BEYOND MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM, RECLAIMING ARCHITECTURE'S SOCIAL PROJECT

PLENARY TALK PRESENTED BY JAD TABET AT THE FACULTY OF ENGINEERING AND ARCHITECTURE STUDENT CONFERENCE

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During the last four decades, architecture has changed dramatically and these changes, that affected both its discourse and its practice, produced major shifts in the way architects envision their profession as a specific field of knowledge and experience, as well as its role in society. In the following paper, I shall try to analyse these major transformations, based on my life experience as a professional that studied architecture in the mid-sixties, started his teaching commitment in the early eighties and still practices today, amidst the haze that surrounds the birth of a new century.

My first encounter with the American University of Beirut was in fall 1964, when I joined the School of Engineering and Architecture as a first year student. As most young men, I was arrogant and full of myself, but I should say that at that time, for people of my generation, arrogance was a common attitude since everything looked to us simple and evident. Scientific development, coupled with the triumph of technology and production, held promises of a New World where continuous economic progress would lead to the emancipation of humankind and where hunger and poverty would soon be overcome. The discovery of antibiotics, a true revolution in medicine, promised to overcome age-old diseases and raise life expectancy everywhere in the world. The space conquest, then in its early stages, appeared to us like a sparkling Odyssey. In developed countries, Welfare states aimed at reducing inequalities and resolving most glaring disparities, while newly independent Third world countries in Asia and Africa, after recovering their national sovereignty, built their dreams on economic growth to reduce the gap of underdevelopment. Nasser's Egypt had nationalised Suez canal and undertook the construction of Assouan dam, offering the hope for the first time in history to control the flood of the Nile and provide electricity and water to thousands of Egyptian fallahs.

At that time, for us, nothing seemed out of reach…

Architecture embraced the optimistic cause of modernity, setting out to materialise the utopia of a New World, through new techniques and aesthetics, emancipated from the burden of the past. The universalising abstract qualities of technological reproduction would supposedly bring greater equality among people, not only greater access to shelter but broader access to common values and collective experience, resulting in a new International style. Our teachers, of whom I will name late Dean Ghosn and Professor Assem Salam, pointed out our duty as professionals to act as responsible actors in our society, but as that time of great faith in universal values, this involvement meant to us enrolling under the banner of one of the sacred trio's masters: Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright or Mies van der Rohe. The pioneers of Modern movement upheld the basic premise that architecture and urban planning have the power to engage society and actually transform it, and that art and technology, united in mass production, could bring increased social welfare as well as enlightened democratic consciousness and contribute to human progress. We were tempted to follow them on this path, to the point that some of us even dreamt that architecture has the power to change the world…

For my graduation in 1969, I chose to present a final project that looks today like a naive utopia. A pilot village in South Lebanon where inhabitants, grouped in production and distribution co-operatives, would experiment highly sophisticated agricultural techniques while acquiring theoretical knowledge in rural economy, agronomy and management. An alphabetisation centre, a socio-medical complex, popular art, music, dance and theatre ateliers, civic defence training and sport facilities completed the program of what was conceived as a new phalanstere for the resisting South. The whole construction system was conceived on a modular basis to allow for expansion, and the idea was to develop local building techniques of lightweight prefabrication to promote self-construction at limited cost.

It was a confused mixture of Hassan Fathy, Moshe Safdie and Team X approaches, that was supposed to transform society through democratising art and technology.
I returned to AUB in fall 1982, but this time as a lecturer in Architectural Design and Architectural Theory. I had lost part of my arrogance, but I still had very strong certainties, although I started raising questions about my previous relationship to the dogmas of Modern movement.

It was a time where we started discovering that the promises of modernity were short from solving the problems of balanced development and improved environment. The negative effects of a unidimensional technology-oriented growth became more and more evident, with the breakdown in natural equilibrium and the deterioration of ecological conditions. The dream of Space odyssey threatened to turn into the nightmare of star wars. The effects of economic crisis pushed for dismantling most of regulating mechanisms set out by welfare states during the previous period, while a deep philosophical disorientation followed the widespread loss of faith in the Enlightenment promise of inevitable progress, as "truth" and "reason" fail to advance human condition. In underdeveloped countries, the promises of development left most of the population on the lurch, while a small minority monopolised most of countries’ resources. Nasser was dead, and the failure of his modernising project cleared the way for local dictators and oil potentates. An endless war had transformed the Lebanese dream into a nightmare and, with 1982 Israeli’s invasion, an arab capital was occupied for the first time in modern history.

