Tradition versus Modernity: The Challenge of Identity in Contemporary Islamic Architecture

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout various historic periods of the Middle East, the construction of the built environment has been a result of progression in cultural values, religious context, political framework, science and technology, and the progress of society as a whole. Following World War I, the availability of building materials and technologies for the standardization of fabrication and construction spread to countries within this region. Native and foreign architects explored a variety of approaches of new forms and methods to architecturally express new functional needs. In addition to the dynamics of economic progress and socio-cultural and geopolitical contexts, contemporary architecture of this region faced the challenge of finding an individual character that combined the heritage of historical regional building traditions with the expression for a modern society. This evolution included the creation of new building types, the use of innovative building technologies and materials, and the revival of Islamic architectural traditions suitable to the demands of growing industries and urban infrastructure. Digitization of the design process, involvement of international architects, and increasing investments in construction projects obscured the progression of architecture in the Middle East and North Africa. Recent sociopolitical and cultural movements also moved this region into an age of complexity and contradiction, a situation predicted by late modernists. As a result, contemporary architecture is no longer a monotonous, universal, or homogenous phenomenon. Since the 1970s, local and international architects have experimented and examined different architectural trends. The current chaos of stylistic pluralism says less about cultural diversity in this region than about architects' egocentric approach or social and economic complications.

In this age of pluralism and global capitalism, Islamic architecture has become a tremendously diverse entity which cannot, by any means, be generalized. The disorder in the construction industry affirms the absence of a systematic theoretical critic on architecture and its potential impact on culture and society. While architects in this region do not seem to be motivated by universal labels and the question of style as a set of predetermined icons and features feels outdated, the retention of identity remains an important matter. Today, critics and the public still share the same concern: How can history and identity be addressed in architectural design? To answer this, numerous attempts have been made to reinterpret "tradition" in new projects. By applying a theoretical and historical framework, this paper examines current trends and approaches to the interpretation of "identity" in contemporary Islamic architecture.

THE DISCOURSES OF IDENTITY

Cultural identity is a collective self, in which people share a common history and ancestry. Each identity has a set of characteristics that can be gained through social interactions.[1] Michel Foucault described this as practices by which individuals are led to focus attention onto themselves to decipher, recognize and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire. This brings into play a certain relationship that allows them to discover the truth of their being.[2] Personalities are often formed through the

characteristics or common origin one shares with another person or group and, through shared values, an allegiance is formed. Questioning the trajectory of self, British sociologist, Anthony Giddens wrote, "The search for identity is a modern problem, which probably has its origins in Western individualism. And the idea that each person has a unique character and special potentialities that may or may not be fulfilled is alien to pre-modern culture."[3] Cultural identity works as a mediator between past and future. Rainwater wrote that the self forms a trajectory of development from the past to anticipate future. Each individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what in anticipated for a future. The trajectory of the self has a coherence that derives from a cognitive awareness of the various phases of the lifespan.[4]

Architecture as a cultural artifact plays a significant role as a signifier of cultural identity. The emergence of new styles and movements in the Middle East and North Africa helped to define new cultural personas throughout this region. Whether local or regional, real or illusory, these identities have positively affected national self-esteem. Such self-confidence is evident on local or national scales after the construction of certain projects. Water Towers in Kuwait, Babur Garden in Kabul, and Bibliotheca Alexandria are witnesses to this claim. There are, however, numerous examples of failed architecture which have provoked public anger and outrage. Such responses from the public reveal that contemporary society sees its individuality tied to the identity of cities and architecture. This explains the use of architecture as a tool to create or revive senses of nationalism and patriotism by governments.

In reference to contemporary Islamic architecture, historicism concerned itself with national identities, which mostly emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of national governments, and the liberation of formerly colonized countries like Egypt. Since then, there have been intellectual debates on the use of traditions and representations of history and identity. Some of these challenges are visible in the writings of famous architects of the region. The attempts to localize modern architecture in the Middle East were rooted in early modern movements in the region. Hassan Fat'hi was one pioneer whose focus on community issues through using traditional and classical forms was criticized as too conservative

