

Faith, Culture and Architecture

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Introduction

Throughout history faith has been one of the most dominant components of cultural life. In fact, many cultures have been referred to by their prevalent faith rather than their geographical location or ethnic group. Owing to its institutional establishment and intrinsic strength, as well as its political nature, faith has always been a toned down, if not neglected factor in analyses of cultural life. The overpowering strength of faith as a determining component of life-style has perhaps been neglected in many cases, due to fear of offence, but, mostly, due to the dogmatic and therefore 'untouchable' nature of almost all faiths. While analyses which don't incorporate faith as a topic of study remain incomplete, those which base their studies exclusively on inferences from the study of faith become speculative and unscientific.

Faith is both personal and social. It is personal when it relates to the individual. It is social when the individual relates through his faith to the community and to his larger environment. This dual nature of faith makes it complicated to deal with. When it is personal, the amount of dogma which constitutes the belief may be so great that one cannot deal with it in an objective way. On the other hand, when aspects of any faith need to be communicated then reason has to be applied in order for there to be common ground for communication.

In the social sciences consideration of faith as a major element in the study of a culture is taken as practically self-evident. However, this is mainly taken into account in the study of 'other' cultures. When it comes to the societies with monotheistic faiths researchers usually shy away from making explicit assertions. This, of course, is an aspect of our modern times. We live in multi-ethnic, multi-faith environments. Any research which singles out only faith as a determinant would cause at least intellectual discomfort.

When faith is treated as the individual's attitude towards the rest of the world it is as if it does not have much to do with a person's social life, or, it is handled in a very general way, so that it becomes devoid of any specific content and it therefore tends to lack meaning.

Architecture - or more broadly, the built environment - and its interface with faith has always been a most interesting point of attention. Faiths as ways of life and social memory have had considerable influence on, among - other things - the shaping of the built environment. This relationship is seldom explored. One of the reasons for this lack of exploration during the last hundred years is basically the spread of modernity as the most effective practical ideology. Modernity, being implicitly secular, does not encourage in our societies the exploration of the relationship of faith to other phenomena, such as buildings, and Architecture .

In the intellectual climate of the late nineteen-sixties modernity was challenged as an unquestionable single ideology because it failed to bring promised solutions to modern life and living. The rapid spread of the amenities and conveniences of modern life created a uniform but a less personally and socially meaningful built environment.

Research which concentrates on vernacular modes of building (usually sustained by transfer of knowledge and symbolism) has had faith as its most important determinant. As the problem itself was seen as more meaningful, the study of the issue of identity in the built environment of traditional settings was viewed as having much more to offer. The lack of traditional features in the modernist settings put modernity under serious scrutiny and challenge. For alternative solutions architectural theory and research had to refer to the traditional settings to learn what was missing in the modern environment. To think seriously about and to evaluate 'modernity' took time. Soon architects themselves turned towards serious consideration of the vernacular modes of building - sometimes with great interest in finding out the nature of deeper structures, but mostly to copy the forms that communicated a particular symbolism.

Bernard Rudolfsky in his exhibition titled "*Architecture without Architects*"¹, or what was referred to as *folk* or *traditional* architecture, attracted the interest of many architects and non-architects. Following this unforgettable show, and for a period of more than two decades, vernacularism, *vernacular* architecture, evolved into an attractive area of research and exploration. Paul Oliver² was among the pioneers who advanced this area of exploration into a new realm of scholarship. Many of the problems of contemporary built environments were examined not only to verify but also to learn from the buildings and settlements which evolved over time and in themselves encapsulated many easily observable building determinants.

¹ B. Rudolfsky, *Architecture without Architects*, New York: Museum Of Modern Art, 1967.

² P. Oliver produced the first book which placed "vernacular" architecture within the frame of reference of theory of architecture. His opening essay in *Shelter and Society* (London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1969) was followed by many articles on field-based cases in order to display the richness of this new field of architectural research.. Later, he edited books on geographical themes, such as *Shelter in Greece*, *Shelter in Africa*, and *Shelter in Afghanistan*. He also dealt with themes like *Shelter, Sign and Symbol* (Barrie and Jenkins, London, 1975). In all these books, his fresh voice has given the younger academics new research possibilities and the encouragement to publish new ideas. The present author was among these, as part of his early research was published in *Shelter, Sign and Symbol*. He has dedicated the past five years to the creation of the *World Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture*, (Cambridge: C.U. Press, forthcoming in 1997.)

