

Introductory remarks

Selecting one hundred buildings in a century from twenty two countries that spread over a large territory is without a doubt a challenging task. A team was put together for the selection, and contributed with essays defining major issues that architectural production faced and responded to. The opportunity unraveled several findings that are useful to present here. First is the dire need for grounded, documented, substantiated and precise research on architecture in the Arab world. Second is the discovery that, although archiving and documentation are not well-established endeavors, some archives do exist, scattered, untreated and awaiting action. Third, regarding content, we are reminded – once again – how revealing architecture is of the ethos of time and place. The century seems to have taken us full circle, back to fundamentals, and not surprisingly is forcing us into new beginnings.

At a time when the Arab world is in turmoil, reinventing itself by choice, subjected once again to external interventions, or driven towards religious fundamentalism, it is enlightening to look back at the past century. Already initiated in the second half of the 19th century during Ottoman rule, Arab nationalism and the notion of Pan-Arabism developed in the 20th century. Accompanied by modernization, the concept went through several phases of expectation, realization, disenchantment, and associated questioning. The various essays of this publication make manifest the architectural vicissitudes which were often concomitant with political conditions.

Arab cities were not always tied in their fate, although they all vibrated at times with the same aspirations. The spotlight moved from Cairo, Baghdad, and Beirut to Dubai and other places. Furthermore, many cities flourished benefiting from hardships of other cities undergoing war and turbulence. It is therefore judicious to ask: what, beyond the Arabic language, ties the Arab world together. The answer will not come from architecture alone; the exercise of putting together these examples clearly demonstrates that. Far from aiming to be an exhaustive catalogue or even an undisputable selection, this collection is an opportunity for fortuitous encounters displayed across the pages of the book.

We have mostly highlighted buildings that pertain to the issue of public identity construction, of representation, and of nation building. We also favored the presentation of buildings for which drawings and sketches were available, in order to emphasize the idea of vision and authorship, and also call for the preservation of archives and the documentation of architectural material. We excluded unbuilt projects from the selection, hoping to prepare a publication on the unbuilt Arab world, a designation that says as much about architecture as about statehood. What could not feature in this book will be documented in an online database that will expand continuously.^[1]

It is a fact that several of the major buildings in the Arab world – from Iraq, to Mauritania in the Maghreb, passing by the Arabian Peninsula, the Mashreq, Egypt and Arab East Africa – were designed by foreigners who came with the colony, the mandate and other protectorates. The absence of locally trained professionals made this possible and several countries waited a long time before launching local engineering and architecture programs. Although with various levels of intensity, the model of the foreign architect marking the territory with landmark projects prevailed. It is for that matter still widespread, reinforced now by globalization.

In contrast with some quickly concocted “regional” recipes sometimes legitimized by foreign expertise, many attentive local or foreign professionals designed in response to time and place. In the past century, Architecture theorists and historians were not many in the Arab World. In reality, the Arab library of Architecture, for the most part, is made of books and essays written by practicing architects who wrote about their own work in order to convey their ideas: Hassan Fathy with his *Building for the Poor*, Saba Shiber in his many pamphlets, Sayed Karim with *Majallat al-Imara*, Rifat Chadirji with *Al-Ukhaidir Wal Qasr Al-Bellawri* (a crucial work on Iraq, awaiting translation into English), Mohammad Makiya, Antoine Tabet and others. It is timely to read those seminal texts; the questions they raised early on about locale, identity, tradition, contemporaneity, appropriateness and economic-social-environmental sustainability remain valid ones. Recent architecture tends to favor environmental response over the debate of style. As we are looking back at the previous century, we realize that modernism was not as careless as it was portrayed, nor were all architects then concerned primarily with style. Before sustainable design was coined as such, many architects designed soundly, learning from earlier traditions while sometimes pushing the boundaries. The often sterile debate opposing the traditional and the modern can only be resolved if we consider tradition to be a compilation of modernisms over time.

Those recurrent questions, as well as the pressing ones related to housing, the environment and the globalization of culture, are to be debated. The Arab Center for Architecture hopes to take part in that debate as a platform for thinking about architecture in the Arab world. Participating at the Venice Biennale of Architecture was possible thanks to our host, the Kingdom of Bahrain, which entrusted us with the installation and publication for its third participation after two successful ones. This is a milestone towards making our mission more operative.

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