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Sustainability and Piety

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By Spahic Omer

Sustainability in architecture is possible only when there is sustainability in values and philosophies that underpin the former, giving it its identity, vigour, and direction. Moreover, sustainability in architecture is possible only when there is sustainability in people's intellectual, spiritual and moral predilections whereby the philosophies and values of sustainable architecture are one and the same as those personified by people: the conceivers, patrons, creators and users of architecture.

It is for this reason that Koca Mimar Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, said that architecture is at once an estimable and the most difficult calling, and he who would practise it correctly and justly must, above all things, be pious.

Muhammad Iqbal on that score while eulogising the Mosque of Cordova in Spain in a masterpiece poem that carries the same name – or Masjid-e Qurtaba in Urdu –uses the beauty and glory of one of the most famous architectural masterpieces in Islamic history as a prism through which he analyses the nature and some of the most prominent traits of a true believer. At the end of his poem, after describing the underlining qualities both of the Mosque and true believers, and what type of a spiritual affiliation ought to exist between the two, Muhammad Iqbal calls for revolution and reform across the spectrum of the Muslim cultural and civilisational presence.

The importance of reforming and sustaining individuals, traditions, systems and institutions, in the context of reminiscing about the Mosque of Cordova and Islamic civilisation's lost repute and luminosity, is readily apparent in the poem.

Muhammad Iqbal proclaims:

“Your beauty, your majesty, Personify the graces of the man of faith.

You are beautiful and majestic. He too is beautiful and majestic...”

“Your edifice unravels The mystery of the faithful;
The fire of his fervent days, The bliss of his tender nights.

Your grandeur calls to mind The loftiness of his station,
The sweep of his vision, His rapture, his ardor, his pride, his humility.

The might of the man of faith is the might of the Almighty:
Dominant, creative, resourceful, consummate...”

“Your equal in beauty, If any under the skies,
Is the heart of the Muslim and no one else.

Ah, those men of truth, Those proud cavaliers of Arabia;
Endowed with a sublime character, Imbued with candour and
conviction.

Their reign gave the world an unfamiliar concept;
That the authority of the brave and spirited lay in modesty and
simplicity, rather than pomp and regality...”

Quality of bona fide sustainability

Also, powered by the *tawhidic* mettle, Koca Mimar Sinan regarded his enormous talent as a gift from God which he strove to perfect for no other reason except to serve God as the final end for all other ends, that is, the end at which all finalistic nexuses aim and come to rest. Sinan erected so many buildings of different types only that they be used for glorifying the Holy Being, and that they become a tangible proof of God’s greatness, infinity and permanence, and of man’s and built environment’s inconsequentiality, impermanence and relativity. The latter can never assume the quality of bona fide sustainability.

The relative and qualified attribute of sustainability that is normally affixed to the man-made built environment, rather allegorically, is possible only due to the infinite, omnipresent and everlasting nature of the purposes and goals it serves. Sinan thus wrote: “Thanks be to God, to this humble servant it became an art to serve in so many a house of God... I looked upon all creation as a lesson, and completely understood it has no permanence. I laid the foundations of many buildings. (Doomed to) annihilation, man does not endure. The pavilion of my body began to crumble. I suffered pain in its fetters. The sorrows of fortune my beard turned grey. My body trembles from fear of God. Think not that my bended form is an arch. It is a bridge of passage to grief and sorrow. Brother, in order to pass to the next world, to this vault of fate’s pavilion I bowed my head. Thanks be to God that I am a righteous man! In my art, I am upright and firm.”

Sinan also wrote: “Boundless thanks to that Architect (God) of the palace of nine vaults, who, without measure or plumb line, without rule or compass, by His hand of creation, made firm its arched canopy. And endless thanks to that Master of the seven-storied

workshop, who, with His hand of power, kneaded the clay of Adam and in him displayed His art and novelty. And endless blessings upon that Self-Existent One, whose munificence, like the waves of the sea, brought forth humankind into the plain of existence from the hidden world of nonbeing...”

It is on account of those truths that according to the Qur’anic discourse as well, Islamic buildings are erected and sustained only upon a foundation of piety to God and His good pleasure, because the lives of their benefactors too, are built and sustained on piety and hopes for God’s pleasure. Whereas the buildings of those who turn away from God are erected upon a foundation of suspicion, faithlessness and false hopes and fears, just as their lives are built upon the like foundation.