Amidst these tragic events, we were trying to find out our way in the jungle of "isms" that flourished at that time on the architectural scene. Christopher Alexander had alerted us, in his "Notes on the Synthesis of Form", on the inability of Modern architectural and urban models to fit with community environments. Robert Venturi had criticised, in his period-breaking book "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture", the tendency of these models to alienate people from their cultural expression and their failure to capture public imagination. While John Turner was celebrating self-help squatter settlements as a model that addresses housing issues more effectively than any of the institutional professional programmes. The failure of Modern movement in finding appropriate answers to housing and living problems in an era of rapid and massive urbanisation, its tendency to rely on elitist and technocratic solutions, as well as its destructive effects on natural environment and built heritage produced a disenchantment with modernism as an architectural and urban system.

Hence, modernism’s abstract and totalizing frameworks, its idealised internationalism connoting a superior and universalising existence, lost ground against an emerging sense of culturally differentiated identities. In opposition to the stripped-bare modern aesthetics, we started considering architecture as a system of signs expressing national or local identities, a language that conveys cultural meanings, providing continuity with past traditions or popular cultural forms. Modernism was dead, Long live post-modernism!

In the Vertical Studio I directed in 1985 and 1986 with the students of Third and Fourth years, we tried to study the morphology of traditional arab and islamic cities, their urban fabric and architectural typologies, and explore ways to achieve the development of urban forms that would avoid the rupture generated by modernisation and insure historical continuity. The exercise was fascinating, but we were rapidly faced with a difficult dilemma: although the rediscovery of cultural identity that has been marginalised by the totalizing narratives of modernism appeared to us as a process of liberation, we had to face the risk of falling into a discourse that merely advocates the retreat into tradition and disregards social evolution and cultural transformation. After all, Hassan Fathy’s experience in New Gourna village ended up to be a fiasco, since the essence of his architecture was based on the re-instatement of traditional building methods and ways of life, at the very time when the communities he was building for were undergoing radical transformations and changes in societal values. Hence, the search for identity lost soon its emancipatory aspect and became often limited to the reproduction of traditional architectural archetypes, a self-centred return to formalism or worse still, to a dogmatic regional revivalism that excluded innovation and creativity.
When I moved to France in 1987 and started my professional practice there, the limits of such a dogmatic attitude became more and more evident to me. I discovered that, whether we like it or not, globalisation has unified the world, in the sense that major problems, whether related to the growing interdependence of world economy, the integration of financial and telecommunication markets, the increasing rates of population migrations, the changing patterns of spatialities or the deterioration of natural environment, all of these are raised today at the scale of the entire planet and cannot hence find appropriate answers at the mere local level. Globalisation has undermined the coherence, wholeness and unity of individual societies, but it has also produced significant shifts within culture, amplified by the development of communication technologies and the ethereal transfer of ideas and ideologies. Propelled by new categories of experience, changes in sensibilities, indeterminacy of language, breakdown of boundaries and new modes of representation, a discursive complexity now marks every discipline and professional field. In a context of continual cultural modification, where the post-modern condition is marked everywhere by rupture, fragmentation and discontinuity, both the reliance of modernism upon totalizing notions of function and universal expansion, and the traditionalist resurrection of meaning, with its desperate search for identities' expression, seem totally inadequate to provide definite answers.

Architecture is in search for a new discourse and practice.

Amidst this deep cognitive crisis, where recategorisation is occurring at all levels of life, from the most mundane to the most momentous, the subversive strategy of deconstructivism has the advantage of challenging the comfort of universal abstract language and undermining our certainties about taken-for-granted conventions. Peter Eisenman or Bernard Tshumi's approaches, whereby design is conceived as a process by which architecture dislocates its own meanings to generate forms that produce estrangement and perceptual renewal, look obviously attractive. Similarly, Rem Koolhas and Zaha Hadid's objections on the relevance of the ordered city model — this ideal type inherited from the Renaissance and the Baroque periods — and their search for alternatives inspired from the fragmentation of suburbs or the chaotic dynamism of Far eastern emerging cities, may look more appropriate to the late capitalist age. However, these subversive discourses often produce a feeling of deep malaise that leaves us unsatisfied. Architecture is not only a compositional language or a system of signs. It is not a painting on the wall that makes the familiar strange and thereby historicizes it. It is not a theatrical production that focuses attention and participation on a particular moment of critical consideration. Architecture is a multi-faced social practice that operates at the intersection of power, relations of production, culture and representation.

