

Cultural Quakes and Architecture

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I'm going to talk today about some possible ways of engaging architecture with contemporary realities. In doing so, I am merely recalling the initial concerns of modern architecture, which began as a movement for social transformation through the design of new solutions to historic problems. More specifically, I shall talk about engaging architecture in regions where cultural quakes are causing havoc in the daily lives of thousands of people. A cultural quake is a violent eruption of the cultural crusts of a civilization or region. It seems to come about as a culmination of years of creeping movements of its social plate structures. I shall explain this analogy later with an example from the Balkans and the Middle East.

The proposition to engage architecture with contemporary realities rests on three contentions:

- Firstly, whether we like it or not, architecture has political impact and political events impact architecture. The construction of enormous complexes in Brasilia, Dhaka and Chandigarh, the placement of a major American art museum in the heart of the Basque region struggling for a regional independence, the bulldozing of churches and mosques in Kosovo, the demolition of monasteries in the Cultural Revolution in China. These are all examples of the impact that politics and architecture have on each other. Somehow, the formation and obliteration of the identity of a community is inextricably tied to the construction and destruction of architecture.
- The second contention is that one should not leave high architecture to mature indefinitely in an ethic-free zone. The high ideals of architecture ought not be concerned only with an haute couture status where a designer's signature certifies architectural beauty and brilliance.
- Thirdly, that architecture can provide socially just solutions in areas where new conflicts are destroying the futures of large parts of the global community. These architectural solutions have a potential that are infinitely superior to any solutions designed by military commanders and advisors.

I am not advocating that these contentions be applicable for the engagement of architecture in a universal way. On the contrary, I believe that these contentions are applicable only in some regions.... regions where the intense nature of crisis has violently overtaken the daily lives of the people. These are perhaps the epicentres of the cultural quakes that have erupted in the last few decades. These are regions that have been and will continue to be profoundly affected by the formation of Israel in the midst of a region ruled by mostly autocrats, the decline and fall of the Soviet Empire and the collapse of African countries. These are regions that are now placed on one side of a *newly emergent polarity* where the collapse of the nation state, the impact of the global

free market economy and the terrible impact of modern war technologies have recently thrown millions of people into poverty over the last ten years.

I should explain the nature of this *newly emergent polarity* since the conflicts that have been triggered off by this polarisation process provide the context for the architectural interventions that are proposed by me in the last part of the talk. This new polarity is not about ideologies and cold wars, it is, I believe about order and disorder, state and non-state governments, nation state impositions and regional resistances. On one side of the divide are a few countries that possess what Eric Hobsbawm terms "permanent state structures"- these are the north Atlantic countries of Europe, the United States and the far eastern countries of Japan and China. On the other side of the divide is most of the rest of the world without stable state structures. Some parts of this "rest of the world" is in the process of trying to establish permanent state structures while others are simply being governed by power groups who impose temporary order through dictates. Large parts of Africa, the Middle East and the ex-Soviet colonies come under this category. It is a characteristic of our age that the countries with permanent state structures try, in one way or another, to impose orderly governments on those regions whose disorder seems threatening to them.

Within this polarity, I would like to place before you two proposals that were made as architectural interventions in regions where military solutions have been imposed on communities living in the midst of disorder. The first one relates to Kosovo where I spent a little time proposing reconstruction schemes for the United Nations and the second one relates to Jerusalem where I spent considerably more time working with the Palestinian Authority. Let me state at the outset that both proposals are idealistic and futuristic and aimed at expressing the view that architecture can intervene in a political reality and thereby confront extra-architectural problems with physically designed solutions. The proposals are intended to suggest the taking of risks to explore solutions that are other than dirty armed militia ones.

I begin with Kosovo one of the epicentres of cultural quakes in Europe.

An examination of the cultural tectonic plates of Eastern Europe shows that there are at least three major cohesive cultural masses that have drifted towards and away from each other in the past few centuries. Their thrusts and ebbs have resulted in the formation of fault belts along the points of contact of their separate crusts. These fault belts in the crust run north south and east west and have been the locations of the most intense cultural quakes. The cultural crust that lies to the northwest consists of the Western European Catholic-Protestant civilization and this has in recent history caused the strongest movement. The surface of this crust has been active in the last two centuries and is now constantly drifting towards the east as well as the south. The second cultural plate is crusted with the Orthodox Eastern European civilization and this lies to the east as well as the south of the Western European

plate. This plate has been relatively dormant for the last 50 years but has now started erupting with a vengeance the third crust lies further to the south and consists of the Muslim civilization of Turkey. At one time (between the 13th and 16th centuries) this crust was rather volatile and its movements had thrust deep inside the other two plates, causing immense cultural seismic activity.

