

# INTERROGATING THE ARCHITECTURAL CONSCIENCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the increasingly intrusive aspect of ‘ugliness’ marring the architectural urban built environment today focusing on the underlying connotations of the inherent mindset. Questions arise as to why, who or what is responsible and what can be done about it? A wide literature review, addressing this issue from varying standpoints, is presented here as supporting evidence of this persistent trend of ‘ugliness’ defacing our cities and negatively affecting the quality of life since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century and the time of Ruskin. Findings confirm a direct link between the visible aspect of ugliness and the mindset of society. Modernity, tradition, the role of the architect, architecture and the dilemmas facing the architectural practice today are visited. Issues of ethics, morality, aesthetic values, and general wellbeing appear pertinent. Maintaining individual identity appears as a valid need. It is surmised that there is no singular all-encompassing solution to suit all but that each society, through its unique cultural and geographic environment, potentially holds within its own heritage the remedy; an example being the Muslim Society which has a rich heritage and is governed by well documented principles. The aim of this paper is to continue to emphasize the urgency of the problem and proposes that the route to salvation starts from within; in the mind. Attainment of knowledge and revitalizing traditional values are seen as conducive to a practical solution. This is especially significant in the current globalization and technological advancement.

**Keywords:** aesthetic, architect, architecture, cities, Muslim Society, Ruskin, tradition, ugliness

## **INTRODUCTION**

As an architect, I find the issue of ugliness in our cityscapes disturbing and intriguing; one that requires in-depth scrutiny and immediate intervention. Urbanization is growing promising a proliferation of the problem. According to a UN estimate, between 2011 and 2050 the urban population is expected to increase by 72% (3.6 to 6.3 billion); that is 67.7% of the predicted total world population by 2050 (9.3 billion) compared to 51.4% in 2011 (United Nations, 2012: p.1). Along with the unhappy state of the cities, residents appear to be in a constant state of unease

rushing around their daily activities often showing signs of distress especially in the unforgiving traffic that is a hallmark of the times. One can say that there is a definite universally recognized predicament transpiring in cities today that is valid and urgent. This paper examines the characteristics of the attendant mindset and seeks to validate the problem through a review of relevant literature addressing the correlation between the built environment of cities and the wellbeing of its inhabitants and is based on select literary material as surveys, research studies and journalistic articles.

Aesthetic problem appears to be universal seemingly associated more with contemporary urban settings, particularly cities. The word 'aesthetic' is most commonly associated with the appreciation of beauty. Scruton (Dooley, 2009: p.137), who specializes in aesthetics, describes it as a state of mind; "there is a state of mind, an attitude, a stance towards the world, for which we have borrowed, under the influence of Enlightenment philosophers, a Greek word that means something quite different. *Aesthesis* denotes sensation or perception". I tend to agree with this more commodious definition. The online Etymology Dictionary defines the roots of the word aesthetic as "from Greek *aisthetikos* 'sensitive, perceptive', from *aisthanesthai* "to perceive (by the senses or by the mind), to feel." I view the perception of beauty as a positive aesthetic experience, unlike ugliness; beauty conjures happy feelings and ugliness evokes unhappy ones. Beauty brings pleasure while ugliness breeds discontent. Ugliness can be described simply as an absence of or lack of appreciation of beauty. Elucidations pertaining to the perceptions of beauty and ugliness have baffled philosophers since time immemorial and continue to do so to-date; however, one thing is true and it is that when one encounters beauty it is immediately felt.

The aesthetic experiences of cities today continue to conjure the same feelings of distaste as it did last century. The word ugliness, as extreme as it may sound, crops up quite often. The architectural critic Ada Huxtable (1964) writes:

*“The crisis in our cities can be stated in very simple terms; they are becoming increasingly hideous. Underneath the ugliness and often causing it are many real ills brought on by overwhelming social and economic changes and population pressures since the war. The cities are sick and urban renewal is government applied first aid.”*

