

ARCHITECTURE BEYOND ARCHITECTS

The following conversation is excerpted from the Master Jury's five days of debate in June 1995.

Luis Monreal: What is positive and unique about the Sana'a conservation is two things: good planning and the capacity to encompass the efforts of governmental, inter-governmental, private, multilateral and bilateral organisations through UNESCO and through the co-operation between various countries and Yemen. In that respect it is a model approach. The local people have undertaken, from the very beginning, the direction and management of the project, and this is essential for its success: the utilities problem, water, paving the streets, and giving a new look to the urban face that results in a change of behaviour of the inhabitants. The restoration of a critical mass of buildings is the core of energy that will spread this good example throughout the city. So I think the strategy of the project is excellent. There are, of course, problems that remain to be solved. One has to recognise that the number of buildings restored is limited; one would like to see more private housing restored by the inhabitants. There are questions of traffic and garbage which are difficult to solve. They do not require infrastructural measures, they require a change of mentality, an education of the population, but I think this process is in motion. I think we have to take some risk, because the message to be sent through awarding a project like this is very important. I think that for many issues the Sana'a project is a lot more relevant than the two Uzbekistan projects. Sana'a has more methodology and more elements that would help to spread a message of good urban conservation and rehabilitation throughout the world.

Ismail Serageldin: Everything you said about Sana'a applies to Bukhara. It is a community-driven exercise, not a bunch of foreigners who are doing it. Some of the problems that Sana'a hasn't been able to tackle yet have been successfully tackled in Bukhara. I am trying to see your

judgement as to the differences between Sana'a and Bukhara. Would it be fair to say that some of the problems that Sana'a has not yet successfully tackled have been successfully tackled in Bukhara?

Monreal: One of the major differences in context between Bukhara and Sana'a is that Sana'a has a problem of over-population which is probably not the same in Bukhara. Secondly, the amount of resources obtained from external sources in Sana'a seems far superior to that in Bukhara.

Peter Eisenman: I thought that Hafsia, if anything, was the maintenance of an historic infrastructure: even though it may have been added to, it was trying to maintain the infrastructure. It is really a matter of rejuvenation of the historic city, not the restoration of a city. What you see in Hafsia isn't a single historic monument. It is a kind of urban development scheme. I would like to talk about Hafsia in relationship to these other two projects, because if we are going back to the notion of trying to find an alternative to western influence or architectural fundamentalism, restoration would play into the hands of traditional discourse. Hafsia seems to be an alternative that doesn't merely stabilise the old but transforms an existing texture into a contemporary condition.

Serageldin: What is at risk in Hafsia is the encroachment of the modern city into the old city – the medina – and destroying it. The result of successive efforts has been to bring back a different pattern of people and economic activities with a mixture of low-, middle- and high-income groups and, ultimately, architectural expression. Hafsia is also dealing with the link between contemporary economic activities and a traditional city core, which in most of these cities has been under attack.

Eisenman: The issue is precisely that. The reason more of these towns are not being saved is because, in one sense,

people who are interested in restoration are seen to be standing in the way of progress. The Hafsia model is far more interesting than the restoration model because it is an attempt to be progressive while holding on to the existing fabric. The fabric, I think, is what we are after, as opposed to the 'monument'.

Serageldin: Except that in most of the Muslim world today, the patrimony of the heritage that we have, in terms of monuments, is under tremendous assault. This is one of the biggest concerns. Our patrimony is being destroyed. In Cairo, for example, we had 522 listed monuments in 1948, and more than 140 have disappeared over the last forty years because conservation efforts are not sufficiently recognised. The people who struggle for them are not seen as doing something worthwhile. The Aga Khan Award has done a tremendous amount throughout the Muslim world in raising consciousness about restoration.

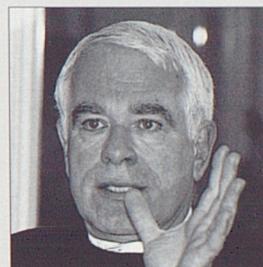
Mohammed Arkoun: In discussing Hafsia, it is interesting for conceptualising how tradition or conservation can be used today, but I remind you that Hafsia has already received an award.

Serageldin: The incremental scheme in Pakistan is the only scheme that has convincingly reached the poorest segments of society, that has successfully been able to help the homeless – of whom there are millions throughout the Muslim world – and given them property and the right to shelter. The very nice Aranya scheme may have more architectural merit, but the ability of the incremental scheme to screen the homeless in a reception area and then bring them in – in a way that keeps speculators out – actually empowers the poorest people. It is unique.

