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Need for Sustainable Architecture

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By Spahic Omer

People are both the creators and demolishers of civilisational accomplishments. They are the only beneficiaries of every great civilisational output. Similarly, people are the conceivers, creators and users of architecture – a physical locus of civilisations.

They create architecture and then use and interact with it. They do so either commendably, securing and enjoying the fruits of their rightful acts so long as they stick to the right systems that led them to such a state, or appallingly with no clear purpose or direction. In the latter's case, things always work against the authors of and heirs to such an architectural tradition as is anchored in flawed

Thus, of the essence is that individuals are constantly and painstakingly educated and nurtured. Their progress and involvements should be overseen and monitored along the lines of an adopted proven and genuine worldview, philosophy and vision. In this way, erroneous and unproven world views, philosophies and visions can be easily kept at bay and done away with. Their inappropriateness and hazard will always come to the fore whenever contrasted with the recognisable and ubiquitous value and quality of the former.

A microcosm and identity of cultures and civilisations

Hence, so important is a state of architecture in the lives of humans that it signifies a microcosm and identity of their cultures and civilisations. It is the people's third "skin", their actual skin and clothes being the first and second skin.

It goes without saying that people are the direct cause of their own architectural destinies and they are fully responsible for them. The causal relationship between people and their architectural processes and ultimate legacies are clear. Equally clear are the prospects of reversing an architectural process and setting things right when they go wrong. Thus, diagnosing architectural ailments and providing effective remedies are made more promising.

In this context, calls for creating and enhancing awareness about sustainable architecture, coupled with calls for creating and promoting actual sustainable architectural systems and styles, are to be viewed. Such calls denote certain people's realisation that the current architectural practices cannot go on indefinitely.

The human population has increased so great and their impact on the natural world grown so devastating that what was regarded a progress in the past may soon turn out to be a source of our civilisational downfall. Without a doubt, the world of architecture is set to become a means and tool for such a downfall. It is set to gradually emerge as the main culprit and, at the same time, one of the main victims of the situation's adversity.

architecture – people are given the hope that the situation can be reversed. By the law of causality that also affects architecture, a feasible blueprint for a change could realistically be drawn.

Calls for sustainable architecture

Thus, at the core of those calls for radical changes in the substance of human civilisational trajectory lie calls for sustainable architecture. They represent the people’s intellectual maturity, hope and courage. Many people have truly come to terms with what is going on. Before all hope vanished, they would want to try to reverse the situation. They wanted to do their part and so, absolve themselves of any potential subsequent guilt.

Portraying humanity’s gloomy scenario and the role of architecture, it is established that by the early 21st century the building of shelter (in all its forms) consumed more than half of the world’s resources – translating into 16 percent of the earth’s freshwater resources, 30–40 percent of all energy supplies, and 50 percent by weight of all the raw materials withdrawn from earth’s surface. Architecture was also responsible for 40–50 percent of waste deposits in landfills and 20–30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.

Many architects after the post-World War II building boom were content to erect emblematic civic and corporate icons that celebrated profligate consumption and omnivorous globalisation. At the turn of the 21st century, however, a building’s environmental integrity – as seen in the way it was designed and how it operated – became an important factor in how it was evaluated”. (*Green Architecture*, www.britannica.com)

As a result, a new philosophy of architecture was taking hold. It is a philosophy that advocates sustainable energy sources, the conservation of energy, the reuse and safety of building materials, and the siting of a building with consideration of its impact on the environment.

In sustainable architecture, the entire life cycle of the building and its components is considered, as well as the economic and

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environmental impact and performance. However, building within our environmental limits is only one of the central principles of sustainable architecture whose focus is much broader.

Sustainable architecture also relates to social, educational, cultural and economic development. It relates to life in its totality on account of architecture corresponding to its facilities, framework and corporeal manifestation.

