OPINIONS COMPARED
(Claudio D'Amato & Antonino Terranova)

THE MANY VOICES OF CULTURE IN ISLAM

At the 2nd International Exhibition of Architecture in the Venice Biennal

The division into periods practised by western society to describe the history of architecture (Greek, Roman, Renaissance, Baroque, Modern architecture, etc.) normally refers to time parameters or to concepts of nation or of style. The definition of «Islamic architecture», on the contrary, differs because it takes its origin and its legitimacy from a religious basis which at the same time is also political and social.

This basis, for Islam, ends by becoming a supranational cultural connotation: Islamic architecture, in fact, extends over an extremely vast area straddling the three continents of the ancient world, stretching from the Straits of Gibraltar to the mouth of the Ganges.

In quantitatively different forms according to the history of the individual countries, it is present in Europe (Spain, Italy), Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania) and in Asia (Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India).

To a number of experts one may also speak of Islamic «style», that is, of unitary features, based on the occurrence of linguistic, typological and formal elements found continuously in the course of time and binding together present day and historical production.

The merit of the Second International Exhibition of Architecture of the Venice Biennal organized by Paolo Portoghesi, devoted to the architecture of Islamic countries, was that of providing for the first time a vast and complex panorama which finally makes it possible to gain a precise orientation on such questions (see the catalogue by various authors, ARCHITETTURA NEI PAESI ISLAMICI, Venice, Edizioni La Biennale, 1982, 308 pages). Indeed, this panorama, although necessarily summary in spite of its 1500 meters of linear length (Ludovico Micara and Attilio Petruccioli performed a task of reconnaissance and documentation exemplary in its vast coverage and completeness) furnished useful instruments to understand with sufficient clarity the bond of continuity between past and present in Islamic architecture, and the problem of its originality of expression and its «style».

The ample section devoted to restoration, lovingly supervised by Paolo Cuneo, bore witness, from the particular optic of operations to safeguard the architectural heritage, not only to a culture capable of reflecting on itself and of preparing the tools for the study thereof, but above all it generously show to the public at large the incredible richness of a world of forms which in certain aspects can be identified as the direct heir of the great tradition of Roman architecture. Think only of the importance and the role of the cupola space and the theme of its unity in Islamic architecture. Perhaps the best evidence of this is found in the architectures of Sinan, which the extraordinary work of survey and measurement carried out by the team led by Romano Burelli restored to us in a series of fascinating and impeccable drawings.

The section devoted to Islamic architecture in Sicily and to the continuity of its tradition in urban structures, looked after by Enrico Guidoni, enabled the fruitful results which the interweaving of different cultures has always brought about to be appreciated.

But this exhibition’s contribution was above all that of giving the lie to the false, reductive equation according to which architecture in the Islamic lands today is the architecture of petro-dollars.

In the last few years, characterized by the world level fuel crisis, in fact ideological and political motivations, in some cases not divorced from religious integralism, have induced an appreciably part of western culture to condemn en bloc, without any right of appeal, the en-
tire production of recent Islamic architecture.

Proposing an image thereof be- reft of its dignity, in having fallen for the enticements of the oil barons, was a sweeping over- generalization. The reality is, as usual, far more complex. As the Arab political front is richly articu- lated, with differences that are not mere nuances, so the architectural culture that the Islamic world today expresses is extremely diversified. First and foremost, alongside the presence of the big western consulting companies which «export» their projects and designs from abroad, there is an interesting new generation of Islamic architects, even if numerically not very large. Thus there are projects and structures commissioned directly from abroad by the Arab Emirates; but there is also the Iran of the post-Shah period, traversed by profound contradictions, where young architects who have often studied abroad (and not seldom in our country) are laboriously seeking a way that is not one of acceptance, either of Kho- meini’s integralism or uncondi- tional surrender to the models of western culture. Alongside the monarchies of Morocco and of Jordan, we have Algeria and Turkey, whose his- stories are perhaps, among Islamic countries, the most interwoven with the western world, and which are today able to express an autono- mous university teaching. From these schools of architecture excel- lent elements have emerged and have reached a noteworthy level of quality above all in the sector of architectural conservation.

Then there is Egypt, the home- land of Hassan Fathy, the cham- pion of the dialogue with tradition, in whose school the youngest gene- rations have been educated, those today reproposing in their designs the inheritance of their past in watchful and original forms.

To Hassan Fathy and to his beautiful architectural products, achieved using the ancient technique of unbaked bricks, the exhibi-
which in the best cases has succeeded in imposing a change in western architecture with the abandonment of European-centred myths. The real economic availability of the richest of the Islamic countries and their precise requests regarding architectural requisites have, in the best cases, enabled the limits of flat stylistic adjustment to be surmounted.