While the lives and buildings of believers, in spiritual terms, are firm and sustainable for the obvious reasons, the lives and buildings of the wicked ones, for obvious reasons, too, are weak, insecure and shaky. God then asks: “Is he who founded his building upon duty to Allah and His good pleasure better; or he who founded his building on the brink of a crumbling, overhanging precipice so that it toppled with him into the fire of hell? Allah guides not wrongdoing folk. The building which they built will never cease to be a misgiving in their hearts unless their hearts be torn to pieces. Allah is Knower, Wise” (al-Tawbah, 109- 110).

Since the Hereafter signifies an integral part of life’s reality, yet its climax, sustainable life patterns are only those patterns which ensure success and happiness not only in this world, but also in the Hereafter. Correspondingly, truly sustainable architectural styles and systems are only those architectural systems and styles which typify, aid and promote life ideals and activities that are set to guarantee the true felicity of both worlds.

Getting the best of both

There can be no rift, nor incongruity, between this world and the Hereafter, and between people’s innate penchants and actual preparations for getting the best of both. This is a powerful message of recurring Qur’anic accounts concerning the terrestrial aspirations and eventual ends of many individuals and nations, such

as Pharaohs, Qarun and the ‘*Ad* and *Thamud* peoples. They all failed miserably in their enterprises and were duly punished. Fundamental to their ultimate failures were the mentioned spiritual as well as psychological rift and incongruity.

However, it is not by chance that the Qur’an in those narratives draws attention to certain aspects of those people’s built environments which denote at once a ground and sign of their failures. Their built environments are occasionally even employed as a means and instrument for carrying out those agonizing downfalls and punishments. Their built environments were their necropolises. As if the Qur’an intends to communicate that just as there was nothing sustainable in those people’s life paradigms, when juxtaposed with the actual purpose and scale of the totality of existence, there was likewise nothing sustainable in their built environments, notwithstanding the class and sway of their physical and artistic dimensions. Their built environment expressions were as hollow and transient as their ontological appreciations and wisdom.

Says the Qur’an, for example, about this: “So how many a town did We destroy while it was unjust, so it was fallen down upon its roofs, and (how many a) deserted well and palace raised high. Have they not traveled in the land so that they should have hearts with which to understand, or ears with which to hear? For surely it is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts which are in the breasts.” (al-Hajj, 45-46).

“And how many towns We destroyed, which exulted in their life (of ease and plenty)! Now those habitations of theirs, after them, are deserted — all but a (miserable) few! And We are their heirs.” (al-Qasas, 58).

“(Remember also) the ‘*Ad* and the *Thamud* (people): clearly will appear to you from (the traces) of their buildings (their fate): Satan made their deeds alluring to them, and kept them back from the Path, though they were keen-sighted.” (al-‘Ankabut, 38).

“Those before them did also plot (against Allah’s Way): but Allah took their structures from their foundations, and the roof fell down

on them from above; and the Wrath seized them from directions they did not perceive.” (al-Nahl, 26).

Furthermore, when God instructed Prophet Ibrahim and his son Isma’il, also a prophet, to build the Ka’bah or al-Masjid al-Haram, He commanded them to “...sanctify (purify) My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer).” (al-Baqarah, 125); or to “...associate not anything (in worship) with Me; and sanctify (purify) My House for those who compass it round, or stand up, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer).” (al-Hajj, 26).

Ibn Kathir reckons in his exegesis or tafsir of the two verses that the main message contained therein revolves around the purity, sincerity and sanctity of the motives and goals of Prophets Ibrahim and Isma’il in their capacities as the Ka’bah or al-Masjid al-Haram builders, as well as around the integrity and sanctity of the edifice’s civilizational standing, goals and function. Indeed, the essence of the whole enterprises of building and architecture, and their own integrity and propriety, are implied in those succinct Qur’anic accounts. Because they are sandwiched between, and greatly influenced by, designers’ and architects’ intellectual and spiritual dispositions, and by buildings’ ultimate performances – something that is clearly alluded to in the stated Qur’anic verses – actual designing and building processes are thus implicitly connoted as well.

Spiritual importance of sustainability in architecture

This is so by reason of the verity that genuine building and architecture undertakings are complex, demanding and rather integrated and organic processes wherein no phase or phases could be identified, separated and regarded in isolation as more important than others. From the initial phases of making intentions and generating conceptions and ideas, to the final phases of using, interacting with and developing emotional relationships with buildings, no stage or aspect of the architecture process is to be handled or attended to at the expense of others.