All the three cultural crust faults meet in the region of the erstwhile Yugoslavia and this is the most dangerous cultural quake zone in the whole of Europe. It is subjected to the pressures of all the three crusts and thus the cultural seismic activity there leads to traumatic physical upheavals. The First World War was triggered off in Sarajevo. Subsequently Marshal Tito was able to paper over the deep cracks in this hot spot and postpone the plate pressures from erupting. But like all tectonic movements whose creep is held down, the pent up pressures have a tendency to make up for postponed eruptions and it needed only the rule of Slobodan Milosovich to let loose the fury of the pent up force in the regions around Sarejevo.

The north-south fault lines in the cultural tectonic plates pass through the territories of Eastern Europe and include Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia. At one time the Soviet regime used these places as buffer zones between themselves and Western Europe and was quite contented to let them be ruled locally by convenient petty dictators. With the demise of the USSR, Western Europe has rushed into this buffer zone to ensure that they do not return to Russia's orbit. Russia continues to be regarded as an unpredictable ogre. Today, Europe with its stable state structures, could indeed find these regions as convenient protective buffer zones for its home territories. They provide a transitional space between themselves and Russia. These buffer countries have therefore been designated as Transitional Economies and as Candidate Countries for the European Union. As a political and a financial force, the European Union is trying to hammer in stable state structures through political democracy, good governance and private enterprise as the basics for joining Europe. Carrots that would discourage the potential spread of Russian influence once again. The exception to this is Kosovo where the entire national state structure has been suspended and superseded by an imposed global United Nations (UNMIK) government.

Beginning on March 21, 1999, the United States-led NATO forces launched cruise missile and bomb attacks at targets across the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Within 78 days, as a consequence of the retaliations to this attack, large parts of Kosovo were bombed and bulldozed into rubble. Half of the housing stock was completely devastated, and the agricultural system seriously damaged.

I was sent to Kosovo by the United Nations to propose an overall housing reconstruction strategy there was no electricity for the entire country; the entire infrastructure had been destroyed. Communication and transportation was confined to the United Nations networks and vehicles. Even food stocks could not easily be moved across the country to meet the demands of the inhabitants. Most people were unemployed in the countryside and many families were in tents, a sight not unfamiliar to T.V. viewers watching the catastrophic events in the Balkans. The only affordable and available building material was the rubble of former structures.

My proposal focuses on a site in the village of Chabra, where not a single house was left standing and the entire population was living in donor tents, being fed donor food, supplied with donor water and toilets in their own back yards.

In a sense the proposal is allegorical or metaphorical. Its starting point is the complete isolation of the village, and the need to provide shelter, employment and food and electricity. The only help available was the human resources of the Kosovars and the aid given by donors, some of who had been responsible for triggering off the devastation. A realistic reconstruction strategy required the order of funding that no donor was willing to make. The UNMIK government was absorbing most of the funding and apart from dire cases of need, the Kosovars would have to fend for themselves.

My specific reconstruction strategy that is the alternative to the one that the International institutions were interested in begins with engagement of adult labour to sort and break up the rubble into smaller pieces. This work was to be paid for in wages from UN and donor funds thus providing the first opportunity to get cash into the households. This rubble is then packed into metal wire mesh gabions that are supplied in rolls and are opened up and packed with the rubble to form the walls of the new houses, emblematically combining the reality and metaphors of the crisis there.

In addition to the walls, the only other elements of the new houses in Chabra are a series of donated solar panels to provide electricity and a glass house for growing essential foods during the cold weather when temperatures are well below freezing. In a way this proposal was tapping the high tech nature of the donor gifts that symbolised the jewellery on the house, with the hard labour and building skills of the Kosovar villagers.