The term ‘ills’ and reference to cities as ‘sick’, clearly implicate the mindset in the aesthetic crisis of cities. Scruton (2009) writes that *“beauty seems no longer to have the significance that once it had’ and attributed the “man-made ugliness”* of city centres to the work of modern architects. Yet another very curious read claims that *“First we killed God. Then it was nature, and after that history. Now it is architecture”* (Hume, 2012). This clearly implicates, again, the mindset in the ‘death’ of architecture. The relevance of such a statement reflects a viable description of the modern mentality that has veered off from the stability of religion and tradition, which are perhaps the two pillars necessary for the human mind to learn how to respect and maintain the environment. This view is maintained by Nasr (1973, pp. 93-109) who says:

*“...it might be said that the environmental crisis, as well as the psychological imbalance of so many men and women, the ugliness of the urban environment and the like, are the results of the attempt of man to live by bread alone, to ‘kill all the Gods’ and announce his independence of heaven.”*

The destruction of God, nature, history and architecture is also attested through the proliferation of the word ‘pollution’ that is cultivating more specific physiognomies, such as ‘*noise pollution*’ and ‘*visual pollution*’. Perhaps now the terms ‘pollution of the senses’ or ‘sensuous pollution’ can be reinforced to describe a situation in which all the senses are disturbed at once. Further testimony to the global impact of pollution is the present-day hot topic of sustainability where architecture and construction are seen as the leading contributors to both the problem and the solution.

## ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM

### Through the eyes of Ruskin, Scruton and El Wakil

Symptoms of the disarray of urban aesthetics are universal and, by many indications, seem to be an outcome of modernity. The opinions of Ruskin, over a century ago, and those of Scruton and El Wakil, both contemporary voices, share a similar repulsion towards the architectural built environment of their time and all three impugn modernity and its attendant mindset. It is interesting to note that since the early nineteenth century up to today, the twenty first century, architecture appears to be suffering the impact of modernity without repose.

Ruskin's insight into the problems created by modernization still holds today. His publication, "Poetry of Architecture" (Ruskin and Phusin, 1855: p.83) stresses the nobility of the science of architecture by referring to it as not being merely a science of the "compass and the rule" but that

*"..it is, or ought to be, a science of feeling more than of rule, a ministry to the mind more than the eye. If we consider how much less the beauty and majesty of a building depend upon its pleasing certain prejudices of the eye, that upon its rousing certain trains of meditation in the mind, it will show in a moment how many intricate questions of feeling are involved in the raising of an edifice; it will convince us of the truth of a proposition, which might at first have appeared startling, that no man can be an architect who is not a metaphysician."*

Ruskin describes aspects of the mendacious characteristics of the buildings of his time as

*"plaster and stucco ... substituted for granite and marble; rods of splashed iron for columns of verd-antique; and the wild struggle after novelty, the fantastic is mistaken for the graceful, the complicated for the imposing, superfluity or*

*ornament for beauty, and its total absence for simplicity...”*

Buildings today suffer lack of harmony in function and form and a senseless haphazard copy paste adaptation in design, structure and finishes. To use Ruskin’s words “we have pinnacles without height, windows without light, columns with nothing to sustain, and buttresses with nothing to support.” These descriptions pretty much sum up the status quo of our contemporary architectural scene today.

Roger Scruton is a consistent critic of the modern city. In his article “The Modern Cult of Ugliness” (2009), he blames the “triumph of function over form” as being the main cause of the dehumanization of towns and cities by “drifting away from beauty.” He further sustains that “*what we look at, listen to and read affects us in the deepest part of our being. Once we start to celebrate ugliness, then we become ugly, too.*” He goes on that the “*official uglification of our world,*” is due to the “*mania for modernization*” that is doing away with “*beliefs that have stood the test of time for millennia*”.

In another article titled “How to change the world” (2013), Scruton describes the modern buildings of Amsterdam:

*“The architecture that litters the roadsides from the airport to the edge of the old city is architecture of nowhere. It does not create a place, a dwelling, a settlement. It lies there by the side of the road as if some giant had dropped it as he strode across the landscape.”*

He suggests that it is a sense of “detachment” that is the root of “loneliness and isolation” of the modern-day city dweller; detachment from obligations and responsibilities to the community. He refers to the works of John Bowlby and Hegel, stating that “humans stand in need of attachment. It is the condition from which responsibility grows – responsibility for oneself, and also for those to whom one is bound in relations of dependence. Scruton (2013), surmises that the “moral

development of mankind” is dependent on the satisfaction of the innate human “need for attachment”. He suggested that the solution lies in resisting change, “in the name of what we all secretly want, which is to re-attach ourselves to the community, to the place and for the form of life that is ours.” In his article, “Cities for Living” (2008), Scruton touches on the pedagogical failings of architecture, blaming the modernists for “vandalizing” the curriculum of architecture by ensuring the elimination of the “classical discipline.”