This is perhaps the reason for our insatisfaction towards the contemporary architectural discourses. Despite their different theoretical premises — from eclectic historicism or regional revivalism to radical deconstructivism — all these discourses share a common disengagement from the social commitment of Modern movement. In the meantime however, while unifying the world, globalisation is creating a new geography of centres and margins, which produces increasing inequities between societies and within societies. The fall of Berlin wall, while liberating eastern European countries from a totalitarian obsolete system, has accentuated these inequities by establishing a new world disorder, marked by unilaterism and sharp imbalance. Insecurity, fuelled by structural unemployment and bias economic and financial policies, is the lot of the poor in every society. In a time of dazzling scientific advances and technological breakthroughs, billions of human beings, especially in the Third world but also in developed countries, are living in conditions beneath human decency. The communication revolution and the rising expectations of populations everywhere make these disparities even more visible and the potential for social pathologies and politically explosive situations more likely. The social distance between cultures and their ability to communicate with one another being affected by these growing disparities, the resulting differences reflect in violence and conflicts. If modernism was ceremoniously exploded in 1972 as we were told, with the failed Pruitt-Igoe project in Saint-Louis, post-modernism died in New York on September 11, says French philosopher Jean Baudrillard.
Amidst these new conditions, can architecture stay aside, responding to social, political and economic realities through a retreat into formalism and the marketing of aesthetic images, or the play with meanings and metaphors? Is the design of the built environment of no more consequence to humanity than the Haute Couture of Paris fashion houses?

The search for an alternative to the unbalanced unilateral globalisation is not a straightforward operation, that can be solved through simplistic political statements or magic formulas opposing “them” to “us”. It is a complex process that articulates various levels of knowledge and practice and embraces, on the one hand the critiques of modernism’s pretension of universality and its totalizing frameworks, while on the other hand challenging the autism of identities’ backlash and the common cynical attitude of post-modernists. At a time when more than 95% of the built environment is being shaped without any professional intervention by architects, it becomes urgent to reconstruct a social agenda for architecture, to avoid the risk for our professional practice to be marginalized, or transformed into a mere production of commercial images. Such an agenda, which articulates both architectural discourse and design practice, is based on a number of key elements that appear today of primary importance:

- **First**: One of the effects of today's globalisation is the erasure of public space. This is partly due to the growing homogenisation and impersonality which characterise contemporary world, but also to the fact that the reaction against this homogenisation prompts people to envision community on an even more restricted scale. If the self is defined in opposition to homogenisation, the sharing of this self is more and more narrowed to exclude those who are different in terms of class, ethnic origin, philosophical or religious belief, or even style and mode of expression. As Richard Sennet warns us, fraternity has become empathy to a select group of people, allied with rejection of those not within the local circle. But this process of fraternity by exclusion of outsiders never ends, since a collective image of us never solidifies. Fragmentation and internal division is the very logic of this version of fraternity, which leads ultimately to fratricide.

  In response to the process of re-tribalization that affects all contemporary societies, it becomes urgent to invent strategies aiming at reconstructing public space, a space in which diversity and complexity of persons, interests, groups, beliefs and choices become available as a social experience.

- **Second**: The deregulating credo that characterises contemporary globalisation process and the search for short-term maximal profits are endangering both the natural environment and the cultural heritage of our societies. Consumer culture’s wastefulness and the accelerated entropy produced by the ruthless efficiency of deregulated markets produce a growing consciousness of the need to promote sustainable development. However, environmental inequities are also growing between societies and within societies. While the Third world is being transformed into the dustbin of northern developed countries, the gentrification of rehabilitated city centres and the growing tendency to restrict the full use of natural protected areas for the happy few transform ecology into a privilege for the rich people. Hence, the democratisation of ecology becomes a key point of architecture's social agenda.

  Forty years after Henri Lefebvre's call for the right to the city, the right to environment and to cultural heritage becomes the challenge of our contemporary times.

- **Third**: Within the new economic and political constraints created by globalisation, it is necessary to build up new mechanisms for the revival of the health, social welfare and social housing project that was abandoned due to the failure of the modernist endeavour. Reclaiming the emancipatory project of modernity does not mean repeating the same errors, nor falling back into its idealist and totalising frameworks. On the contrary, the renewed understanding of a social project for architecture means to envision a future which is not a past.
Such a project should be envisioned as part of an overall agenda aiming at building up new inventive strategies combining rethinking public sector policies, creating genuine public/private partnerships, whether on national, regional or international levels, and recognising the role of communities in forging new spatial relationships that allow the dilution of social ghettos and promotion of social integration. Within such an agenda, architectural challenges are of primary importance for the restoration of disempowered dignity since, as we all know, the architectural image is a key element of self-representation both for individuals and societies.

- Last, but not least, the making of architecture is an epistemological activity, it is unavoidably a social practice, but it is a practice that has its own specificity. Much of what we know of institutions, social relations, cultural values and everyday life is mediated by the built environment. Thus, to make architecture is to construct knowledge, but also to intervene, to signify: it is ultimately a political act. However, while recognising the fact that we cannot shirk professional and social responsibility for our architectural practice, we should not forget that this practice is fundamentally related to form-making. Inasmuch it differs from painting, sculpture and the various branches of engineering, architecture cannot become a branch of sociology or be reduced to a variety of anthropological or philosophical discourse.

Hence, one of the main challenges for architects in this new century is to invent both a new critical discourse and a new constructive practice that founds the specific role of architecture in a world of growing multidisciplinarity.