the imitation of traditional forms. As Islamic countries rely more on their own resources, their new identity will secure them with the basic potential of creativity. Since the problem of

Badshahi Mosque, Lahore, Pakistan

Selimiye Complex, Edirne, Turkey

Great Mosque of Cordoba, Spain

identity is related to the problem of historical heritage, we will be looking to the sources of our uniqueness for inspiration." *[Dogan Kuban, Commentary]*

[From Charles Correa, Commentary]
Charles Correa: "We heard this morning two different positions very powerfully staked out; Professor Nasr's was the assertion that the magnificent architecture of Islam had a profound religious and metaphysical basis. Today, we see only the visual impact of a place like Fatehpur Sikri, for instance. That's really only seeing half the pie. We must return to an integrated view. Professor Kuban, on the other hand, differed on a number of important aspects. For instance, I thought he said that the old Islamic cities were primarily the consequence of a feudal economy This makes some sense to me because one sometimes sees this integrated product in other societies without such a strong religious basis to the architecture. I think we could probe pre-Islamic societies looking for architecture displaying these elements of integration. More profoundly, and more basically, he is saying that Nasr's position is a paraphrase of. "I have seen the past and it works." I agree. The question is. "What do we do with the future? Where do we go from here?" He seemed to imply that the Islamic world was caught up in a kind of world move-ment for change, for modernisation. I suspect there are other positions which a number of other people would articulate. Is it not possible today to have an Islamic point of view which is modern, yet has the metaphysical and religious component brought out by Nasr?" *[Charles Correa, Commentary]*

[From Zubair, Commentary]
Zubair: "I feel that there is no such thing as secular Islam. Islam embodies all our activities whether in art or in living, so the idea of "Islamicization" of the arts is rather important. We have concentrated upon Islamicisation of our behaviour in one aspect of our life. which is the Shari'a, and on prayer with all its aspects. leaving arts aside. Most of the elite have been educated in Europe and America. They return with the idea that one concen-trates on functions rather than shape. They place a lot of emphasis on the efficient functions of the building rather than on location and space according to Islamic ideas. I would say there is an Islamic architecture and, even if we are highly modernised, if we are industrialised, we still will have a type of Islamic architecture because space allocation is different from space allocation in a Western country. Take, for instance, the factory. Factory space allocation must be different. In Islamic society there will be a place of prayer, and there will be a place for ablution (wudlu'). If we are embodying our Islamic attitude, this would be reflected in the design itself." *[Zubair, Commen-tary]*

[From Berque, Commentary]
Berque: " There are views which are in conflict in Arab countries and throughout the whole world. The world is being divided into those who believe in authenticity without a future and those who believe in a future without authenticity. Fortunately, the antithesis is a false one. In Islamic tradition we can find many inherent elements which make for modernity. I do not think it is necessary for a project of Islamic urbanization to formulate a regressive Utopia We would do better to propose definite progress based upon, or inspired by, an admittedly criticized past." *[Berque, Commentary]*

[From Hassan Fathy, Commentary]
Hassan Fathy: "The problem we are discussing here is the problem of architecture in Islamic cities, mainly between the latitudes of fifteen and thirty-four degrees, with a rather similar climate and environment. By the end of the nineteenth century, Islamic architecture had reached the nadir of a cycle whose peak was in the fourteenth century. It declined under different influences from within itself as well as from without because every style starts with force at the beginning, comes to a climax and then starts a decline. The architectural decline coincided with political decline, and that coincided with the industrial revolution, which has changed everything. The moment had come for change, and we didn't know how to change, so we took the easy way out, simply adopting Western culture. You want to revive Islamic architecture? We don't need to revive it; it is living. All we need is a scientific evaluation." *[Hassan Fathy, Commen-tary]*

[From Charles Correa, Commentary]
Charles Correa: "We must decide what aspects of Islamic architecture can be explained in these terms and what goes beyond that into the metaphysical realm. We have to decide, also, how much of that metaphysical baggage can be taken with us into the next hundred years. To my mind, these are the real issues, and not the false dichotomy between the ugliness of what is now going up and the great monuments of the past. The

Market in front of the Great Mosque of Djenne, Mali

modern buildings are terribly ugly, but it is not all the fault of the West. The fault lies with those of us who build them." *[Charles Correa, Commentary]*