He states that;

*“European architecture schools no longer taught how to understand moldings, or how to draw existing monuments, urban streets, the human figure, or such vital aesthetic phenomena as the fall of light on a Corinthian capital or the shade of a campanile on a sloping roof; they no longer taught appreciation for facades, cornices, doorways, or anything else that one could glean from a study of Serlio or Palladio”.*

The area of pedagogy in architecture, beyond the scope of this paper, is a crucial issue that I believe requires re-evaluation.

Contemporary architect and staunch traditionalist, Abdel Wahed El Wakil, blames the loss of traditional values and the deviation from religion for the sad state of the built environment today. He proposes that tradition is the single defense against the current deviation and that the only way forward is to re-establish the essence of religion through the maintenance of the chain of tradition. El Wakil (Hutt, 1984; p. 26) relates the loss of tradition to the loss of identity and maintains that;

*“Change is intrinsic to all living organisms and institutions, but the anchor of change is continually safeguarded by tradition. Without this safeguard, change becomes not part of a cyclic progression but a kind of centrifugal violence that disrupts and fragments the arts, and none more*

*than architecture.”*

El-Wakil suggests designing within tradition as the solution, saying that “Only through the re-establishment of our spiritual identity can the dynamic and continuous process of consolidation and reorganization be truly assured” (Hutt, 1984: p. 28).

Having witnessed the effects of the construction boom in the Arab cities of the Middle East, El Wakil, in the Future Arab Cities Summit in Qatar (2012) blamed the spectacular pace of urban development of robbing the Arab city of its physical uniqueness and identity and destroying its cultural and environmental balance. He claimed that it is a deviation and not a development that is “failing economically, socially and environmentally”, and one which has resulted in confusing and disorienting architects practicing in the Arab and Muslim World. El-Wakil sees the Arab city as a sprawling giant adapted more to the scale of the motorway rather than to that of man. He blames the blatant imposition of imported Western-style developments that have proved unable to cope with the specific cultural and environmental requirements of Islamic Societies. He explains that the application of these foreign systems to Arab cities and the unprecedented speed of development did not leave any chance for an evolutionary process, where new technical methods could be tested and adapted in order to respect the laws of the indigenous cultural system. The result is lack of a consistent and meaningful architectural urban setting that has undermined man’s continued interaction with, and attachment to his environment. In a recent interview (Young, 2012; p. 40) El Wakil said that architecture should be based on the use of archetypes “drawing on traditional architecture and lessons from the past .... a way to guard against the material mindedness, architectural ego or the spurious novelties of commercialization”, and argues for more focus on “spirit and less on pushing materials to their limits.”

## **ANALYZING THE PROBLEM**

### **The visible tangible**

The visual aspects of the problem, as I observe, demonstrate in the form of blandness, clutter and general lack of real aesthetic

beauty in architecture. This manifests in rampant eclecticism, liberal interpretation in the use of varying architectural styles and a consistent lack of attention to detail both in design and execution of works. Concrete is everywhere overwhelmingly abundant and cumbersome to look at, while greenery and natural landscapes are sparse. Houses are becoming smaller. Children are often left out of the equation and play areas are either nonexistent or insufficient. High-rise apartments are becoming the norm. On buildings, one observes the silhouettes of machinery jutting out from roofs and sprouting randomly on walls, pipes and wiring running haphazardly along building frontages and building blocks disfigured by unsightly decorations and extensions. Each building stands alone, an architectural misfit within its own individual setting as well as within the street on which it stands. Dissenting elements and flagrant decoration, where found, are expended on the exterior form in such a manner that instead of contributing to the unity of the whole, they fragment it. Concrete, due to its highly malleable nature, is formed to mimic natural materials such as brick, stone and wood, in such a randomly haphazard manner that the original qualities of the material being emulated are lost in translation appearing artificial and unbecoming. Building mass compositions lack proportion, harmony and balance; the absence of these traits is further amplified in the visual spectrum as this scenario is continuously repeated as far as the eye can see along the street.

