

FROM PUBLIC SPACE TO PUBLIC SPHERE

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“It’s our turn now

To puzzle the unborn. No world

Wears as well as it should, but mortal or not,

A world has still to be built.”

W. H. Auden, *The Birth of Architecture*

My involvement with the Aga Khan Award for Architecture – as a member of both the Master Jury and the Steering Committee – has persuaded me that architecture is the midwife to “the good life.” Many times a year His Highness the Aga Khan convenes us as a group – architects, artists, engineers, historians, planners, landscape designers, cultural critics – to conceive ways by which the afflictions of the global world might be alleviated by humane interventions and institutional innovations in the realm of the built environment. We are challenged, so to speak, “to puzzle the unborn”, to think outside the box, to place ourselves ahead of the curve by engaging with problems, and seeking solutions that are emergent or incipient in the ongoing processes of social transformation. The potential for new infrastructural or planning initiatives; the viability of new building types; sustainability achieved through the deployment of local initiatives in the interest of new structural design or the invention of new materials; the creation of new communities of stakeholders through collaborations between the commercial sector, the state, microcredit banks and non-governmental organisations – these are only some of the ways in which “puzzling the unborn” produces *agents of change* – individual or institutional – capable of inaugurating new paradigms of social development and cultural progress.

While cultivating the seeds of invention as yet “unborn”, the Award insists that we return with new resolve and fresh ideas to a world that has not worn as well as it should have. This is a world we know only too well: a world of inequality, unemployment, homelessness, illiteracy,

disease, violence and ecological degradation. It is the resolute will of the Award to invest in the belief that “a world has *still* to be built” in the double meaning W. H. Auden gives to that phrase.

In one sense, *still* building the world is a continual, incremental activity – wherever we are in time and place, the world still remains to be built and rebuilt. We turn to the tasks of restoration and conservation to give new life to monuments and memorials, to revive built environments and natural resources that have suffered the wear and tear of nature’s ferocity and the rapacity of human history. A second reading of the phrase – “mortal or not/a world has still to be built” – suggests that our spiritual and aesthetic desire for perfectibility joins with our ethical concerns for fairness and justice as we *aspire* towards ways of living and building that create new horizons for humanity. To believe that a world *still has to be built* in the aspirational sense is to introduce a cautionary note of “value” in the process of responding to pragmatic interests in concrete circumstances: how will *this* planning decision, or *this* choice of material, or *this* configuration of public space be seen by the populations of the future? In exercising our professional expertise how do we establish “best practices” that serve our contemporaries while creating enduring frameworks of value that will ensure the quality of life for those generations as yet “unborn”?

A wide repertoire of problems, ideas and aims circulates through the programmatic agenda of the Award because its concerns for the built environment are an integral part of its attempt to support and protect the establishment of civil society across the various geopolitical landscapes of the *umma* – some robust and stable, others volatile and vulnerable. His Highness has defined the core concept of civil society as made up of “institutions designed to advance the public good but powered by private energies”. A vital connection between the Award

and the other agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is established through the contribution all these agencies make to strengthening the role of civil society across the *umma*.

A recent discussion of the AKDN Civil Society programme makes a cogent link between the “good society” and “public space”: “Civil society can be seen as being drawn from three traditions: as part of society or associational life lived through groups and associations; as the kind of society that we want to see or the ‘good society’; and as ideas about how society is formed and shaped in the domain of the public space where different views on issues – such as good governance – are expressed and negotiated.”

Pluralism is the living link between the good society and public space, and architecture is the arc of this ancient and intimate connection. The ethics of the good society – democratic rights, equal opportunities, respect for the beliefs and customs of communities, the dignity of the individual – are protected and enacted in the governmental institutions that shape the public space – freedom of expression, dialogical democratic exchange, the provision of education, health, safety, work and other aspects of human security. Civil society combines the provision of social goods with the equitable representation of private and public bodies that work to protect and enhance the “quality of life”. Professional associations, commercial enterprises, educational establishments, ethnic and religious associations, cultural institutions, organisations dedicated to advocacy for minority representation – these are all participants in the creation of civil society as it combines an ethical and political pluralism with the institutions of pluralist social systems. The AKDN is surely right when it suggests that civil society, at its best, works like an “ecosystem, an assemblage of different parts and connections that adds up to more than the sum of its parts”.

Pluralism, as embraced by the Award, is a framework of ethical and cultural values articulated through the practice of architecture and the built environment. Its purpose is to spread tolerance, dialogue, collaboration and affiliation amongst diverse communities – national, migrant and diasporic – who are historically fated to live side by side in indigenous and foreign habitations. The pluralist perspective is committed to finding modes of communication and negotiation through which communities can play a decisive role – with the collaboration of architects, planners, designers and engineers – in deciding what they consider to be “the good life”. Deliberating on such “quality of life” issues requires that the *local* conditions of living and building – customs, materials, work practices, traditions, hopes and dreams – have to play an important *normative* role in making any building decision. And such acts of deliberation, if they are going to embrace the plural interests of the whole community or society, require there to be a vibrant civil society that is capable of negotiating with the state on its own terms, while balancing the interests of specific groups.

Such a complex task is further complicated when the fast globalising *umma* is faced with the challenge of diversity both internally and externally. Multicultural societies are prone to the contestation of belief and custom, and only a confident civil society can turn these differences into a civil conversation between communities. Within ethnic and religious groups, who often find themselves marginalised in metropolitan societies, there is a sense of betrayal when second- and third-generation adherents seek other, less traditional affiliations. In parts of the *umma*, there is potential for conflict when particular ethnic or religious populations are divided between those who continue to live in the national home and those who live abroad but seek to have an indigenous influence. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the internal challenges and opportunities within civil society formations – where affiliations and solidarities have to be created from parts rather

than wholes – are, on a smaller scale, true of the complex structure of the *umma as a whole* in our contemporary world.

To enhance the construction and cultivation of public space is, in the broadest terms, the mission of the Award. Its commitment to the promotion and protection of civil society allows the Award to engage with the problems of public space as part of a larger concern with the emergence of global “public spheres” – those democratic institutions and fora that ensure the freedom of the city; the intercultural expression of ideas, beliefs and customs; the open communication between individuals and communities; and the lively exchanges of commerce and technology. The concept of the public sphere has been too closely tied to Eurocentric ideas of the Enlightenment, whereas it has a wider relevance to the propagation of the ideals of civil society across the globe. Public space is the matrix of the public sphere: it provides the habitations of family life and social settlement; it creates public squares where the “people” congregate in recognition of their civic identities; it houses museums, schools and universities that turn legal and political citizens into cultural citizens; it provides channels of public transport that network the plural neighbourhoods of the *polis*. The public sphere convenes the built environment into a living organism that transforms the lives it supports, just as it is transformed by the inhabitants that render it alive.

A world has still to be built... Nothing must deter us from this truth. A worn-out world deserves our urgent attention. An unborn world deserves our creative intelligence. A world *has to be built* as best we know it, and as best we can do it, because that is our debt to the past and our duty to the future.