[From Muhsin Mahdi, Islamic Philosophy and Fine Arts]
Muhsin Mahdi: "The aspects that characterize the artistic traditions (in the plural) of Muslim communities is not unique to Islamic architecture, but is in fact present in one or another of the artistic traditions of some other religion? This question does not bother me at all; on the contrary, I wish that all these aspects would be present in all the artistic traditions of other religions. The seminar has pointed to the roots of spiritual beliefs and artistic traditions in the Islamic countries. If the majority of contemporary examples we have seen indicate anything, it is that some architects are trying to attach dead branches to these roots with rubber bands. Our task is to find out whether others have succeeded in grafting living branches to these roots, and whether the result is a living tree that can grow and under which contemporary Muslims can take shade. We cannot perform this task if we continue to assume that architecture in the Islamic world must reproduce certain forms or symbols that we students of Islamic history or culture have identified as "Islamic," in order to help us distinguish "Islamic culture" from Western or other Oriental cultures. Whatever the use of this approach may be, it is not a substitute for a philosophy of art, or for an art criticism that deals with the rules of artistic produc-tion and with the individual and collective experience of a work of art." *[Muhsin Mahdi, Islamic Philosophy and Fine Arts]*

[From Ismail Serageldin, Watering the Garden]
Ismail Serageldin: "Muslim identity provides a subtle thread of unity through a rich diversity of cultural expression, yet despite this diversity, architecture in the Muslim world is seen as either 'western' or 'authentic'. The debate about architectural form is most forcefully joined in ideological terms. Architecture is seen both functionally to affect behaviour (eg, segregation of sexes in the access of space) and as symbolising a state of being. This strongly-argued double dichotomy of society/ built environment and behaviour/architecture carries ideological connotations that it does not deserve, and prevents the exploration and fruition of critical discourse. The Muslim cultural space, however, is the locus of much intercourse between cultures and media. It is no longer, if it ever was, the coherent expression of an harmonious socio-cultural reality. Architects therefore need to avoid romanticising the past, accept the reality of today and seek to build a better tomorrow: Thus they will do more than solve local problems; they will contribute to the architectural and social discourse of the world." *[Ismail Serageldin, Watering the Garden]*
[Dogan Kuban, Commentary]

Dogan Kuban: "What does Islamic architecture mean? I think something created by those people who call themselves Muslims. It is as simple as that." *[Dogan Kuban, Commentary]*

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, established in 1977 by His Highness the Aga Khan, recognises examples of architectural excellence that encompass contemporary design, social housing, community improvement and development, restoration, re-use, and area conservation, as well as landscaping and environmental issues. Through its efforts, the Award seeks to identify and encourage building concepts that successfully address the needs and aspirations of societies in which Muslims have a significant presence. Prizes totaling up to US$500,000 - the largest architectural award in the world - are presented every three years to projects selected by an independent Master Jury.

[From James Steele, The Search for Meaning]
"When His Highness The Aga Khan established an award for architecture, it was intended to both increase public awareness of Islamic culture and to create a forum for examining the appropriateness of contemporary architecture throughout the extremely diverse community of Muslims worldwide. Since 1980, this award has been given every three years, and in the selection process used to determine the winners, the jury has typically considered the particular context in which each project has evolved, as well as the unique social, economic, environmental and technical factors to which it responds.
In looking back over the successful projects of the past, there is a consistent pattern of appropriate and creative utilisation of available resources in meeting functional and cultural needs, as well as the higher potential in each project to set a standard for the future. The Aga Khan acts as the Chairman of a Steering Committee that governs the Award, and the term of this committee spans each three-year cycle. Its task is to oversee the distribution of prizes totaling $500'000 that are awarded in each cycle to projects selected by an independent Master Jury. Those awarded include architects, construction professionals, craftsmen and clients who are considered most responsible for the final realisation of each project." *[James Steele, The Search for Meaning]*

[From Oleg Grabar, The Mission and its People]
"The mission of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has been to to explain and develop the practical and psychological or intellectual options facing humanity in the twenty-first century. Whether they are in their ancestral lands or in the anonymous quarters of enormous and varied metropolises, should Muslims seek to maintain in a near skin what their grandparents had been or should they proclaim their new identity? And what intermediary positions can be imagined?

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The deeper mission of the Award: to understand coherently and to explain in-depth the mechanisms which made a rich and very varied past appear so brilliant and successful today; to identify the ruptures which occurred in terms which would make their experience creative in meeting the challenges of today; and, finally, to ask forcefully and openly whether the narrow-minded political and ideological framework of nations should not be superseded by a generous and humane universalism." *[Oleg Grabar, The Mission and its People]*

[From Mohammed Arkoun, Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture]

"The Aga Khan Award for Architecture has developed and illustrated an encompassing understanding of the expressions of Islam in its classical age as well as in its contemporary trends. The ultimate goal of this endeavour has never been to build a model of an Islamic architecture and to impose it all over the Muslim world; on the contrary, the constant concern of so many architects, historians, social scientists, thinkers already involved in the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has been to encourage and practice a free critical inquiry on three major points:

- The historical objective knowledge of the classical legacy of what is called Islamic culture and civilization; the idea is not to compete with the established scholarship in this field, but to reflect on the relevance, the meaning, and the results of the continuous reference made today to this classical legacy as the model for the contemporary expressions of "Islam" as a whole (religion, culture, civilisation).