Coexistence between humanity and nature

Hence, sustainable architectural designs aim at encouraging and supporting coexistence between humanity and nature at all levels in a healthy, supportive, diverse and sustainable condition, recognising their mutual subtle interdependence. They respect relationships between spiritual and material consciousness.

Sustainable architecture further makes people admit and accept their responsibilities for the consequences of their architectural decisions on both human and natural wellbeing. It eliminates the concepts of waste, profligate consumption, haughtiness, greed, elitism, imbalance and absolutism. It also seeks constant improvements in architectural education that aims to produce generations of designers and architects with the highest standards of sustainability professionalism, integrity and competence.

In other words, at the centre of the whole mission of sustainable architecture stand people with a delicate interplay of their rights and responsibilities, their existential and environmental consciousness, as well as their intellectual and spiritual orientation and proclivity. By people we mean both professionals and users, just as by sustainable architecture we mean every aspect and tier of life that the former in its multidimensional sphere embodies.

Sustainable architecture is a school of thought in its infancy. Its fundamental problems of definitions, goals and methods are yet to be fully identified and agreed upon. Since its loose and patchy inception, as a reaction against the established modern architectural practices that in the long term were promising more

drawbacks than benefits to humanity, its progress has been sluggish at best.

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If truth be told, nonetheless, hopes for any real progress in the field will be probable only when all the root causes that led mankind to embrace the known destructive tendencies towards the wellbeing of the natural world, are tackled head-on and without exemptions. Such causes are deeply embedded in humans and are ideological, psychological and spiritual in nature.

The actual environmental devastation that we witness around us is just an effect and reflection of what essentially befalls man at the material, intellectual and spiritual levels of his existence. Architecture is a field of human activity where such inner human confusions and disorders are best manifested. Accordingly, soulless people produce a soulless architecture, confrontational people produce a confrontational architecture, and people who lack understanding of, and respect for nature produces an architecture that is incompatible, yet in overt conflict, with the natural environment.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr summarises the root causes of the predicament in the affirmation that modern man has de-sacralised nature, rendering it opaque and spiritually meaningless. In short, the disequilibrium between modern man and nature, and between man and his very self, is due to the destruction of the harmony between man and God.

Islamic architecture

As far as Islamic architecture is concerned, its propensity for sustainability and peaceful coexistence with nature is inherent in its core, notwithstanding the ways people understand and call such a character. Islamic architecture could thus be understood as the type of architecture whose functions and, to a lesser extent, form, are inspired primarily by Islam as a comprehensive worldview, value system and a way of life.

Islamic architecture is a framework for the implementation of Islam. It facilitates, fosters and stimulates the *'ibadah* (worship) activities of Muslims, which, in turn, account for every moment of

nature, life, death and the Hereafter. Thus, Islamic architecture would be the facilities and, at the same time, a physical locus of the actualisation of the Islamic message.

Practically, Islamic architecture represents the religion of Islam that has been translated onto reality at the hands of Muslims. It also represents the identity of Islamic multi-tiered culture and civilisation.

Finally, Islamic architecture, as a revolutionary phenomenon, should be viewed as one of universal and abiding significance which reveals the standards and values that gave rise to it. True, it was as responsive to the climatic, geographical and cultural requirements as any other architectural tradition. Nevertheless, it never treated them away from the exigencies of a higher order and meaning of things.

By means of skills, creativity and imagination, on the one hand, and by its distinctive combination of aesthetic and utilitarian ends, on the other, Islamic architecture never drew a wedge between the physical, psychological and spiritual needs of man. Man has been created as God's vicegerent or trustee on earth and whose earthly mission is all about sustainability, one way or another.

An authentic Islamic architecture is sustainable, not only on environmental and economic, but also social, educational and spiritual development. In the same vein, a truly sustainable architecture is rightly called "Islamic", rather than those architectural traditions as endorsed and practiced literal symbolism, shallow formalism and blind following, regardless of where such traditions are applied and by whom. ***

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