Not uncommonly, in fact, the possibility of having recourse to the most sophisticated and costly construction techniques has permitted the historical heritage to be actively recovered: such is the case with Otto Frei’s architectural products for Jeddah and those of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, writing there a fascinating new chapter in the history of tent architecture.

In this sense the freeing of western culture from ancient, abstract certainties will be able to be realized in a fuller form universality if it can be respectful to individual cultures, and if at the right moment it finds a way to embrace these with true feeling. An ideal of universality that takes as its symbol that blessed tree, an olive tree that is neither eastern nor western, as the Koran says.

Claudio D’Amato

Architecture in Islamic countries.
Second International Exhibition of Architecture
Organized by the Biennale of Venice.

Architecture of the Islamic countries. Distance I find disquieting. Nearness makes me anxious. I know I cannot resolve the contrast. On the verge of the trivial, these feelings of mine, of an ensnared layman, would tend to make me wander in the unknown dimension of mobility in history and geography. What an investigation should assume as an area is crisscrossed with ways and routes and datum points which interweave, stretch out, expand and contract, leaving of themselves the structure of a city, the memory of a monument. Encountering on the same routes different cultures which move in opposite directions.

And moments of inactivity, of contraction. Moments such as that of today: of endemic crisis; of confusion between opposed strivings and possibilities; of the new meeting, with its fertile background of products and ambiguities, with a western culture in its turn characterized by bewilderment and lacerated between technological methodological propulsion and philosophical-artistic uncertainties.

A meeting that becomes fatally the protagonist of the research. Will we succeed, two different cultures undergoing different crises, in helping each other, using alternative behaviours to those of colonialism which imply the existence of a strong, dominant model able to set itself up as a source of values?

Pleasure of the East. Like the languor of nostalgia and the possibility of discovering that which is different which fear makes us hide in ourselves?

The disquieting pleasure of contrasts, favoured by the anthological structure of the catalogue: the texts, the compliments, the architects and the projects in the universities, the restoration and the protection of the environment, etc.

- Contrasts between fable-like fascinating distance, the pleasure of which we envy in travellers of other times, and the anguish of an oppressive closeness of present problems.
- Contrasts, therefore, between the two dominant keys of the catalogue, the thematic/linguistic one of the architects which explicitly follows the boundless plura-
lism of the previous Biennale, and the problematic/productive one of the new cities to bring into being and of the ancient cities in decadence. Here, too, lurks the suspicion that we are exporting the schizophrenia of our bizarre culture.

Contrasts between the two opposed ways of the difficult meeting of the various languages of Architecture: that which filters the poetic metaphor of the memory and of the exotic through the modernistic materials of western architecture, perhaps taken to the limit of their technical possibilities, and that of a more immediate, mimetic assent, of linguistic sympathy, but also substantial, with traditional stylistic motifs. Yet the doubt remains, on which is concealed after all a more astute but also emblematic affectation.

A disquiet and an anxiety that are therefore justified. Is the beautiful cover picture of a more and more enticing Venturi, now capable of any sort of acrobacy, sufficient to exorcize them? Can its pluristyle exterior quieten those conflicts, as in universal planning proposal under the sign of a language over and above the parties? I dare to say that it is not sufficient. Those who know that an exterior, a front cover, both "represents" and "disguises", will wonder what there is behind it. Well, behind it, behind that façade, is there really the conflict of those contrasts: of the eye-catching one between the always a bit Kitschy great works of the “Italian projects abroad” and the daily experience and existence that seeps from the unbaked brick houses and from the narrow lanes of the bazaar? Does that cover really possess the only possible exorcism, the tragic one of the Sacred? That cover is therefore not enough, because it represents only that part of a whole that cannot be understood (and perhaps it strikes terror, and perhaps for that reason it is wished to disguise or rather to "ratify" it in a truly artful manner). But abolishing differences in this way, flattened by language the secrets of the various civilizations and the interlinked mysteries of the Sacred and the everyday, rooted in the architecture of true tradition, where would be an end to the beautiful fascinations whose precious thread is taken up by Paolo Portoghesi in the introduction, by going back along and selecting the presence of the past and of the distant and of the different in a number of Masters? Or, how should one go on, prudently, whenever it is a question of spousing the differences without ratifying and flattening them, desecrating and emptying them!? At least, to be able to be affected again from time to time by new spells, new lessons in ever-different things new (“Lettres Persanes”).

For, in conclusion, what better could this Exhibition — the first of this level in Europe — have given us?

Especially as the catalogue, leafed through once more with a clearer mind, easily becomes an index of works, in what appears ultimately the best form for a strategy of unsuperficial attention: a factual dimension always able to balance the irrational pleasure of the poetically different and the rational satisfaction of a scientific research which gives some order to experiences and to likenesses.

Antonino Terranova