- The dominant forces, models, conceptions, achievements which are actually at work and are spread today throughout all Muslim societies and which are not related at all to the claimed ideal model; in other words, the built environment and the cultural expressions of "Islam" are subjected to an irresistible process of deterioration, disintegration, destruction.

- The identification of new ways, new methodologies, new conceptions, new tools, to provide for an enabling culture and thought that would stop the process of rupture with the classical legacy, would help to recognize the living tradition, and, at the same time, would contribute to the invention of modernity in Muslim societies.

The Award has been created precisely to face these historical problems of the Muslim world. How is it possible to insert modern thinking and technology in archaic and traditional societies? How is it possible to evaluate with a modern scientific approach — against ideological and apologetic claims — the positive values of the Muslim tradition to infuse it into our modernity? These are two constant, inseparable ideals of the Award. The originality of the Award is to master the past, the present, and the future of Muslim societies through architecture and urbanism as integrated and integrating activities. This is a cultural and political revolution with the greatest implications for a new civilization." *[Mohammed Arkoun, Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture]*

[From Mohammed Arkoun, The Aga Khan Award as A Process of Thinking]

"The importance of the Award is as a *Space for Freedom* in which all crucial debates, made taboo by the devices of censorship and self-censorship in the present Islamic world, could be carried on with intellectual responsibility and shared concern between the West — where all decisive agendas are fixed — and the Islamic world — where dependence, economic failures, political violence, and social and cultural regression are worse today than they were during the 1950s to 1970s.

The selection of the members of both the Steering Committee and the Master Jury should be guided by the urgent need to put an end to all conventional, romantic, nostalgic, fundamentalist references to the 'spirit of Islam', 'Islamic identity' and 'Islamic spirituality' maintained apart from modern, critical reassessment. Classical Islam (750-1250) is a purely historical reference; a modern Islamic culture and its thought are nowhere available; it is only emerging through the violent forces of globalization. This is the concrete, constraining context in which more or less relevant architectural, as well as literary, musical, artistic, philosophical and theological - responses are emerging and will emerge in the coming years. Award vision and activities need to be revisited, reassessed, enlarged to encompass the new challenges, the increasing complexities, the terrifying gaps imposed by the historical transition from a fading modernity to a radically new posture of humankind facing the reorganization of knowledge and all subsequent constructions of civilizations.

When he founded the Award, the Aga Khan had the vision of a forum for research, study and critical analysis of the new historical problems facing Muslim societies in the first decades of their independence. He wanted to offer a space for free debate to all interested parties to identify the conditions, the ways, the obstacles and the actions related to the conservation, restoration, improvement and creation of the built environment in historical cities and, more generally, in all spaces designed for contemporary Muslim societies.

The most talented and successful architects in the world have contributed to the Award as a thinking process, as members either of the Master Jury or of the Steering Committee; they have exchanged and discussed cultural, historical and anthropo-

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logical aspects of architecture and urban fabrics in Islamic contexts with specialists in the social sciences who have neither the experience of the architects nor always the required critical approach to Islam as a religion, a cultural tradition, a system of thought." *[Mohammed Arkoun, The Aga Khan Award as A Process of Thinking]*

[From Mohammed Arkoun, Islamic Culture, Developing Societies, Modern Thought]
"This approach, including a long-term historical perspective and a free but critical acceptance of all the challenges of modernity, is probably unique as far as Muslim societies are concerned. It is not to be found in any known type of scholarship - Muslim or Orientalist in any tradition of teaching, in any private foundation or trend of thinking. That is why the Aga Khan Award for Architecture is so conscious of its responsibility and so eager to go further in the path successfully traced over two decades." *[Mohammed Arkoun, Islamic Culture, Developing Societies, Modern Thought]*

A SEARCH FOR MEANING

[From James Steele, A SeArch for Meaning]
In the fourth Award ceremony, held beneath the towering walls of the Mohammed Ali Mosque on top of the Citadel in Cairo on October 15th 1989, a strong feeling of continuity and confidence emerged making it a turning point in retrospect in the history of the event. In his introductory remarks, His Highness The Aga Khan noted that, perhaps more than any other time in the past, there had been a special awareness of the tripartite contributions of restoration and preservation, social and community development and the search for that he called an 'architecture of quality' in their turn, which has continued to highlight the important role of each in suggesting valuable directions for the future of Islamic architecture.

