CREATING ONE'S FUTURE FROM ONE'S PAST: NONDEFENSIVELY

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There are people who have created for themselves a romantic picture of a glorious past that is far from accurate. They wish to see the living Indian return to an age that has long passed and they resent any changes in his art.

To rob a people of tradition is to rob it of inborn strength and identity. To rob a people of opportunity to grow through invention or through acquisition of values from other races is to rob it of its future.

— Frederick Douglas and René d’Harmoncourt, curators of the 1941 “Indian Art in the United States” exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This paper is essentially an expanded exegesis based on the trenchant quotation above, which was on display at the new Indian Museum when it opened in the “old” (nineteenth-century!) Alexander Hamilton Customs House in lower Manhattan, New York, in the fall of 1994.1

The museum itself (which is the first of three that will be established with support from the Smithsonian Institute) is a remarkable achievement. It has absorbed a portion of the extensive collection of artifacts produced by Native Americans from all parts of the New World (Central and South America, as well as the expected material from North America — which is usually treated as if it were “separate”) that was assembled by a white, nineteenth-century amateur with a deep interest in Native Americans and with fine, albeit catholic, taste.

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This could have been a disaster, just another condescending depiction of "the other" as a primitive and dead culture. In fact, protests from "first-nations" people delayed plans for the museum for several years, and this delay averted what otherwise might have been a fiasco at best, an offense at worst. Native Americans insisted on becoming involved from the beginning in the Smithsonian's plans to display their heritage.

First, the museum planning committee, constituted with Native American representation, insisted that items with sacred significance be returned to the tribes (they prefer the term "nations") from which they were acquired. Second, it was decided that the chief curator of the museum would be a Native American and that Indians would play a decisive role in preparing the exhibits and the accompanying texts.

This attempt to de-colonize the displays was politically significant, and the results are aesthetically stunning. In the opening display, in a true and honest form of "post-modernity," each exhibit is introduced by three types of texts. Each text presents a different perspective on the items displayed: one is the conventional view of the (white) ethno-historian; a second is the view of an enlightened, sympathetic (but still external) anthropologist; and the third, and by far the most interesting, expresses the emic, or internal, view of the descendants of the producers — Indians themselves — consistently referred to as first-nation persons.

The contrasts among these perspectives are striking, but they do not create "straw men," nor are they undignified or "cheap" travesties. Rather, they capture some of the dilemmas that resulted from the worst form of colonialism the world has ever known (displacement by a settler regime). They counteract attempts to portray the "native" as belonging to a totally alien culture, and they portray the struggle of the Native American to come to terms with his existential condition as a person with both a past and a future. They express the dual refusal of natives to be viewed either as "dead" or as "alienated" from the modern world. (The epigraph quoted above is taken from the third type of text, and it is perhaps important to point out that neither curator for that early exhibit was a Native American.)

This is perhaps an apt place to begin a discussion of the need to preserve — but also to permit growth — in traditional architecture, especially with reference to high-culture areas with a long tradition of evolution and written records and a very long reach into a glorious past. Indeed, especially in such cases it is important to question the basic concept of tradition.

Let me begin with the most outrageous form of my argument: there has seldom, if ever, been anything identifiable as purely traditional architecture in the sense of a totally indigenous form constructed by an absolutely isolated group of builders. Such a concept of traditionalism is as much a fiction as the anthropologists' fantasy of a totally primitive tribe uncontaminated by outside forces, the linguists' search for babies raised by wolves, or the science-fiction writers' favorite plot — the revival of a frozen caveman. Yes, such cases may have been found, but most have been revealed to be hoaxes and, when they are not so exposed, there is only a narrow and limited band of information that can be obtained from them. (The Tasaday turned out to have been affected by external contact; and the recent (real) discovery of a frozen caveman is yielding information on the state of his health, but not on his culture — and, of course, he cannot be revived.)

Thus, I begin with the premise that throughout history architectural forms have migrated — either along with the migrations of people (the world has always been nomadic, although the current range is spectacularly wide), or with the reports of travelers who carried goods and ideas from one place to another.

Such diffusion served a valuable function. Because humans are both imitative and adventurous, the creative impulses of builders have been strengthened and transfused by such gifts. Indeed, great architecture has always traveled, interbred and synergized. In the process of its transmission, changes have been integrated with existent forms, thus "becoming" the transformed "tradition."

In another article in this journal, published several years ago, I called this process "traditioning.″ Here I want to build on this earlier idea, exploring the ways in which such an approach can offer guidelines to present-day architects, especially those in non-European culture areas. But first I may need to support my allegation that isolated traditions do not exist with some concrete evidence. The Middle East and North Africa, fortunately, offer some of the best examples for my purpose because of the very long time over which so-called traditional Islamic architecture evolved in those regions.