The grid-iron planning system, a hallmark of the modern city, appears to be a key player in the proliferation of the visual problem of our city-scape. It portrays as blocks bounded by streets that are often long and straight with little curvature. David Frisby (Prakash and Kevin M. Kruse, 2008: p.29), referencing Heinrich's view of the effect of the "modern street system", says that

Heinrich, the modern street system is associated with "individual public buildings in a parade" and parallel housing rows. Instead, the location of public buildings should be interspersed with dwellings, because from them one should be able to appreciate and achieve the beautiful perspective. However, "the average public is in fact alienated from the artistic vision and at present



finds in the richly bedecked shop display windows, above whose huge reflecting glass the monumental facades swirl in the air and in the attire which on foot, in the coach or on horseback rush by and are reflected in the glass windows complete satisfaction for the enjoyment of the cityscape. But should one concede that this is a justified and justifiable taste?" Taste should be stimulated not by foreign models such as Parisian points de vue, "but by taking up again genuine, old, primal German (Urdeutsch)" examples."

Along the long streets of the typical gridiron plan and as far as the eye can see, buildings are laid in long queues vying for attention and bombarding the onlooker with a varied disarray of confusing visual stimuli. This linear layout encourages the need for uniqueness and innovation where both client and architect seek to produce structures that portray individuality regardless of aesthetics. Like a museum where each work of art, along with the name of its creator, is intentionally made to stand out and be scrutinized; our streets are becoming open exhibitions of clashing personal styles and tastes in open rampant rivalry. While one would normally visit a museum by choice and where the work of artists is not imposed on the public, architecture cannot be avoided; one is forced to endure it every second of every day!

### **Architecture; a mirror of the mind - the causative intangible**

Architecture forms the woof and warp of urban existence. Architecture is also a representation of identity in its many facets, such as religion, tradition, customs and heritage. People now generally appear to be somewhat indifferent, introverted, almost injudiciously careless, towards the environment that exists beyond their own door-step.

Based on the assumption that all action is a mirror of the mind, one can logically infer that architecture is a direct reflection of the state of mind of society. It is then only logical to link the deterioration in architectural aesthetics in cities to the universal mindset of its residents; a connection between the erosion of beauty in architecture and the attitude of the people towards their built environment.

Recent studies focusing on the impact of the built environment on the wellbeing of its residents offer valuable information on how the body and mind react to their immediate environments. Stress is a major affliction of modern city life. For example traffic congestion, so much a part of modern day city life; the long hours spent on the road take their toll on one's mental state, turning basic living efforts into struggles. This stress tends to domino effect on the rest of one's daily activities becoming a nagging issue ever present in conversations and often dictating the mood for the rest of the day as one anticipates the stress of the next rush hour. The built landscape, in its current state of ugliness, adds insult to injury as it is perceived subconsciously in the mind of the onlookers and commuters who are stuck in traffic taking it all in.

I suspect that if the cityscape was pretty it would help ease the frustrated mind of commuters just by inducing some joy in the mere perception of beauty. Stress has been linked to both physical and psychological illnesses (Abbott, 2012). It is considered "an epidemic public health concern that negatively impacts physical and mental health, including cardiovascular, gastroenterological, immunological, neurological, endocrine and mental/emotional health status." (Beil and Hanes, 2013; p. 1251). A number of Studies have indicated definite associations between the built environment and the health and happiness of city dwellers.

### **The Built environment and health**

A paper titled "How Natural and built Environments impact Human Health" (Cornell University, College of Human Ecology, 2010) on the impact of planning decisions on public health. It highlights the positive effects of nature, in terms of greenery and parks, being available both within sight and reach, in promoting wellbeing and a sense of community through social interaction. This study enforces the negative effects of the built environment; associating noise with poor reading skills of children, elevated blood pressure levels and increased stress. Poor quality housing with cold and damp interiors is linked to respiratory illnesses such as asthma. High rise living is also indicated as inducing

psychological stress especially on mothers concerned about the safety of their children and children, in turn, suffering behavioural problems as a result. The paper ends by advising individuals to take steps to enable more active interaction with nature advises citizens to ask planners to consider public health in their planning decisions.