THE SECOND PROPOSAL

At the site of my second proposal, Jerusalem, it became clear to me that there are, in many ways, two cities. The old city, enclosed within ancient walls, belongs to the Arabs, while the New Jerusalem belongs to Israel. Between the two cities lies a blurred space a buffer zone in which both communities hesitate to implement radical change.

If either of them actually initiates anything, a riot would ensue, because such movement would cause a shift in the imagined lines of control, with one of the two contenders emerging as victorious claimant to the whole of Jerusalem. The Ottoman walls neatly define the boundaries of old Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is well settled around a new city centre full of boutiques and extending into endless suburbs that are constantly expanding, as the Jewish population grows larger than the Arab one within the city limits.

The site for the proposal is in the fuzzy zone. Within the buffer between the two cities lie a square-shaped site that separates the tense outer edges of the old and the new cities and is currently used as a car park. New Jerusalem is a macro city of literati where the civic order of Zion has been codified into a series of written rules and regulations and practices. Inevitably, as in all macro urban cultures, these rules resist the pressures of ever-changing relationships and initiatives arising from the collaborations and negotiations of citizens interacting and adjusting to each other. These actively enforced municipal regulations resist the dynamics that convert Folk cultures into urban civilizations. The Arab city, on the other hand, is the Mesocity of intellectuals, of spoken cultures a city that is reluctant to codify its civic order into written rules and regulations. Here the community meshes its activities not along functional Regulations but on the basis of a permissiveness bordering on the turbulence of a moving stream; where tolerance and acceptability of the ensuing chaos is almost an asset to use and exploit in new ways. As the unfortunate jewel that has to be shared between Muslims, Jews, and Christians, the old city becomes the battleground where the orthodox in each community fight for it to become their own.

The project proposes Jerusalem as one of ten stations strung along a new rail link, stretching from Haifa to Nazareth, Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Beersheba, and Gaza. The train moves across the physical and ideological barriers that both sides have imposed. It is about connectivity of the economy and its people, and about new markets and

CHOICES. IT IS A TRAIN FOR COMMUTERS AND FOR GOODS AND SERVICES

Equally significantly, the rail bed forms a new nationwide water carrier that will be able to bring water from the desalination plants of Haifa, the Sea of Galilee, and the aquifers under the West Bank to be

distributed to the dry agricultural terraces of the West Bank and the deserts of the Negev. Both the track and the water carrier are integrated. The train rides, so too

Speak, on the tube carrying the water. Each of the ten stations on the route provides a civic, secular concourse for economic and social exchange.

The Jerusalem station represents a kind of celebratory architecture that could provide alternative humane solutions to the hastily sketched military response to a divided city. The conditions leading up to the proposals for this Jerusalem station are described elsewhere in a soon to be published manuscript that explains more fully the context of the proposal. This proposal is based on my refusal to accept the viability of a separate Palestine and Israel. It assumes the gradual integration of both these parts as the only viable alternative to the disastrous consequence of setting up two conflicting Lilliputian nations.

For those of you wanting to refer to any aspects of these proposals, I refer you to the forth coming volume of the proceedings of the ANYTHING conference held in New York, the forth coming volume on Jerusalem edited by Michael Sorkin and finally for a more lengthy description of the Jerusalem proposal in a forth coming volume of my essays in a book "The Loneliness of the Long Distant Future, to be published in September in India.

In conclusion let me quote from an account of history -The Muqaddimah -written in the fourteenth- century by the Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun:

The education of a scholar is greatly benefited by travelling in the pursuit of knowledge and to meet the authorities of his age.

If I were to change but a few words in this quotation and read it as "The education of an architect is greatly benefited by travelling in the pursuit of solutions and to meet the authorities of his age..." it would summon up my talk... my own reluctance to helplessly watch the gradual deconstruction of large parts of the collective of civilisations that we have inherited. ... And not have a thought in my head. The proposals are therefore born out of the thoughts of someone who comes from an ancient and wrinkled civilisation that has somehow instigated enormous changes in world affairs through peace and non-violence. I refer not only to the great non-violent advocacy of Buddhism but also the extraordinary work of Mahatma Gandhi, the inspiration of the Dalai Lama and of course more recently the compassionate work of Mother Teresa. I cannot but have an unshakable belief in the resolution of conflicts through solutions other than the poisoned military ones.