In recognition of the deeply felt need to preserve historical monuments that represent the best architectural traditions of a glorious past, an award was presented to those involved in the restoration efforts on the Great Omari Mosque in Sidon, Lebanon. Dating back to the Bahri Mamluk period; the Mosque was erected in 1291 on the remains of a castle built by the Knights of St John during the second Crusade and the buttresses on its southern facade still reveal its use as a fortress. Many additions and improvements were carried out during the late Ottoman period, ultimately presenting a mosque based on a central courtyard plan enclosed by four *riwaqs*, or porticoes. The prayer hall is located in the southernmost *riwaq* which is covered
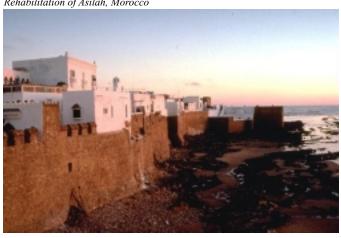
by cross-vaults. In addition to severe weathering, the mosque suffered extensive damage during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, to the extent that a local patron offered to replace it with an entirely new building. The local residents refused to give up the old mosque, however, which had always served as both the physical and psychological centre of their community, and requested that it be restored instead. While restoration and preservation efforts have been cited by the Award in the past, and have included monuments of such importance as the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the circumstances surrounding the destruction and precise rebuilding of this mosque have given it a special significance.

Another award, given to the municipality of Asilah, has recognised community efforts of an entirely different kind, involving the rehabilitation of a small town on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Two local men came back to Asilah after graduate studies abroad and determined to improve their town. The highly personalised way in which they did so really began with the question of how the innate creativity of a community can be marshaled for positive change. The first steps they took in

Great Omari Mosque, Sidon, Lebanon

Rehabilitation of Asilah, Morocco

attempting to answer that question are an object lesson in the effectiveness of straightforward tactics that have now served as an inspiration for other such communities throughout the world. They began by organising a small cultural festival in the town in the summer of 1978, which attracted nearly one thousand visitors from the local area. This modest event gave the townspeople a renewed sense of civic pride and self-worth that has continued to grow as rapidly as the festival itself, which now attracts nearly 125,000 people and is one of the biggest cultural events in the Middle East. The overall rehabilitation of the town has also encouraged many private individuals to build new houses in the traditional manner throughout the fabric of the medina, to replace others which had deteriorated beyond the point of possible restoration.

The Grameen Bank Housing Programme, a further Award winner, has successfully attempted clever innovation of another sort, based on a concept that has already challenged past theories of how to assist in providing self-help housing for the poor throughout the developing world. As the first of two schemes to be given in the social development category, the Grameen Bank Project has been implemented in Bangladesh, which is one of the poorest and most populous countries in the world, where nearly fifty per cent of the rural population is both landless and homeless. The basic concept as initiated by Mohammed Yunus, who is the managing director of the Bank, has been to offer small loans of the equivalent of $350 to the rural poor without requiring any collateral, in direct contradiction to the customary reluctance of the financial community to do so in the past. In his view, every human being, regardless of social position, deserves a life of dignity and should be given the opportunity to care for himself if possessing the commitment to do so. Personal commitment, then, becomes the main criterion in determining credit worthiness, and not financial resources. With these small housing loans, each borrower is provided with a pre-fabricated concrete slab, four concrete columns and twenty-six corrugated metal sheets for a roof. The pre-cast building materials are mass produced and made available to the borrowers at very low prices. The residents build their houses themselves, typically enlisting the help of all of the members of the family to do so: in order to keep costs low. It has now been more than a decade since the programme has been in effect, and hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis have benefited from it, with more than forty-five thousand such homes in existence. With a payback rate of nearly 98% during this time, the Grameen Bank, has also demonstrated that institutional changes must precede any significant progress in housing for the poor.

The second social improvement scheme to be honoured in the series was the Citra Niaga Urban Development plan for Samarinda in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. In comparison to the wide ranging institutional implications of the Grameen Bank initiative, the major achievement of Citra Niaga is the lesson it offers in the effectiveness of the self-controlling system of cross-subsidies that were used. A democratic management board represents the interest of the local government, as well as the shop-keepers and street peddlers, and both the equity and the benefits have been shared by all three. This project has totally transformed former slum area, which had previously been occupied by low-income, migratory settlers, into a well-planned urban and commercial complex. As built, the centre is now made up of two hundred and twenty-four stalls that have been provided without cost to the street peddlers, as well as two hundred and twenty shops of various sizes that are incorporated

Grameen Bank Housing Programme, Bangladesh

Citra Niaga Urban Development, Samirinda, Indonesia

within a series of arcades that cater to medium and high income shoppers. This project has not only achieved its social and economic objectives, but has transformed Samarinda into a vibrant and well-designed urban centre.