Owing to this profound spiritual importance of sustainability in architecture in the context of the Islamic spirituality and

worldview, Prophets Ibrahim and Isma'il, while building the Ka'bah, besought God for foremost life blessings and boons which, in fact, represented and, by definition, were inseparable neither from the purpose and mission of their honourable lives, nor from the purpose and mission of the groundbreaking phenomenon of the Ka'bah or al-Masjid al-Haram in its role as a blessed place and a guidance for all kinds of beings. They among other things supplicated: "Our Lord, accept (this service) from us. Indeed You are the Hearing, the Knowing. Our Lord, and make us Muslims (in submission) to You and from our descendants a Muslim nation (in submission) to You. And show us our rites and accept our repentance. Indeed, You are the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, and send among them a messenger from themselves who will recite to them Your verses and teach them the Book and wisdom and purify them. Indeed, You are the Exalted in Might, the Wise." (al-Baqarah, 127-129).

In the same way, about building, using and maintaining mosques, God says in the Qur'an: "The mosques of Allah shall be visited and maintained (*ya'muru*) by such as believe in Allah and the Last Day, establish regular prayers, and practice regular charity, and fear none (at all) except Allah. It is they who are expected to be on true guidance." (al-Tawbah, 18)

Apart from scientific and professional knowledge and skills, faith, integrity and good deeds are also needed for rising to the challenge. As a matter of fact, the latter is more consequential and is a prerequisite of the former. The key word in this verse is '*amara*, *ya'muru*' which, according to Abdullah Yusuf Ali, if applied to the theme of the mosque, implies the following: 1) to build or repair; 2) to maintain in fitting dignity; 3) to visit for purposes of devotion; and 4) to fill with light, life and activity.

Due to this remarkable spiritual significance of sustainable architecture in Islam and its unbreakable relationship with people's everyday life, influencing them and being influenced by them, the Qur'an affirms, for example, that buildings can be founded either on God-consciousness (*taqwa*) and His good pleasure (*ridwan*), or on an undermined sand-cliff ready to crumble to pieces with its occupants into the fire of Hell (al-Tawbah, 109); that mosques can be built for causing harm and disbelief and division among the

believers and as a station for whoever wars against God and His Messenger, that is, out of sheer hypocrisy (al-Tawbah, 107); that buildings can be a cause of pretense and doubt in people's hearts (al-Tawbah, 110); that it is not for such as join gods with Allah to erect, visit or maintain mosques while they witness against their own souls to infidelity, because their works bear no fruit in the spiritual kingdom (al-Tawbah, 17); that the giving of drink to pilgrims only, or the physical maintenance of al-Masjid al-Haram, as a form of deadening formalism and blinding symbolism, is not equal to the pious services of those who believe in God and the Last Day and strive hard in Allah's way (al-Tawbah, 19); that nobody is more unjust than he who forbids that God's name is glorified and mentioned much in His mosques and strives for their ruin (al-Baqarah, 114); that the Ka'bah has been erected in order to function as a place of assembly for men and a place of total safety (al-Baqarah, 125); that buildings can be built as landmarks for vain delight (al-Shu'ara', 128); and, finally, that "righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but (true) righteousness is (in) one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask (for help), and for freeing slaves; (and who) establishes prayer and gives *zakah*; (those who) fulfill their promise when they promise; and (those who) are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous." (al-Baqarah, 177).

All in all, the Islamic idea of sustainable architecture is to create awareness and an utmost sense of responsibility in people, which will inevitably stir up spontaneous and sincere sustainability actions. By people we mean not only architects, designers, planners, engineers and patrons, but also everyone else in society's subtle hierarchy of ranks, stations and responsibilities, by reason of architecture being people's art and at once their collective right and responsibility.

In this manner, a healthy environment of mutual giving and taking, as well as of mutual demand and supply, will be created and upheld. People will thus perceive the prospect of contributing to sustainability pursuit as their moral, spiritual and contractual obligation. In it, they will see themselves, their future and their

mission. Most importantly, they will see in it an evidence of their impending success, wellbeing and the interests of both worlds.

Such a ubiquitous mood and vibes will be felt everywhere and by everyone, owing to the universality and comprehensiveness of the sustainability concept and undertaking. It will signify honorable people's emphatic response to God's command: "...And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression..." (al-Ma'idah, 2).