by some of his peers. Fat'hi's style, however, influenced a new generation of architects who were also under the influence of western movements. This type of historicism was investigated by local architects, through the use of historic elements, forms, and materials. Nevertheless, this type of historicism did not become dominant because of the public's fascination with European and American architecture. The economic development of the region and the involvement of international construction firms also resulted in the import of modern architectural forms and shapes from the western world. The use of steel, concrete, and glass were considered signifiers of progress and development in the city as well as signs of prestige and social pride for their owners. Another issue that accelerated this process was the lack of serious criticism on modernism in the region. In other words, historicism in this age was either pure imitation of local forms and elements or an imitation of western postmodern language that had no roots in the Middle East. Gradually, with the decline of modernism in Europe and the U.S., and in an attempt to define national identities, many political authorities preferred to support regional approaches, which clearly contradicted the uniform language of the modern architecture. After a period of Western domination, the search for national identities motivated local architects to discover form and elements inherited in their cultural and architectural heritage. While this ongoing trend was not necessarily synchronized with so-called postmodern movement in the U.S. and Europe, its depth should be questioned.

IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EASTERN ARCHITECTURE

In order to contextualize recent architectural movements, the formation of modern architecture in Middle Eastern countries should be examined. Among these countries, Turkey was physically and culturally most similar to the West, especially because of Ataturk's attempts to modernize the country in the early decades of the 20th century. The 1960s were a pivotal decade in which the Western International style was followed in parallel to a revived nationalistic style in Turkey. Sedat Hakki Eldem's (1908-1988) Social Security Complex (1962-1964) consisted of a series of rectilinear volumes surrounding a series of small void spaces, each lined with concrete columns and rhythmic fa-

çade components. Inspired by a typical courtyard plan of the Ottoman *madrasa,* the Turkish Historical Society Building (1966) by Turgut Cansever features a large three-story atrium, around which other interior spaces are configured. In contrast to the exterior walls constructed in massive local stone above *pilotis,* the interior consists of intricate trellis work that helps to poetically distribute natural light to the interior spaces. The later decades of the twentieth century were significant in that it opened up competitions and design opportunities for Turkish universities and government-sponsored civic projects, such as Behruz Cinici's (1932-) several buildings on the Middle East Technical University campus (1980s) in Ankara, and the Public Relations Building of Parliament (1980).

The modernization process was almost synchronized in Turkey and Iran, mainly because their rulers, Ataturk and Reza Shah, good friends and close allies, shared similar ideas about the necessity of foundational reformations in their respective countries. The 1960s marked the turning point in the collaborative efforts between Iranian architects who began to question and revive a sense of Iranian identity for a modern way of life. They did this through numerous works including Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (1976), in which regional symbols and spatial organizations are embedded into the plan. While the Cultural Center in Kerman (1984) by Darab Diba were variations upon the famous Safavid *chaharbagh* plan (fourfold garden), Shushtar New Town Housing Complex (1974-1978) initiated a spatial dynamic between the living units to the narrow, series of outdoor spaces and courtyards, elements inherited from Iranian old cities. Mosques of the later twentieth century followed references to the rich Safavid heritage but also combined new variations in terms of spatial layouts and material expression. Although some works followed earlier models, other key projects embodied the harmony the rich historic prototypes with adaptations to modern construction materials and technologies, such as the Al-Ghadir Mosque (1988) in Tehran. This mosque used traditional brick as well as concrete and steel for the structure and foundations. The interplay of Postmodernist ideologies along with the revival of Iranian traditions continued to be represented as the urge for simplicity and absence of decorative ornamentation in urban buildings throughout the later part of the late 1990s, such as the Tehran Communications Building (1994) and the Armita Tower (1997). During the last two decades of the century, civic buildings and multi-family residential complexes also experienced a reinterpretation of traditional principles of design to promote a modern way of life.

As a former colony of France, Egypt had a different story. With the growth of urban centers in the 1970s, one significant work in Cairo was Abdelbaki Ibrahim's Center for Planning and Architectural Studies (1979). Ibrahim utilized modern construction technology and traditional building concepts (including scale, layering of volumes, spatial organization around a central courtyard, and local materials) to convey a revival of historic Islamic architectural traditions within a modern urban context. Although this building does not feature signature historic components such as arches, domes, or vaults, it embodies traditional values in terms of scale, proportions, building methods, and a response to local environmental and cultural needs. The last decade of the century witnessed major economic growth in urban centers, and therefore created a demand for new expressions of the built environment by local and international architects. Based on Western influences, numerous commercial projects experimented with visual dynamics of the façade, as displayed by high-profile urban projects including the Factory and Exhibition Hall of Oriental Weavers of Ramadan City (1994) and the Headquarters of Faisal Bank of Cairo (2000). On the other hand, public and residential projects such as the Headquarters of Oriental Weavers (1994) and the Khan Commercial and Recreation Center (1999), employed an eclectic approach of traditional design methods featuring the proportion of spatial organization, arches, and motifs, along with concrete and contemporary construction techniques. In addition, in the 1990s, Western postmodernist trends were visible in major public works displaying historical revival through the progress of ideologies and technology, such as in the case of the Nile Gallery (1997).