The past two decades of architectural research have benefited from scores of researchers who internationalised the work so that the area constituted a fresh and meaningful subject of architectural research. This research had existed in local academic circles, but was usually of primary interest to the architectural profession. It did not, therefore, directly benefit from the multi-disciplinary approach which began flourishing in the 1960's.¹

When research went beyond the mere physical attributes of architecture, in order to "explain" as opposed to "display" it also became a more profound effort. The exclusively architectural approach treated vernacular architecture as a source of deep-rooted forms or removed the buildings from their social and economic contexts and presented them as icons of nostalgia.

The contributions of Charles Jencks and George Baird (1966) to architectural discourse were the precursors of a change in the unilateral validity of Modernism. Later Peter Blake declared, rather radically, the demise of the Modern Movement (1977). The following years witnessed the overpowering influence of Post-Modernism where attempts were made to reinstate many of the missed or ignored elements of identity into both the theory and practice of architecture. Furthermore the abuse of Post-modernity was reflected in shallow, superficial proposals that led architectural thinkers such as Leon Krier to come up with a more radical approach in which they tried to reinstate the past: *i.e.* Classicism.

The architectural movements like *Post Modernism* or *Classicism* expressed concerns about what was missing in contemporary architecture. Naturally, as they acted exclusively from professional architectural premises they had to be rather prescriptive in reinstating 'the missing' solely through elements of architectural design. Vernacular architecture has always incorporated the belief that faith could be distinctly observed in the built environment. This is basically due to the nature of vernacular architecture as it evolves in history from within a society. The long and slow process of evolution intrinsically validates vernacular architecture to the point where it has even been treated as being 'perfect'.

In the medieval towns of the East and West one could distinctly see different populations living in separately confined areas in cities according to their identity. One still sees today in many cities, Armenian, Greek, Jewish, Coptic, and Muslim neighbourhoods, etc. An interesting aspect of these neighbourhoods is that they were formed in order to accommodate believers of the same faith, to give themselves a feeling of safety. In time the neighbourhoods acquired distinct architectural features which can be seen as manifestations of a particular faith.

¹ In the 1950's, Turkish academics explored the local architecture of various provinces in their dissertations. They all have remarkably high standards of survey and measured drawings. Similarly, Sedad Eldem dedicated almost his entire professional life covering more than half a century to the same subject. He produced many thematic titles, among which his five volume *Türk Evi (Turkish House)* can be mentioned as the definitive work.

This Volume

Rather overlooked - if not ignored - faith in reference to aspects of 'Architecture and Behaviour' in Islam, is a noticeable presence and needed to be explored in a scholarly way. It was the vision of the editor-in-chief of *Architecture & Behaviour*, Kaj Noschis, to dedicate an issue of the journal to the subject of Islam and the built environment, a subject which has been the central theme in the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Since 1977 we have accumulated substantial information on the subject and have been able to develop and organize our intellectual knowledge through seminars and publications.

The Award is perhaps the only one of its type which gives exclusive priority to the believers of Islamic faith. The reason for this is not to deprive the believers of other faiths of attention, but, to give priority to Muslims (who more than other groups, live almost totally in under-developed areas) and to their built environment and architectural heritage, which appears to have suffered from the contemporary tendency to rapid and perhaps almost thoughtless construction.

During the eighteen year history of the Award we have had the chance, the privilege and the mission of looking into architectural issues from the perspective of faith. This perspective has, however, had the broadest possible focus.

The present volume reflects the intention of the motto of the Award, as it claims to nurture 'Space for Freedom' to express, to discuss, to criticise and to learn. In the following pages readers will find sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory approaches to the subject. As guest editor I did not wish to restrict contributions to a one dimensional, doctrinal, point of view, so I invited contributors to make their most recent thinking available to the readers of *Architecture and Behaviour*.

Authors

Ismail Serageldin, one of the most prominent architect-thinkers has devoted a substantial portion of his time to studying the relationship of culture and built environment. Serageldin's conviction that economic development without a strong cultural dimension could fail, or, would at least be incomplete, has had considerable influence on policy-makers. His active and influential position in The World Bank has offered him the chance of communicating his ideas at the highest level. He has also dedicated a great deal of his time to the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, where he has elaborated the Muslim dimension of architecture, planning and cultural development. In this volume he addresses the crucial aspect of transition and sees an important role for architects because they can offer solutions which can be integrated within societal continuities.