Evans (2003: pp. 537-541) in his study, “The built environment and mental health”, stresses the direct and indirect impact of the built environment on the physical and mental health of people touching on issues of housing, crowding, noise, indoor air quality and light. Evans states that the built environment affects mental health indirectly in three main indirect ways; personal control, social support and restoration. Personal control allows people control over their surroundings and enhances their mental health; but when they lose or are deprived of this control, they develop a feeling of helplessness that is manifested in “reduced persistence” i.e. quickly giving up on tasks. On the effect of architecture on helplessness, Evans claims that ‘territoriality, the inability to monitor and regulate use of space, is related to physical environment. Tall, large structures, long interior corridors, lack of small group spaces and poor visual surveillance capability (e.g. inability to monitor entrances, places for concealment) interfere with territorial control and feelings of ownership, and are associated with both actual crime levels and fear of crime. Evans points to the fact that studies have shown a positive effect of social support on mental health and emphasized the proven healing effect of nature such as “trees, water and natural landscape” in restoring “cognitive fatigue and stress.”

### **The Built environment and happiness**

It would seem that happiness and beauty go together. A recent study titled “Understanding the pursuit of happiness in ten major cities” (Leyden, Goldberg and Michelback, 2011; pp. 862-888) associates design and the conditions in cities with happiness (survey of ten major cities: New York, London, Paris, Stockholm, Toronto, Milan, Berlin, Seoul, Beijing and Tokyo). It is based on the work of Layard (2005) titled “Big Seven” which defines seven factors affecting happiness (besides the financial and economical

statuses) namely “family relationships, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom and personal values.” Building on these factors, the findings by Leyden et al contribute additional factors, these being access to cultural and leisure amenities, ease of access to convenient public transportation, safety and security and being good places for rearing children. It suggests also that city dwellers “appear to be happier when they feel connected to the people and to the places of their cities.” Relevant findings that stand out in this study are the positive associations of happiness with time spent socializing with friends and neighbours, a feeling of security, religion and belief in a “higher power”. The instigators of this study advise urban planners, designers and policy makers to base their decisions on a more holistic approach encompassing the wellbeing of the residents in acknowledgement of the effect of governmental policies on city dwellers’ living experiences.

### **Ethics in the Architectural Practice**

Spector (2001; p. vii) addresses issues of ethics in architectural practice stating that

*Architecture’s moral mission reached the nadir of its decline in the 1970s, after the critiques of modernism formulated by Jane Jacobs and Robert Venturi unleashed a thoroughgoing repudiation of the movements moral pretensions. The revolutionary ideal of solving societal problems through design that was so vehemently proclaimed by modernism’s proponents in the heroic age of the 1930s was exposed as hollow, and the architecture profession fell into a state of ethical disarray.*

Spector suggests that the problem is basically a result of the architect’s inability to relate to contemporary issues of the users of the built environment.

In the chapter “Practice”, Spector (2001, pp. 5-6) mentions the moral responsibility of the architect towards both client and

general public stating that the role of the architect, at least partially, is “to take on the ethical dilemmas of building. By mediating between private and public demands, for instance, or by weighing the risks of technological innovation against those of stagnation, an architect puts his or her professional status on the line.” Spector affirms the architect’s reputation in society as one built on integrity and trust and that the architect’s role extends to include protecting the public at large from “the potentially devastating effects of poor and insensitive building practices.”

One cannot speak about ethics without touching upon the codes of professional conduct that have been developed by architectural entities universally as a means to ensure ethical and professional behavior and to protect the rights of the architect, clients and stakeholders. It is only worth mentioning that although the main concern is ensuring an ethical environment for the practice of the profession, these codes have done little to curb the spread of ugliness and disarray so obvious in the streets of our cities today. Their efficiency can perhaps only be said to be effective within their own narrow local and native environments and only in the existence of a policing authority to ensure adherence to the rules. Implementation of these codes starts with the architect and depends very much upon the pre-existence of moral and ethical values; public awareness of rights and dues also serves to further strengthen their effectiveness. From my own experience, it is very difficult to enforce such codes in a profession that functions within a huge and diverse arena as that of the present-day construction sector with its multitude of players and stakeholders. Ethical shortfalls are, in my opinion, conducive to unprofessional behaviours and activities that ultimately contribute to the sad state of the community at large.