The Gurel Residence, in Canakkale, Turkey, clearly reflects the concern of architect /owner Sedat Gurel, with having the house blend into its surroundings. In this area of the Aegean seacoast, the design required sensitivity to both the steep, rocky slopes that angle down to the water, as well as the dense groves of pine, olive and oak trees that cover the site. The residence is a cluster of seven units, distributed over the site in direct relationship to a long wall that protects them from the road nearby. The pavilions consist of two living units, four sleeping areas, and one common service element, that are arranged along the wall in such a way that open-air courtyards are created between them. The overall feeling of the house, which uses local domestic construction techniques as well as indigenous forms, materials and details, is that of a small scale traditional village, which promotes the special qualities of the site by providing private as well as communal spaces. The ingenuity used in juxtaposing built elements and open areas, as well as the use of simple, local construction methods, makes this house a logical model for a variety of locations.

In contrast to the private retreat created by Sedat Gurel, is the Al-Kindi Plaza in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and the Hayy Assafarat landscaping scheme, which address public issues of the appropriate character of communal spaces, within the contemporary Arab city. It contains a Friday Mosque which can accommodate up to seven thousand worshippers, as well as residences for the Imam and Muezzin of the mosque, a library, a government service complex which houses the Riyadh Development Authority, and shops surrounding a central maidan. In deference to the traditional Najdi architecture of this region, the buildings are designed with central courts, and thick, insulating walls that present small openings to the outside. Both the buildings and the open spaces also reflect Najdi decorative patterns. The architect has said in regard to his design of Al-Kindi Plaza:

> This project attempts to demonstrate that many of the problems faced by post-industrial architecture stem from the destruction of the context into which a new building might fit. Once this context is re-created, good design can easily follow. We emphasise that valuable architecture is that which the pedestrian can appreciate, and that the quality of the built environ-ment results essentially from the entire fabric, including the variety of open spaces that are the result of the structures surrounding them. Local traditions, in the shaping of climatic and cultural environments, should not be abandoned in favour of mechanized technology because there really is no contradiction between the two.

The question regarding the re-use of traditional forms and decoration reawakened a controversial issue that has run through all of the past cycles and has yet to be resolved. This question has been particularly sensitive because of the rampant and uniformed application of 'Islamic' decoration on a majority of the recent export architecture throughout the Muslim world. This has resulted in what Professor Dogan Kuban of Turkey has called a misplaced reliance upon a kind of 'cultural fetishism' that blindly uses forms from the past without a full understand-

Gurel Residence, Canakkale, Turkey

Hayy Assafarat Landscaping and Al-Kindi Plaza, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

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ing of their meaning. The ongoing debate between those who advocate the use of such forms as a model, and others who seek to renew the processes that produced such forms so that they then might be used as a reference, surfaced again when the Sidi el-Aloui Primary School in Tunisia and the Corniche Mosque in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, were presented with awards.

The Sidi el-Aloui school is one of twenty projects that were initiated in 1983 to rejuvenate the Bab Souika- Halfaouine district of the medina of Tunis, and is located in a tightly ordered district with many older structures in it. The school is sited on the northeast side of a rectilinear public park, and houses sixteen classrooms distributed symmetrically around two internal courtyards. The main entrance is on an axis with the public park that faces it: and is made obvious by the large *mashrabiyya* balcony that projects out over it from the first floor. While seeming somewhat insignificant from a western view-point, the use of such detailing on this public building represents a major victory in Tunisia, -where it had once been considered frivolous. This courageous exploration of traditional forms, as both a necessary and economical alternative to standard governmental proposals, presents an example of great value to other developing countries.

The Corniche Mosque in Jeddah is by Abdel Wahed El- Wakil. In this building, the architect is intentionally literal in his use of a traditional language, in a continuing attempt to find the missing link between the rich inventiveness of the pre-industrial age and the tenuous relationship between craftsmanship and architecture today. The Ministry, in collaboration with the Municipality of Jeddah, chose several high visibility sites around the city for near models of traditional mosque architecture. In addition to providing places of worship, all of these models were intended to exhibit methods of traditional construction, and to show that buildings using these methods were achievable on a limited budget. To do so, conventional ideas of glazing, as well as strict air-conditioning requirements also had to be changed, which was far from easy in this hot, humid region that has converted so completely to western standards of mechanized environmental comfort. The Corniche Mosque epitomizes the spirit of the entire programme, emphasising the perceived importance of sculptural form as a means of enhancing the image of these structures in the contemporary urban scene.