In Syria, an increasing amount of local architecture and engineering firms, new building typologies of multi-family housing, public, educational, sports, civic, and cultural buildings were introduced. Works such as the Martyr Basil al-Asad Sport City in Aleppo (1980) and Dar al-Asad Cultural Center in Raqqa (1983) opened doors to the building of modern typologies with new construction technologies. New design approaches and construction methods were explored by famed Syrian architects including Mo-

staphia Hikmat Yazji and Abdel Munim Hirbli, who rejected traditional ornamentation methods and instead followed Western design influences and concrete structural systems. Later buildings such as the Damascus School of Architecture (1982) and the Latakia Sports Complex (1987) were constructed entirely out of reinforced concrete and followed Modernist trends of the adherence to geometric form. Other large-scale public projects of the later half of the twentieth century, such as the Syrian General Insurance Company Building (1984), also featured modern formal sensibilities, materials, and structural systems. These, however, incorporated traditional principles of central courtyards and gardens as an inherent part of the spatial configurations. Syria's neighbor, Lebanon, followed almost the same chronology in its development of modernism. Throughout various building typologies, projects like Pine Forest Mosque (1968) and Harissa Cathedral (1970) marked decades of reflection on modernist principles within the local context. These buildings featured the incorporation of regional traditional elements such as central courtyard plan configurations, solid-to-void relationships, and arch components. Through the foundation of various legislative agencies and the growing need for implementation of urban infrastructure, the last three decades resulted in several iterations of city planning for Beirut. Numerous topics like public space, infrastructure, and residential districts were reviewed through the city's master plan in order to create a city filled with rich historical traditions within a changing, progressive society.

In Saudi Arabia, two modernist and classicist approaches proceeded around the same time. As part of a commission to revitalize the New Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, the Ruwais Mosque (1989) by local architect Abdelwahed Al-Wakil was built to embody a sense of contemporary style within a strict set traditional vocabulary. While both were constructed using traditional materials and methods, and comprised of symbolic *minarets,* domes, and vaults, the striking asymmetrical plan and sculptural quality of the parabolic roof form mark the departure from the historical prototypes. Al-Wakil's later mosque projects in Jeddah, including the Suleiman Mosque (1988) and Azizeyah Mosque (1988) were noted as becoming religious and monumental icons within a growing modern Islamic city. In addition to the construction of mosques, several modern building typologies within Saudi Arabia's urban centers have captured the essence of traditional architectural symbolism while catering to current functional needs. The Saudi Development Fund Building in Riyadh by Urbahn and Coile (1976-1981) is one modernist work that features a large central internal atrium. Iterations of courtyard-types were continued in numerous projects in the later twentieth century, including Henning Larsen's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Building (1985). In addition to the large central indoor atrium, Larsen's monumental project also referred to local architectural traditions in terms of utilizing the massive volumes and the dynamic use of natural light within the interior spaces.

The use of traditional symbolism is somewhat present in the design of high-rise buildings within dense urban settings, such as the National Commercial Bank of Jeddah (1977-1984) by Gordon Bunshaft. This striking tower is comprised of three solid components that form a vertical triangle, marked by three large punctured voids. Bunshaft's expression of the traditional courtyard typology is manifested in this tower's distinct spatial configuration, which highlights groups of atria along the vertical height with glass walls facing the internal courtyard. Constructed of steel and pre-cast concrete with travertine finishing, this skyscraper is known for its use of pure geometric form to serve a functional purpose. However, the dominance of pure geometry and the use of reinforced concrete forms from Western influences were manifested in projects such as Rowlett and Scott's University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran (1969-1982) and Kenzo Tange's Royal Palace in Jeddah (1983). The Hajj Terminal (1982) designed by Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) in collaboration with Fazlur Rahman Khan, was another such example of a developing building typology that resulted from an increasing economy and growing need for air travel. Marked by the distinct character tensile roof and structural components symbolizing ancient nomadic tent structures, the Hajj Terminal was another noted project that utilized the latest technological capacities, while incorporating abstractions of local architectural heritage. These recent examples in Saudi Arabia have not only become landmarks within the modern urban context, but are architectural reinterpretations of traditional building components for a current building typology.[5]