### **The Afflicted mindset & the Architect**

The writings of Ruskin, Scruton, Nasr and El-Wakil suggest that the problems with architecture are rooted in a departure from tradition and religion, a trend to do away with the past and a persistent quest to innovate. Building on Scruton’s analyses, this deviated state can be held responsible for inducing an intellectual poverty that thrives on greed and an irresponsible desire to pursue

the novel for its own sake with a careless disregard for consequences; a cause celebre. It exhibits in self-indulgence, akin to a feeding frenzy that borders on gluttony which, being a deadly vice, imminently ends in malaise, prominent symptoms of which, now at the forefront of international debate, are misappropriation of the earth's natural resources and climate change topped up by the recent financial crisis. Indeed we live in an era where technology rules and man's appetite for, quicker, sleeker and more innovations does not wane and touches upon every aspect of daily living. The incessant race with time is a hallmark of the times, with people racing about no end not giving due time for gradual and steady development. There is a misinterpretation of freedoms and a lack of respect of boundaries. Ethical and moral responsibilities are compromised and should be questioned. These afflictions of the mindset, originating from within the inner depths of the human mind, radiate outwards through actions and present ultimately on the urban fabric of which architecture is a tangible representation. It becomes necessary to work towards positive change by first acknowledging the inherent faults and shortcomings.

### **The Architect today**

A recent report published by The Royal Institute of British Architects (Building Futures, 2010) queries the stance of the architect in 2025. The report estimates that 70% of the world population will be urbanized by 2050. It speculates infrastructure construction growth in emerging markets to be 128%, compared to 18% in developed markets, and that emerging markets shall experience 55% of global construction as opposed to 45% in developed markets. This clearly indicates that the weight of the market will shift towards the developing world or emerging markets. According to this report 2025 will probably see the stability of only small practices, employing a minimum of one person - serving the local market; and larger firms, employing over 400 people - serving both the local and global markets. The middle range firms employing 25-125 people are expected to disappear altogether. This report highlights the different views of Architects regarding their future roles and visions with some clearly showing an unhappiness with the label 'architect'

explaining that it held them back from expanding their field of operation. Small and large firms expressed different views with technology being a major factor; larger firms depended on advanced technologies while smaller firms expressed unease towards the pressure of having to keep up with the continuous regular upgrade of such programs. The role of the architect in future is seen to be better suited in higher level management and coordination largely due to the complexity of these technologies that would require delegation to subcontractors. Opinions tended to agree on the need for architects to develop business skills to establish their place within the construction industry as contributing team players rather than seek to reclaim lost ground. Future architects are also seen in the roles of consultants, policy makers and entrepreneurs while the contractor's role is seen to lead in construction. The future course is predicted to be led by the demands of the financial markets.

The RIBA report also presented the 'star architect'; a new marque of architect, who is technically savvy and 'innovative' as having taken centre stage producing designs intended to turn heads and inspire awe. From my perspective, generally, architects today have become more engrossed in advancing their own personal agendas, even under the pretext of sustainable design. Patrons of architecture come in many guises such as individual clients, developers, businessmen and brand owners. The architect's role has been reduced to satisfying the patrons' or client needs – more in the service of individuals and egos than of the community at large. The architect's main objective has become financial gain followed by the need to brand their own personal signature styles within a globally competitive environment. They focus on the production of the novel, that which breaks the norm, and stands out for being the record breaker and the tallest, the zigzaggiest, the most tilted, the most eye-popping etc.! Hence one finds the words 'innovative', 'novel' and 'iconic' to be directives in many architectural briefs. Add to this already perilous mindset, the additional challenges of 'green', 'sustainable' and 'eco-friendly' have given architects more excuses to further stretch their imagination, and in so doing buildings are starting to resemble huge machines and futuristic apparati that belong more in the realm of science fiction.