The issue of the re-interpretation of historical forms was also of deep concern to Danish architect Henning Larsen in his design of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The generative idea behind the concept that Larsen developed is that of a 'hidden', inward facing architecture which is closed to the

outside world, but slowly reveals itself from within. This idea of internalisation is further articulated by insulating the triangular public courtyard that he has created in the centre of the building from all of the private office spaces on the perimeter with a semi-public internal 'street'. As the concept developed, each of the corners of the symmetrical triangular form were expressed as nearly separate entities related to the three programmatic divisions of political affairs, cultural and economic affairs, and administration and finance that exist within the Ministry. The monumental image of the building is intentionally meant to he reminiscent of the older, Najdi style of Riyadh, specifically the massive walls of the historic Musmak Fort nearby. Larsen speaks poetically about the quality of light entering his building, and of his intention to make it a 'sundial', which would track the progress of the day on its interior walls. In the inner world that he has created, nuances such as this, as well as the exquisite materials underfoot, take on added significance. His abstract, yet fundamental reading of this particular regional architecture, in this case, treads a careful path between the vernacular features of the Najd, on the one hand, and more international forces on

Sidi el-Aloui School, Tunis, Tunisia

Corniche Mosque, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

the other, that is meaningful to each.

Light, of course, also had mystical qualities for architect Louis Kahn, and was one of the most important considerations in his design of the National Assembly Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which was honoured with an Aga Khan Award. In the same way as Larsen, Kahn has also recognised the need to control the full glare of the sun in a region in which direct exposure can be fatal. Like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Assembly Building is monumental, and transcends merely functional requirements in order to institutionalise democracy in a nation that has had its fill of strife. While some have criticised the building as being far too lavish for such a poor country, Kahn has succeeded in giving the people of Bangladesh a national symbol to be proud of, as well as a feeling of self-worth that is beyond price. Unlike Larsen, Kahn did not copy elements of regional architecture, but has submitted to the specific local conditions and construction patterns of Dhaka The result is a building that is both universal and place specific in its expression.

The same may also be said of the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, which is precisely fitted to the curve of the left bank of the river Seine, and is divided into two sections that are separated by a square central court. The curved, scimitar-like section facing the quay contains exhibition halls and a museum of Arab art and civilisation, the second, rectilinear block, houses the library. As a cooperative effort between France and twenty Arab countries, the building represents 'a dialogue between cultures'. In its precise and polished modernity, the Institute is an appropriately urbane Parisian building, constantly offering a reflected commentary on its surroundings; and yet also presents many tantalising reminders of a more obscure sensibility. The most perceptive of these is the contemporary and technologically brilliant rendition of the traditional wooden *mashrabiyya* screen used throughout the Middle East as a device for controlling

sunlight and privacy in the past. The southern facade of the Institut is clad with over a hundred photo-sensitive panels, containing nearly sixteen thousand moving parts, that act like the diaphragm of a camera in controlling the amount of sunlight coming into the interior of the building. Photovoltaic sensors electronically adjust all of the moving parts of these panels, which are made up of polygonal openings that echo Islamic geometric forms.

The completion of the fourth cycle, concluded a decade of searching and questioning, and the Aga Khan Award for Architecture seems to have come of age. The wide range of awards presented demonstrates the characteristic of unity in diversity in the Muslim world itself, making it a more accurate reflection of the culture it seeks to explore." *[James Steele, The Search for Meaning]*

National Assembly Building, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Insitut du Monde Arabe, Paris, France

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<u>Impact and Insight</u>

In January 1995, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture Master Jury deliberations included lengthy discussions of possible ways to frame the awards, and ways to situate the types of projects that the Jury was reviewing. Excerpts from that discussion are presented here to open up the debate to a broader community.

<u>Peter Eisenman:</u> "We need a clear strategy for the Award. Menara Mesiniaga is one of the few projects that contributes new thinking to the general culture of architecture. Whether 1 like it or not, whether I agree with its symbolism or not, it would be provocative in any context. That provocation is particularly contextual, because it couldn't have come out of Morocco, Australia or Canada. It came out of a particular set of cultural intersections in Malaysia which promote this kind of activity. 1 don't think you could say that about some of the other projects, which recast western ideas or Islamic motifs without breaking out of a tradition and showing an alternative strategy. I'm looking for five or six projects that allow us to make that discourse."

<u>Ismail Serageldin:</u> "We can find among these works projects that are truly unique in terms of their contribution to an international architecture discourse, while recognising that part of their uniqueness is also their context, whether physical, psychological, cultural or intellectual. Architecture is the most rooted and social of all the arts. Good architecture should fit and function well in its society, but also transcend i t and make a statement of relevance. If it also contributes to the international architectural discourse, we eliminate two extremes: the extreme of the transplanted western idea that you have seen in the Gulf architecture, and the reverse extreme, the implantation symbolised by the Washington Islamic Centre, a Mamluk cum Moorish architecture in the middle of Washington DC, as a form of expression of authenticity."