On the same note, believers are depicted as having faith, doing righteous deeds, and joining together in the mutual teaching of truth, patience and constancy. (al-'Asr, 3). It stands to reason that if this philosophy of sustainability and sustainable architecture takes root, then the concerns and snags of double standards, inconsistencies, lethargic and solely profit-driven implementation moves, inadequate educational strategies and policies, lack of political will, lack of transparency, skepticism, etc., which constantly plague today's sustainability development efforts worldwide, could be successfully purged.

All-embracing Islamic sustainability

Indeed, it is nigh on impossible to establish and implement sustainability in an environment of mutual mistrust, impiety, omnivorous greed and self-indulgence, doubt, uncertainty, lack of proper understanding and orientation, etc. *No wonder, then, that decades of talking and campaigning for sustainability yielded a little of positive outcome. Most people simply do not care and cannot even grasp the point of the whole enterprise. The rise of an out-and-out eco-awareness simply failed to take off. Positively, sustainability blueprints and efforts must be rendered genuinely meaningful and sustainable first, before any rays of hope for a genuine sustainability and sustainable architecture could be emitted into the hearts and minds of people.*

There is more to sustainable architecture than haranguing on and selectively and relatively applying such sustainability principles as using alternative energy sources, energy conservation, reuse of materials and reducing waste, pollution and environmental degradation, albeit on some vague, questionable, inequitable and deficient premises. Sustainable architecture is to morph into a total responsible lifestyle and

culture. It is to penetrate every level of people's lives and consciousness. It is to influence, and be influenced by, the rest of life ambits.

Generally speaking, this inimitable and all-embracing Islamic sustainability exemplar is perfectly recapped in these words of the Qur'an: "And the heaven He has raised high, and He has set up the Balance; in order that you may not transgress (due) balance. And observe the weight with equity and do not make the balance deficient." (al-Rahman, 7-9).

In the preceding verses, God speaks about three entwined degrees or levels of harmony, equilibrium and justice on the strength of which life was created and was set to operate, and which man in his capacity as the vicegerent on earth must respect and strive to sustain at all times.

The first and grandest level is the one relating to creating, raising and imposing balance and harmony on the heaven with everything qualitative and quantitative in it.

The second level applies directly to man, the trustee to whom and whose magnificent life mission and purpose everything in the heavens and on the earth has been subjected, whereby he is expected to uphold and not transgress the balance and harmony divinely instituted in life as a whole.

And the third level of harmony, justice and equilibrium is the one that regulates dealings and relationships between people in their daily routines where the weight is to be observed with equity and the sense of balance as a rule of life not to be made deficient, that is to say, where every person's rights will be respected and abilities as well as potentials nurtured and put to good use. This applies not only to human mutual relationships, but also to their relationships with the rest of God's creations.

In other words, as Ibn Kathir in his exegesis or tafsir of the Qur'an remarked, God created the heavens and the earth with truth and justice so that everything else could exist on the basis of the same foundations. The medium or agent for attaining such a target is nobody else but man. One of the objectives of God's revealed Word to man, it follows, was to make man firmly establish his feet at his own most immediate level and to thus confidently start rising through the intellectual and spiritual

ranks of existence aiming at the highest stations where the highest and grandest level of harmony, equilibrium and justice resides.

Unmistakably, human cultural and civilizational legacies, as well as the architectural ones in view of the fundamental and intimate relationships between architecture and human cultures and civilizations, are testimonies to how far in those sustainability matters humankind has gone and risen, or how low it has regressed and fallen.

*In the context of his commentary on the above mentioned Qur'anic sustainability verses, Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains: "In the great astronomical universe there are exact mathematical laws, which bear witness to Allah's wisdom and also to His favors to His creatures; for we all profit by the heat and light, the seasons, and the numerous changes in the tides and the atmosphere, on which the constitution of our globe and the maintenance of life depend." The word "balance" repeated in each of the three verses in question means that men need to "act justly to each other and observe due balance in all their actions, following the golden mean and not transgressing due bounds in anything." Speaking both literally and figuratively, "a man should be honest and straight in every daily matter, such as weighing out things which he is selling, and he should be straight, just and honest in all the highest dealings, not only with other people, but with himself and in his obedience to Allah's Law. Not many do either the one or the other when they have an opportunity of deceit. Justice is the central virtue, and the avoidance of both excess and defect in conduct keeps the human world balanced just as the heavenly world is kept balanced by mathematical order."*****

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