Dogan Kuban is a long time proponent of holistic analyses of cultural phenomena. He has opposed single-dimensional sectarian or ethnically limited historical analyses. His approach, especially in relation to Muslim societies, which are geographically wide spread, accommodating various pre-existing social and cultural heritages and

buildings, is fresh, broad minded and integrative. He emphasizes understanding of the complexity of phenomena within a framework of historical and cultural continuity, as opposed to one based on prescriptive assertions. His inaugural lecture at Geneva University for the Conference on History of Turkish Art contains his latest ideas.

Fredj Stambouli, professor of sociology at the University of Tunis, has an international reputation in his field. His contribution here views colonial occupation in Muslim cultures as periods of decadence and deformation due to the introduction of outside values, causing rupture of cultural continuity. He describes the situation as a 'semiotic crisis'. He views the phenomenon of people's return to mosques as reflecting the hope that they can reconstitute their identity and cultural continuity.

Besim S. Hakim is an Iraqi architect and professor. He has taught at universities in the United States and Saudi Arabia. His research on the old city of Tunis has become one of the major reference works for analysing Islam and built environment. Here, after a brief presentation on the background of his ideas, he proposes priorities for further research toward developing a sounder theoretical basis on various aspects of the built form.

Vacit Imamoglu, professor of architecture at Middle East Technical University, has dedicated his career to the socio-psychological aspects of architectural space. He has conducted vast statistical surveys on perception, values and the experiences of human beings in reference to the spaces which they use. Here he evaluates the unique position of Turkish culture where a secularist ideology predominates in a population that is ninety-nine percent Muslim. He presents his ideas on how architectural processes adapt to religious or cultural values within a secular nation.

Ikram Gelani is a professor in the architectural school of Lahore. He explores Muslim housing in reference to the historical origins and essentials of the Muslim faith, i.e. *the Holy Quran*. Spatial extent, focal point and population in Muslim housing are regarded as the primary policy matters. He concludes with a plea for the realisation of his definition of Muslim Housing vis-à-vis development of a harmonious life in Islam.

Gulzar Haider is a professor architecture at Carlton University Ottawa. He has contributed substantially to discussions on the relationship of faith to architecture. His work is not confined to theory. He has also produced remarkable works of architecture as a contemporary design consultant for Muslims in North America. He has always been very generous with his time, advising many organisations that call upon him for his expertise. In his extremely engaging essay he presents his reflections on the architecture of the mosque and Muslim prayer and to the provision of space for Muslim prayer.

Two substantial research papers were shortened by the authors themselves, at my request, due to the physical limitations of the present volume. The two young Saudi scholars teach at King Saud University in Riyadh:

Mohammed Abdullah Eben Saleh's article, "The Emergence of Vernacularism as an Ethic Controlling the Man-Environment Relationship" is based on research on Al-Alkhalaf in South Western Saudi Arabia. Saleh explores the social and religious institutions formative in the development and the sustenance of the built environment and societal life.

Tawfiq Abu-Gazzeah explores social and psychological aspects of the architectural environment based on the organising principle of separation of gender and function. He discovered that partitioning of spaces and setting of boundaries are not only non-verbal communications designed to protect privacy, but, as well, as territorial behaviour based on strong adherence to and identity with Islam.

Charles Jencks, one of the most prominent, prolific and creative architectural thinkers of the present century generously offered us his opinions during a series of meetings. He is a member of of the Master Jury of the sixth cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. He sees conservative fundamentalism and obliterating westernisation as two diametrically opposite developmental poles. He proposes The Third Way which "suggests growth, creativity, the construction of a new tradition across barriers and between cultures."

I hope this volume provides a good overview of and an introduction to the exploration of the formation of our personal and social spaces as affected by the intrinsic forces of faith.

Gratitude

I wish to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Kaj Nochis, and the Editorial Board of *Architecture and Behaviour*, who agreed to dedicate one of their precious volumes to the subject of Islam and Built Environment.

My thanks are due to all of the authors, who took time out of their busy work schedules to contribute to this special edition.

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