<u>Eisenman:</u> "We need to define the Award's contribution to the international architectural discourse. This is what has been lacking, for me, in the way the awards have been previously framed. Although architectural excellence alone is not enough, we must be careful not to choose projects that would eliminate mere architectural excellence."

<u>Mohammed Arkoun:</u> "Excellence alone is not a criteria. But we are going to face double opposition to your categories. The academic establishment will be opposed when we say we're not interested in your way of presenting things that originate from the Islamic world, which is in a state of total social disintegra-

tion. Then, if we give the tower the importance you want to give it, we will have strong opposition from the fundamentalists, because they will perceive it as typical western aggression. How can we have a breakthrough against these two extremes?"

<u>Eisenman:</u> "Do we truly believe that there is an alternative to westernity, either as an option to fundamentalism, or fundamentalism as an option to westernity? Let's say there is a third road. That's a very difficult discourse to find. If we can encourage young people to search in their own cultures, in their discourses, not to regurgitate the past or copy the West but to use their own conditions to find a new architecture, that would be an amazingly wonderful result. That is what I call radical, which means 'to the root'; a radical expression that would not merely rely on the past but transform it, because no society grows by merely imitating the past. The transformative power of architecture, the way architecture lasts, I would argue, is its capacity to sustain non-absorption into the culture. In other words, good architecture has always been attacked by the cultural normative as being something 'outside'. We're asking the young architect in Jakarta, in Penang, in Kuala Lumpur, to take those kinds of risks from within their own cultures, to be neither traditionalists nor western. I think we fail if we don't at least attempt that mes-

Menara Mesiniaga, Selangor, Malaysia

sage, and arm ourselves against the critique."

Serageldin: "Let's assume we have an agreed set of projects in which we are satisfied that we read a meaning that is relevant to the discourse you are talking about. How are we going to convey that message? You have one audience at Princeton, or the Sorbonne, and another in Tehran. We hope to have an intellectual impact where people yearn for this kind of discourse, but you cannot ignore the social, political and cultural impacts on the discourse."

Luis Monreal: "Within the dynamics of this jury, we have reached a basic consensus on conservation projects, on social housing projects and so on; but when it comes to architecture, we don't have enough examples of architectural design."

Eisenman: "Charles made a very poignant statement to me, and we ought to consider it. He does not believe that the contemporary Islamic tradition contains a 'high art' that is conditioned, that is high architecture, or that is in the tradition of the avant-garde. What we are trying to promote, I believe, is, among other things, a high art, avant-gardist, risk taking tradition. I cannot vote for projects that are neither high art nor risk taking."

Serageldin: "How are you going to promote high art? I take your point very seriously. But if you do not find the risk taking, do you take something and say, 'This is half right, but it went wrong in the following way'?"

Charles Jencks: "That's mid-cult (middle art). Saying something is 'on the way' will never produce high art. You've got to hit mid-cult because everybody can do it. It is produced naturally by our system, so we have to attack it. It erodes high culture. We cannot award mid-cult."

Eisenman: "The Menara Mesiniaga is one of the few examples of the possibility of high art culture, of an avant-gardist, risk taking culture. The only way you are going to raise the bottom is to have a top. If the top is always seen to be mid-cult we're never going to get to the top. This jury should in some way take this as a mandate. The reason we don't have any great architects in the tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, is because the attitude today is much more conservative toward taking risks in art. At this moment in history, it is important to suggest that what Islamic culture needs to promote is the possibility of a high art, avant-garde culture. This could be the third way, as opposed to westernity, of approaching fundamentalism."

Jencks: "In considering these awards one also has to be more

particular about what pluralism means. Deeper pluralism means a lot of different things. It means self-consciously choosing categories which are oppositional. And dealing with oppositions and, therefore, with juries like this one of nine men who don't necessarily like things ike eco-feminism. In other words, there is inevitably a built-in set of prejudices in this room. To support Islam as an emergent world civilisation means that we have to consciously go out of our way to look for things to come in the future. For example, I have noted that under-represented here, by my standards, are ecology, feminism, pop-cornmercialism and industrial High Tech. We do tack 'otherness' within the Islamic world. We can rule out completely any mid-cult architecture, or say we are not going to award anything unless it has a social programme. Or we can award programmes which are 'great' building; we can say this is a 'great' scheme, but not good architecture. It's an old distinction, philo- sophically. This is part of pluralism, part of admitting that judgements are conflicted and even oppositional. The result of this approach would be that the muddiness and fuzziness of the Award, which I think has been a necessary problem, would continue."