**AN INTRINSIC INDIGENOUS?**

There is no intrinsic indigenous traditional Islamic architecture that dates back to the time of the Prophet and his revelations, unless one considers the two elements specifically related to the ritual of communal prayer: an open space able to accommodate believers in periodic collective worship, and some marker indicating the direction of prayer. These two elements suggested architectural possibilities: namely, a permanent perimeter to the space of prayer, which developed...
into the mosque’s outside wall; and a permanent direction marker, which developed into the prayer niche (mihrab). The desire to elevate the prayer leader and to facilitate the sermon, when later added, might be considered a third element, which led to the minbar. Every other aspect of Islamic traditional architecture evolved gradually and in interaction with preexistent forms, either those found in situ or those carried to the new place with the conquests which were a form of permanent migration.

There were, of course, pre-Islamic architectural forms in all zones into which Islam spread, so that, initially at least, “traditional” Islamic architecture was highly diverse and not yet codified. In the Fertile Crescent, for example, there were Roman and Byzantine precursors that were incorporated both into architecture and the urban settlement form (e.g., in Damascus); and in Tunisia, Algeria and Libya strong Roman architectural influences, and indeed whole settlements, existed. In Egypt there was the rich tradition of Coptic architecture, and even earlier Pharaonic precursors; and the exemplary Mosque of Ibn Tulun took both the minaret form from Iraq (Samarra) and the surface decoration from Coptic bas relief. In the Maghreb, Islamic imperatives imposed themselves on Berber, Roman, and possibly Vandal “indigenous” forms.

In short, if the truth be known, none of these developments in Islamic urban and architectural forms was purely indigenous — in the sense of having evolved without outside influences from the earlier civilizations of Mesopotamia, Pharaonic Egypt and the Sudanic Belt, from Sumaria and from Turkish Çatal Huyuk, etc., in an almost infinite regress.

In the Asian realms of Islamic proselytization — such as the Indian subcontinent, Malay, Indonesia, and even farther east in China, etc. — there were greater discontinuities in architectural traditions, because the preexisting traditional forms were quite disparate, following different lines of descent. Because of this, such regions were very late in adopting some of the clichés of the heartland, and only then partially. The appearance in the Far East of more codified versions inspired by Arabo-Persian-Ottoman examples has been relatively recent, and dependent upon prior syntheses.

During the high period of the Islamic empire, traditions evolved, were seeded, replanted, and hybridized — eventually throughout the central Arabo-Persian heartland. A highly creative process of blending and codifying the new style took place, yielding what we now think of as traditional. But even this did not remain constant, nor was it immune to outside influences. For example, Roman and Byzantine forms had been incorporated into Damascus and Aleppo, from which they were carried to Spain by the emigrant Umayyads, and then later, via émigrés from Spain during the time of their reconquest/forced migration, to the Maghreb. And Turkic/Central Asian forms found their way to Turkey, Iraq, and even northern India, and thence, at the time of Ottoman imperial expansion, were reintroduced to Egypt and other parts of North Africa.

**COLONIAL TRADITIONALISM**

Had the process ended there I suspect there would be less interest today in reviving and preserving “Islamic heritage.” Architectural mixes could be taken for granted, and processes of normal evolution would seem more acceptable. However, nineteenth-century European colonialism, carried especially by English and French “conquerors,” not only brought new forms but imposed them on hostile soil. Interestingly enough, they also reinvented old ones in that peculiar romanticism that was used by colonizers to decorate their unpretty enterprise. The French were particularly prone to this early tendency toward Disneyfication. The fantasy of “traditionalism” incorporated into the new Medina Habous in Casablanca, replete with **aswaq** and workshops for a society no longer an economic reality, is only one of the more egregious examples. The French Ministry structures at the edge of Medina Tunis, the arcades of the **ville nouvelle** of Rabat, etc., coupled with the “respect for the ‘native’” endlessly paraded by Maréchal Lyautey in his public **paroles**, are but a few of the many examples that could be mentioned here.

And yet, at the side of (but valued above) the extant Arab cities, the colonizers and their indigenous imitators employed a different set of architectural forms — no less traditional in the places from which they were brought, but certainly not growing organically out of the society in which they were implanted. Discontinuities easily as great as those between Arabo-Persian Islam and Islamic regions of the farther east appeared, but even more alienating ideologically. The new forms were charged with understandable political meanings that had little to do with aesthetics **per se**.

Thus architecture and urbanism became inextricably entwined with liberation politics, but the relationship was a curiously ambivalent one. On the one hand, there was an impulse to imitate and to appear “modern.” It should be recalled that the first such modern quarter of Cairo was not built by the British, but by a French-trained Egyptian engineer, working with French technicians who had been invited by the still “independent” Khedive of Egypt, before Egypt succumbed to colonized status. And even where modern Western architecture did not appear until colonialism was
deeply entrenched, the style became one that (anti-colonial ideology notwithstanding) was “desired” — among certain classes at least. The new quarters became target goals to which those who could afford to wanted to move if they were permitted. Among the younger generation of would-be “moderns” there was no question at all. They wanted independence but also to be modern.

