

Beauty is Truth

‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

John Keats, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’

One could say that we need to look for beauty in a building as the first expression of creativity – beauty of space, pattern, light and shadow, beauty of texture and surface.

To judge architecture from the perspective of a visual artist, I needed to ask myself some questions: What is architecture? Is it made by us, the people who use it? Does it shape us and create who we are? This enquiry led me to look at architecture in a particular way. I realise that our towns and cities are the windows to our unconscious, our homes the frames for our lives. As we look through them, these windows and frames colour our understanding of the world.

In discussing architectural projects across the Muslim world for the award, I recognised that Muslim societies have diverse cultures and different realities. What connects them, most often, are economics and politics – and the growing gap between rich and poor, with access to education for the rich, and few opportunities for the poor.

Architecture clearly has the power to influence and change people’s lives. Buildings that offer spaces for contemplation and reflection, wonder and beauty, can create a culture of understanding and acceptance. By participating in the imaginative shaping and development of the built environment, we can all play our part in creating inclusive societies that challenge prejudices and make a shared space for all people of all faiths.

The great Islamic cultures of the past were famous for their inclusiveness and tolerance. This is perhaps best illustrated in the following lines by Ibn Arabi, a great Muslim philosopher and poet who lived in Andalusia during the twelfth century:

My heart can take on any form:
A meadow for gazelles,
A cloister for monks,
For the idols, sacred ground
Ka’ba for the circling pilgrims,
The tablets of the Torah,
The scrolls of the Qu’ran
I profess the religion of love;
Wherever its caravan turns along the way,
That is the belief,
The faith I keep.

Shirazeh Houshiary