Like Saudi Arabia, architecture in the Persian Gulf region suddenly developed after the growth of the oil economy in the 1970s. In Kuwait, traditional

architectural vocabulary (including spatial layout, formal elements, proportion, arches, dome, color, and ornamental components of earlier regional precedents) combined with geometric rhythm and contemporary materials (mainly reinforced concrete) in the Sief Palace (1983) and the Kuwait State Mosque (1983). Other civic projects such as National Parliament Building (1979-1984), and the Headquarters for the Regional Arab Organization Building (1983-1987) exploited the capabilities of modern materials and structural systems to express Arab traditional components. In addition to the rising demand for these building typologies, water towers held a significant physical, symbolic, economic, and architectural role in the desert landscape. The use of a modern distribution system, as seen in Kuwait Water Towers by Sune Lindström and Maleneand Bjoern (1977) utilized contemporary building technologies to become landmarks. The last two decades of the century featured the construction of several multi-story urban buildings by both native and foreign firms, including the Al-Ahli Bank (1987) and the Audit Bureau (1989). New forms and contemporary technologies (prefabricated components and curtain wall glass elements) were continually explored through urban projects such as Al-Othman Center (1985-1994) and the Oil Sector Complex (1998-2000).

With a mixed history of British and Ottoman rule, Qatar claimed independence in 1971. Similar to other countries in this region, projects built during after 1970s in Qatar involved the challenge of abstracting the historical architectural traditions (such as rhythm, volumetric relationships, and conditions of natural light) within the use of contemporary design language and material palette, as in the case of the reconstruction of the Doha National Museum (1975) and the VIP Guest Palaces (1975). Other religious buildings that also combined regional design principles with modern approaches include the Um Said Mosque (1981) and the Oman ibn Affan Mosque (1984). The campus plan of University of Qatar (1983-1985) consisted of dominant Modernist principles of the grid plan configurations, rigid geometric order, and concrete construction. However, the university's architect, Kamal El-Kafrawi, also incorporated local historic forms (inspired by the ancient wind towers), courtyard plans, and the controlled use of natural light as a response to the cultural and climatic contexts. Other iconic buildings built in the later 1900s such as the Gulf Organization

for Industrial Consulting Building (1984) and the Doha Sheraton Hotel (1984-1985) explored innovative vertical forms based on traditional structures and have become landmarks of the state.

Marked by tall wind towers, courtyard plans, and dense development along narrow streets, architectural components of traditional housing of the Middle East were constructed as a reaction to the local humid climate in the UAE. However, following the initial growth of the oil industry and importation of new materials such as cement, local forms and building traditions were replaced by cement block construction and modern forms. Following offshore oil production in 1969, Dubai faced a surge in commercial buildings, housing, and urban infrastructure. The demand for international travel resulted in the gradual construction of the Dubai International Airport (1970-1980). Projects such as the Rashid Hospital (1972), New Dubai Hospital (1978), and the Town Hall Complex (1979), not only marked the import of Western modernist ideas e.g., rigorous geometric proportions, modular rhythms, functionalism, and structural expression) and standardized construction methods but also initiated new building typologies that were required for a growing city. The 1980s continued to experience urban growth, including infrastructure projects and buildings that referred to the social and cultural components of the traditional city, including the Diwan of the Emir (1987), the Naif Market (1988), and the Jumeirah Beach Park (1989). The steady financial success of the 1990s led to a dynamic change in the skyline and overall cityscape through the construction of countless new towers and urban complexes. These buildings combined postmodernist trends with references to local traditions and accomplished new engineering feats by using steel and reinforced concrete, such as evident in the Al Attar Tower (1997) and the iconic Burj Al Arab Hotel Tower (1994-1999).