Advancement in technology and invention of materials have provided architects and designers with many avenues of experimentation and in the name of innovation, are producing mind bending forms and shapes having an overall tendency to shock the senses. In terms of scale, man is certainly not the benchmark! It is becoming a common trend for people to marquee buildings with familiar objects in an effort to make sense of it all and create common ground thus dubbing buildings with labels such as ‘the tornado’ (Doha, Qatar), ‘crystal’ (The Crystal– Royal Victoria Docks, London, UK), ‘the cloud’ (Seoul, Korea) etc.; none of which tells anything of the nature or function or, at times, the actual name of the development, but focuses rather on how this form reflects upon the human perception! This is a global phenomena and one often hears side comments about ‘buildings that could be anywhere’ reflecting a lack of geographic or cultural identity.

It is easy perhaps to blame the architects for gross neglect of their duties and social responsibilities; enabling patrons to lead the design by simply acting as facilitators for their whims and ambitions producing buildings that are representative of individual tastes. Perhaps the fault is with the regulatory entities that control design thus limiting the architect’s jurisdiction and upsetting the balance of power between client, architect and authorities. Perhaps all parties, and this is my belief, architects, clients and patrons of architecture as well as regulatory authorities are victims as well as perpetrators of the same afflicted mindset.

## **THE ISLAMIC URBAN SETTING**

Perhaps one way of meeting the challenges to our built environment lies in the revival of traditional values suitable to individual cultures and societies. It is probably futile trying to find a universal solution considering the unique cultural and social needs of the different societies in the world. As an example, I would like to highlight some of the qualities of the Muslim Society and how Muslim urban setting are approached in terms of design and planning.



### **Some aspects of the Urban life of Muslim Societies:**

Islamic culture has a rich tradition of art and architecture that is being neglected by contemporaneity and banished into the realm of history. Urbanity has existed since the early days of Islam with Medina as the prototype of all proceeding Islamic cities stretching from east to west across the breadth of the globe. The traditional Muslim urban form may appear, at first glance, not conform to any apparent order or geometry and is often described as chaotic; however within its intricate weave lies the essence of the Muslim way of life governed by clear values and well-defined rules. It is like a custom-tailored garment intended to clothe and protect the total body of its community and to encourage the fulfillment of man's ultimate goal in this life, which, according to the Islamic faith; is the worship of the Creator. New Urban trends have challenged traditional Muslim societal values. Muslims, not appreciating their own heritage, have nonchalantly succumbed to foreign concepts in the name of development and modernity. Adapting new ideas and systems to the vernacular by selecting what works and what doesn't, requires wisdom, restraint and knowledge. The traditional Muslim urban setting, the prototype for the modern one, is unique both in form and function.

### **The underlying values shaping the built environment of Muslim societies**

It is necessary to note that Muslims are bound by a set of values govern their way of life. Thus, wherever Muslim societies exist, their living environment reflects these basic values as Gai Eaton (1985, p. 210) so eloquently put it:

Traditional Islamic Architecture, despite a tremendous variety of styles, bears the unmistakable stamp of Islam; the traditional home and the traditional city were precisely matched to the lives of the people, who, in all their activities, followed the sunnah of the Prophet, and for this reason they facilitated the following of the sunnah, just as Arab dress facilitated the performance of the ablution and the movement in ritual prayer.

There is a defined singular role for the Muslim in this world and that is the Worship of the creator. So through every action a

Muslim is in the act of worship and this is what sets the scope of the approach to urban design and architecture to the smallest detail. Beauty is a divine attribute and should by default be inherent in all aspects of the Muslim's being and way of life.

Regarding the underlying values that govern the behavior of the Muslim, Hisham Mortada (2003, p. xix) states that

The tradition of Islam embodies principles of social organization and behavior. These principles have been established by this tradition to make life of the believers correspond to its objectives and message. Following these principles, as early Muslim societies did, creates harmonious social and physical environments, but to ignore them would violate the tradition itself and adversely affect the social and physical conditions of Muslim life. This seems to be the case in the contemporary Muslim environment, where non-traditional values and regulations are introduced and followed under the banner of modernity.