But modern was equated with foreign — hence the ambivalence and, even today after independence, a certain Arab romanticism for “authenticity” and “tradition.” This has resulted in a movement to restore and recycle traditional Islamic-identified architecture. Thus Islam became very much a part of post-colonial identity politics, most visible in Algeria but also present elsewhere. I am suggesting that colonialism created a disjuncture that forestalled the ordinary process of synergism and hybridization that was part and parcel of tradition, properly understood.

I am certainly not minimizing the value of that tradition, and in prior papers I have stressed the ongoing and contemporary significance of some of the greatest inventions in city building the world has ever known. I shall therefore not repeat these arguments here. Instead, let me turn to some additional dilemmas.

**THE STORY TODAY**

What is so different in architecture today? Why does there now exist an apparent clash between modernity and tradition? And why are so many Middle Easterners concerned with authenticity?

I have pointed out above one of the basic causes for this. In the cloisonné, or mosaic, universe of premodern times, cultural infusions seldom crossed civilizational circuits; or when they did, they had such power that they wiped out or supplanted what had gone before, leaving only residual traces. There are a few exceptions that come to mind — namely, the violent incursions from across the Mediterranean, that great east-west line dividing the northern from the southern shores. Crusader castles are the remnants of these invasions that never took root, as are the parallels between Mamluk architecture and that of Ravenna. But for the most part there was the chance for a more gradual incorporation of styles from elsewhere, especially when they came from the same civilizational zone, and therefore did not have to be resisted on ideological grounds. Thus, societies were not called upon to absorb and integrate drastically different traditions, especially those imposed without their consent or understanding.

Secondly, however, each of the “units” that came into cultural contact in earlier times had time to develop some essential unity within itself. This made transfusions neither as random nor as potentially chaotic as those which occur in the present day.

What seems different today is the sheer cacophony of post-modernity, which makes fun (kitsch) of the authentic or traditional. Postmodern architecture, as it is developing in the Western world, “plays with” everyone’s traditions, even (or especially) its own. It is therefore difficult for Arab architects to play differently, and I am not necessarily advocating that they do so. Indeed, the kitsch of postmodern architecture violates some of the most fundamental and high purposes of architecture — to be honest and functional.

My newest research project investigates the architectural/urban planning development of three American metropolitan zones — New York, Chicago and Los Angeles — stressing how much each has borrowed, but how each place has also developed its own distinctive architectural style. I am interested in how relatively independent traditions have evolved in these cities, despite continuous outside infusions of architects and planners, and how each has attempted to achieve unity in the face of the juxtaposition of styles and the forces of post-modernity. I suspect that this project may yield some unanticipated findings with relevance for cities outside the Western tradition.

This brings me to my final theme. Today the universe is no longer cloisonné, and cultural and demographic migrations are the rule rather than the exception. One might view this as a threat to coherence and authenticity, but that would be to deny the possibility that truly great and innovative art forms can be generated by incorporating the traditions of others. (One need mention only the effects of African art on later Picasso.) The dilemma, then, is how to create a contemporary architectural tradition in nonimitative but syncretic terms, one in which various civilizational units can find their own voices — not only by looking backward to their great traditions but by combining them with and adapting them to a now increasingly global universe.

Contemporary architects, no matter where they work, must adapt these global expressions, making certain that they address culture-specific user needs. This will not only enrich the value of their structures, but make them creations to which local clients can respond with pleasure and reinforced self-confident identity.

So it is that I return, here at the end of this article, to the theme introduced in the epigraph: how to combine the strength of the past with a future open to influences from elsewhere. This is the challenge for traditional architecture in most developing societies.
REFERENCE NOTES

This paper was originally delivered as a keynote presentation at the IASTE conference “Value in Tradition,” Tunis, December 17-20, 1994.

1. The author was waiting at the door when the museum opened with great ceremony. By informal estimates, more than half of the first visitors were descended from America’s first inhabitants.


6. Even the courtyard house, now considered quintessentially “Islamic,” was typical of early Sumerian structures.

7. See, for example, the new Grand Mosque of (the mostly Chinese Malaysian city of) Kuala Lumpur.


11. Abu-Lughod, *Cairo*. See, in particular, the chapter on the growth of the dual city via Isma’ili’s/Mubarak’s plan.

12. A movement most marked in the kingdoms of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf area. In Algeria there is a certain irony: Islamic ideology was employed effectively during the war for independence, but is now a thorn in the side of the current modernizing regime.