Charles Jencks: Quality in architecture also has to do with the design of a good programme. You can't have good architecture without a good programme. That is why the



Serageldin



Eisenman

METU programme for re-forestation is also important. Architectural policy is as important as quality.

Monreal: Here we are not talking purely about iconic architecture but about conceptual architecture. The merit of the incremental scheme is the concept that works; not architectural quality, but conceptual quality. This is a situation in which architecture goes beyond architects. This is a new situation. The architectural profession has a hard time understanding it, which we should recognise.

Eisenman: The conceptual level we are talking about is beyond the aesthetic or the iconic. The question is whether you premiate something because it has a concept without achieving any other goals. I was on a jury at Princeton and one student put together a cemetery and a shopping centre, and the ideologues said, 'Oh that's fantastic,' this new concept of commerce. I said, 'What about the architecture?' And the argument in this academic circle was, 'It's not important what the architecture is if they get the concept right.' We have to be very careful not to go overboard and say, 'Yes, the concept is right and the architecture doesn't matter'.

Serageldin: Can we go back to the two low-income housing schemes? Aranya is very interesting in its wilful efforts to deal with low-income community building, integrated with other groups to create an architectural language and to give it an infrastructural context. But I am not convinced it does quite the same thing as the incremental scheme. Although it has a physical incrementalism, it has not been able really to reach the bottom layer, which is the biggest problem that we are seeing and are going to see. We know that population growth over the next twenty-five years will be two billion, almost ninety per cent of which will be in the urban areas of the developing countries. Most of them are in Africa and Asia, and a very large number of these people will be homeless, traditionally the most difficult

groups to include and to reach. The incremental scheme is unique because it has actually reached the homeless, not those who have a shelter and a shack. And it has reached them in a way that from all accounts is financially viable, which is important. Many of the earlier awards on social schemes turned out to be totally dependent on subsidies, so the model was not viable and could not be replicated. The incremental scheme is capable of replication on a large scale, and it reverses authority from government to the people. In that sense, it deserves recognition. On the other hand, I see the added architectural value in the case of the Doshi scheme at Aranya, but I see them as two separate schemes, in the same way as Sana'a and Bukhara are two separate schemes, each of which brings something different to the table.

Eisenman: If we want to have a category of 'the poor', some of the other projects that addressed the poor found a better architectural solution. I am worried about the message in terms of, 'Is this a project of excellence?' or, 'Is it only excellent in the sense that it reached the poor?' which is a social message. I am not against that message, but I am curious about it.

Serageldin: Providing shelter for the masses, the tens of millions who are going to overrun the cities, is a major challenge. I think that of all the projects we have seen, in terms of ability to reach the poorest, the incremental one is best. Hafsia is doing something very different. Hafsia is creating the dynamics which bring in a mix of enough middle- and high-income people into the old medina and therefore generate the subsidies that enable the whole thing to function.

Jencks: If we reward policy things, we must make it clear that we are not rewarding the architecture. We must make that clear.

Mehmet Konuralp: The incremental scheme is a far

better choice, in my opinion, because it covers most of the aspects that we are concerned with, and it is a very successful scheme, addressing a far broader communal periphery than Aranya does. I have doubts about the architecture of Aranya, because the end result isn't really anything we can speak of.

Monreal: Aranya, besides having some architecture, also has successfully created a social fabric between different religions and the trans-social structure. We don't have to choose between the two, because it is no less superior.

Konuralp: When people are poor, they have far fewer choices of living in their own ghettos than do the rich. Whether Muslim, Christian or Buddhist, their primary concern is shelter. Does the Aranya project really blend these different religions in one scheme, or did it just happen because everybody is poor and everybody is looking for shelter? Religion or clan always comes after the need for shelter. It is like hunger; people are hungry before they subscribe to any group identity.

Nayyar Ali Dada: The incremental scheme delivers the social programme; Aranya gives guidance beyond that in trying to provide aesthetic quality, but in poor societies the life-saving part of shelter is more important than aesthetics.

Konuralp: The incremental scheme is a far better prototype, or at least is bound to be a better example in various aspects of covering the problem. It has more to communicate to similar programmes in Turkey and other parts of the world where we are facing this kind of problem. Doshi's is a limited exercise, with more architectural merit than social and organisational aspects, which I think are more important.

Darmawan Prawirohardjo: They are quite different problems, and each has its own merit.



Konuralp



Monreal