It can thus be inferred that when designing an architectural entity serving the Muslim community, it is important to understand the underlying principles of the Muslim social structure. Guided knowledge is a required pre-requisite to all sound action. Knowledge in Islam is assimilated through the channels of the Quran and the Sunna, thus there is a deep-seated tradition of excellence. The source of this information is, traditionally, the men of knowledge or the *Ulama* who, to quote Mortada (2003, p.68), are "people who possess, as well as a deep knowledge of the sources and branches of religion, proven moral qualities that will guarantee their competence." The role of the *Ulama* is cardinal in Islamic jurisprudence. Ideally this knowledge should be reflected in design codes and building regulations as references for architects and designers. This knowledge should also be incorporated in architectural pedagogical programs in Muslim societies.

Mortada (2003) explains the role of man as vicegerent of God on earth; man being responsible for the wise utilization of natural resources and preservation of the natural balance. At the level of the urban environment, Mortada affirms that Islam has provided

principles that determine the way of life of the Muslim communities and individuals in the urban environment thus regulating people's relationships with each other and with their surrounding environment. Mortada (2003, p. 56) further maintains that

The Islamic way of life, being goal oriented, is inconceivable without ordered efforts being made in accordance with Islamic values. In fact, both the Quran and Sunnah unequivocally condemn disorder in all aspects of life. They request taking all the means and making organized actions in order to achieve the Islamic values.

This emphasizes an attribute of the mindset of the Muslim; that of being orderly, organized and holding values. Mortada goes on to stress, that which all Muslims acquiesce to; man's purpose in life is the worship of God. It can thus be surmised that the basic overarching rule guiding the planning process, be it in the wider area of urban planning or in the individual design of a single building or house, is the fulfilling of this purpose. Mortada (2003, p. 58) then concludes that "once these requirements are fulfilled, there remains wide scope for freedom of choice in planning and design."

Regarding urban planning principles and regulations, below are some relevant excerpts from Mortada's book (2003, pp. 60-62):

Enhancement of the application of Shariah: by maintaining the urban environment that helps Muslim inhabitants to perform their religious obligations to the best of their abilities.

Reflection of the Concept of Ummah: this means that the built environment should be more socially oriented or should provide the means that improve social relationships and interaction.

Prevention of harming public rights based on the Prophetic declaration 'la dharar wa la dhirar' which translates simply into no harm and no reciprocal harm and means one should do no harm to others nor reciprocating of harm. This is a major value especially ingrained in the built environment as it protects

property and ownership rights, public rights, private rights among others.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is an urgent and dire need to exercise constraint in order to maintain the nobility of freedom of creativity for the designer while respecting the rights of the others in the community, hence preserving the dignity of man in his living environment and the sanctity of mother earth. Herein lies the rub – maintaining this cosmic balance while achieving progress. The architectural profession has a major role to play, but perhaps it is only fair to say that sharing the moral obligation and responsibility of the built environment, at the forefront, are the local regulatory bodies, the patrons of architecture and the intellectuals.

The current mindset of society in general, in its disoriented, state is incapable of real progress without some sort of clarity of purpose and unity in direction. With respect to architecture and the revival of the essence of beauty, man cannot be a source of creativity apart from nature and tradition. The wisdom of the ages is neglected in the race for creating the new. This misdirected mindset is responsible in the end for a culture of man-made artificiality that is producing ugliness and a lack of appreciation of real beauty. A deviation has occurred that needs to be righted, and this can be done by making an educated choice, by acknowledging the existence of these afflictions of the mindset and by taking deliberate steps to rewire the mind.

The route to redemption lies in raising awareness of the rich cultural heritage and tradition already available and using it as a foundation for building the present and planning the future urban settings in all societies; bridging the gap between the intellectuals and the masses by encouraging a continuous flow of information and sharing of knowledge with the masses is important; and creating customized codes to regulate architectural practice.

There is no single global solution to the problems faced by urbanity today – even though one may expect the same ethical basic attributes and obligations to be binding for architects

wherever they practice. Architectural pedagogy should be revisited. Architectural codes of practice need to be more suited to the society they serve. Architects need to develop business skills in order to do their job effectively considering globalization and technological advancement. Architects should focus on man's wellbeing on the ground through identity and culture and seek to produce architecture that encourages a sense of attachment and is conducive to happiness.

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