Arkoun: "Another point, which we and all other juries always face, is the reference to Islam. We have not yet mastered the way we actually use this reference. We keep thinking that w e want to support Islam as a civilisation, but this is not the mission of the Award. Rather, w e want to identify what is happening in societies where the majority of people are Muslims. But we look to these societies, with their history, their problems, etc.; we do not look primarily to Islam. The expression 'Islamic architecture' should never be used because it is misleading. It is misleading for us in our own evaluation and for the people to whom we are addressing ourselves. Another point is the impact and over-whelming importance of western architecture, western concep-tions, and western problematics about architecture which are dominating our discussions in this special jury. We have not addressed what I call 'disintegrating societies'. You dream of 'integrated and integrating societies, but architects in the Muslim world are obliged to look to disintegrating societies for a vocabulary and for categories which are intellectually and technically irrelevant to our discussions here. We have not mastered these two dangers."

Jencks: "Do you think western societies are (a) integrated and (b) integrating?"

Arkoun: "Western societies have a history, functioning cultures and political regimes that are supporting, enabling, command-ing, commissioning, et cetera. In the societies in which we are working, none of this is a given. This history about which we are speaking doesn't exist, even in the mind of the elite."

Eisenman: "Not only do Muslim societies not have the enabling mechanisms of western societies which allow for a discussion to

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MONREAL: "I suspect that we are trying to find a message that we all can agree with. I completely disagree with what you said. Yes, we are in a post-Christian society, but history tells us that cultural evolution is not a cliche that you can apply to all societies at the same chronological moment. For many reasons we are far from seeing a post- Islamic society. We are in a post-Judaeo-Christian society in the West, but the West is also in the position of becoming a basically secular society. Even political ideologies are becoming obsolete. Whereas Islam, for at least centuries to come, will have a meaning. Even lack of beliefs in the industrialised western societies will somehow be a further stimulus, a bouillon de culture for a strong Islamic culture."

SERAGELDIN: "One could say that the evolution of identity in Muslim societies translates some elements and transcends others. We are no longer just repeating or trying to return to the past, so there is some process of transformation. Another issue is one's choice of language. Mohammed has more than once chastised us for not using words precisely enough. But more important is how a language is expressed and how it is received. The moment you say 'post-Islamic' it means that Islam is passe, and that's when most Muslims stop listening to whatever you have to say, regardless of your meaning."

EISENMAN: "If we look at the post-western condition or hege-mony of architecture, I believe we find ourselves in the 'post-mechanical' age. That is, we are in an age of media technology, which in fact threatens the whole fundamental iconic structure of architecture, itself the condition of stability and enclosure, the *sine qua non* of the mechanical paradigm. Faced with this, consider Singapore, which is a 'post-technological' society where neither land nor race nor technology, in a sense, is the informing essence. The informing essence of Singapore as a power, as the second most powerful nation in the Pacific Rim, is information. All societies - western, eastern, Muslim, Christian - are going to have to deal with this information technology as it mediates our society. To exclude this from our discourse would be a mistake. This jury has an obligation to at least say, 'Look, we have not seen the effects of this post-mechanical, post-industrial condi-tion.' We are beginning to see it in the Islamic world in the break-up of the political societies that sustained the mechanical era, ie, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the USSR. In other words, with the demise of the western solution for a political condition to contain the rising proletariat, we are faced with a new political condition in the world that is pre-French revolutionary without any pre-French revolutionary models. For example, the Bosnias, the Chechnyas, the Slovakias, et cetera, are searching for models of political, economic, and social viability. This struggle, which is predominantly in the Muslim world, seems to me to be an architectural problem as well as a societal one. All of these post-revolutionary conditions were political attempts to sustain the development of mechanical societies, the development of a proletariat. In other words how do you define polis and state in a pre-French revolutionary society, without going back to the models of the *ancien régime*? The western models, the colonial models, seem to be collapsed. And the twentieth century has witnessed this collapse. We can point this out, in our document, as a hopeful condition. This disintegration that you talk about, Mohammed, is also an enormous disintegration in the West. I do not believe the world can look to westernity any longer for these models. Islam could play an international role in the proposition of models that are nothing to do with the French Revolution at all."

ARKOUN: "The Award, since its creation, has established that Muslim societies are striving t o complete new achievements. What they have achieved until now has been done with western technology, western vocabulary and western architects, which means that your criticism of western societies applies to what is done, is being done still, and will be done in the Third World. Muslim societies cannot yet produce any kind of answer." *[1995 Master Jury, Relevance, Excellence and other Criteria]*

Water Towers, Kuwait City, Kuwait

Ali Qapu, Isfahan, Iran

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