The pace of construction and development in the late twentieth century raised concerns regarding the destruction of old urban fabrics and necessitated strategic major decisions to preserve the historic heritage of the Middle East. Without any doubt, any development plan should apply a clear methodology to preserve historical heritage.[6] Although conservation and development seem to pursue different paths, experience in the Islamic world has shown that faster and more effective progress de-

pends on a partnership between these two.[7] Cultural conservation in Muslim societies often related to nationalist movements, especially after the 1930s, when Western archeologists and historians were hired by governments in the region to explore and rewrite national histories.[8] The construction of modernist boxes in these Middle Eastern cities, however, gradually threatened the life of old urban fabrics and historic buildings, many of which were destroyed or harmed as a consequence of careless decision making. Islamic scholar, Mohammed Arkoun, explained that the damages to several precious parts of the vast cultural patrimony confirm that new tools were needed to correctly address the question of conservation in Muslim societies. Before considering technical or historical aspects of restoration and conservation, mechanisms and collective forces should be defined to operate conservation as a cultural activity.[9] Three levels of efforts that could hugely impact conservation projects include: public cultural development and education, the leadership of an educated minority, and the pressure of the world community.[10]

Conservation is a cultural enterprise, which needs to be evaluated through the perspectives of tradition and community, as well as a universal concern for aesthetic messages delivered by monuments or landscapes.[11] Michael Welbank, in his analysis of the conservation projects in Cairo, mentioned two problems: the absence of priorities for the Antiquities Organization and the lack of coordination of action between conservationists and local authorities. In his critique of Sana'a conservation projects, he stressed the importance of finding a middle course and give and take policy. What distinguishes the conservation of urban areas from the conservation of monuments is that the urban areas are inhabited and used by people. Because of the population of urban areas and their dynamism, these spaces cannot be viewed as physical objects and, as the intermixtures of activity and setting, they cannot be preserved without the motivation and support of the society.[12] If the reasons behind urban development are more material, the reasons for conservation are more ideological. Buildings as reflections of national glory can carry pride and unity within their communities or nations.[13] Insufficient public awareness, a lack of focus among local governments, alien and elite sources which make conservation external to the area, and the dearth of funds all present a challenge to conserving urban environments.

CONCLUSION

After a wave of rapid economic growth resulting from an increase oil prices, there were great opportunities for international architects and construction firms. However, this age is still characterized by discontinuity, irregularity, lack of hope for any type of utopia, and impermanence. Such sense of temporariness became much more evident after the recent financial crisis in the construction industry in cities such as Dubai. Nowadays, the market seems to be the most determining factor in the development of architecture. The homogenization of architecture in the Middle East has been in conflict with the diversity of cultures and societies. This tension between capitalism's global logic of similarity and the national logic of difference has been complicated in the field of architecture. The growth of economy, commercialism, consumerism, and global capitalism of the recent decades has made this region a perfect place for architects to test their creativity. In such chaotic environment, many architects react arrogantly to the contextual issues in an attempt to define their own professional identities. Without established building traditions, architects must take advantage of the opportunity to rebuild everything in new cities like Dubai or Qatar. The absence of influential planning and the brutality of capitalist speculation have made oil cities collections of eclectic buildings that had no relationship with local cultures. This trend was exacerbated without any systematic consideration of environmental concerns which are taken more seriously in recent years. Nevertheless, now the problem lies in the depth of the environmentalist movement, which appears to become more and more dominant in the next decades.

ENDNOTES

1   Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (ed.), Questions of Cultural Identity, (New York: Sage Publishers, 1996), p. 17.
2   Ibid., p. 25-26.
3   Ibid., p. 251.
4   Ibid., p. 252.
5   Mohammad Gharipour and Anitha Deshamudra, "Contemporary Architecture in the Middle East (1900 - 2000)," Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, edited by Orlando Patterson (New York: Sage Publishers, to be published in 2011).
6   Michael Welbank, (1983). "Conservation and Development," Development and Urban Metamorphosis, Volume 1: Yemen at the Cross-Roads. Evin, Ahmet (ed.), (Singapore: Concept Media/The Aga Khan Award

for Architecture, 1983), p.10.
7   Michael Welbank, p.16.
8   Mohammed Arkoun, "The Meaning of Cultural
Conservation in Muslim Societies," Architectural and
Urban Conservation in the Islamic World. Abu H.
Imamuddin and Karen R. Longeteig (eds.), (Geneva:
The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 1990), p.25.
9   Mohammed Arkoun, p.26.
10   Michael Welbank, p.11.
11   Mohammed Arkoun, p.29.
12   Michael Welbank, p.9.
13   Mohammed Arkoun, ibid.