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Chapter 15

Decolonizing Architectural Knowledge: Situating Middle Eastern Pedagogies in a Globalizing World

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Since the seventeenth century, architecture has been approached from four profoundly different standpoints – those of the academic architect, the craftsman-builder, the civil engineer, and in recent years, the social scientist. From the academic viewpoint, architecture has been traditionally viewed as a fine art in which principles of formal composition, stemming from the classical (i.e., Greek and Roman) traditions, are considered to be of greatest importance. Furthermore, both the craftsman and the engineer have tended to place more emphasis on utilitarian and structural ends than on formal design; the craftsman-builders often came from a background of handicraft and folk traditions while the engineer would usually come from one of technology and applied mathematics. Since the advent of sociology, founded in the early nineteenth century by Henry de Saint-Simon and named by his disciple, August Comte, in the 1830s, the social implications of architecture have increasingly influenced the concepts of mass housing and urban design.

Congruent with the preceding historical approaches to architecture, four different types of architectural education were developed: academic, craft, technological, and sociological. Academic education underscores the study of compositional theory and the traditional principles of formal design as the most important aspects of an architect's education. These principles, considered to be most satisfactory, are acquired in schools or academies, where practicing and experienced professors are well acquainted with major design principles. In contrast, craft training in architecture has stressed the achievement of proficiency in the building trades, a proficiency that can either be learned on the job under a master craftsman, or more commonly nowadays, in architectural or craft schools. The primary aim of this type of architectural education is to train craftsman-builders who can erect buildings rather than make designs to be carried out and built by others.[1] However, while the design taught in the academies was primarily based on formal considerations with 'beauty' as the ultimate goal, in technical schools, emphasis was placed on the application of scientific principles to specific problems, with utility and economy as end goals. Under the influence of the new disciplines of sociology and social science, architectural schools were expected to emphasize pragmatic principles; thus, they not only stressed the social function of buildings and the proper relation of these to socio-physical contexts, but also, gradually, paid careful attention to planning and designing for different types of users.[2]

Formal architectural education as we know it today has changed the ways in which architecture has been approached and practiced historically. In essence, modern training has developed as a result of government initiatives as was the case of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Art Academies in France, or craft and guild movements as was the case of the Bauhaus in

Germany and its counterpart Vkhutemas in Russia [Figure 15.1]. In terms of approach, content, and focus, these schools represent the principal models of architectural education and have been developed into variations that were adopted and adapted in other parts of Europe, North America, and later to other parts of the world including the Middle East.

Contemporary Problematization

Far from homogeneous, architectural education in the Middle East has ensued along different schools of thought depending upon the region and the national setting. This makes it almost impossible to capture one unique image of the qualities and characteristics of architectural education in Middle Eastern countries. Various studies suggest that in many cases it began during colonial periods, adopting educational models of the ruling colonial power.[3] In other cases, systems of education were wholly imported, following approaches that seemed suitable at the time. In a few cases, some nations within their broader region have influenced others. Currently, each nation, or group of nations, pursues its own educational practices that are based on a combination of inherited traditional models and contemporary regional or international affiliations.[4]

The majority of the academic content, educational structures, curricula, modes of delivery, and learning styles within the educational process of architecture in the Middle East are developed based on western models. From a critical perspective, the main body of knowledge on architectural education and design pedagogy is predominantly fashioned and developed in the English-speaking world and is interrogated, debated, and reproduced mainly in the larger context of Western Europe and North America. The architectural academic community in other parts of the world, including the Middle East, is intensely predisposed by such a discourse as well as by various pedagogical trends typically introduced in western academia to reflect the needs of future professionals and the profession at large. Mainly, these represent tendencies that are instigated and practiced within the contextual particularities of western academia including the ambitions and constraints of academic institutions, the professional milieu, and the way in which architecture is practiced and produced. Classically, such an influence manifests itself in the fact that in any discussion about architectural pedagogy in Middle Eastern academia the discourse which characterizes the Global North dominates; it thus overshadows opportunities for developing another parallel, or in fact different but equally important and critical discourse which can be generated and developed to address other unique particularities relevant to the Middle East.[5]

Questions Arise

The notion of 'Islamic architecture' and the 'Islamic city', which occupies the collective psyche of architectural educators in the Middle East, was first produced within western orientalist
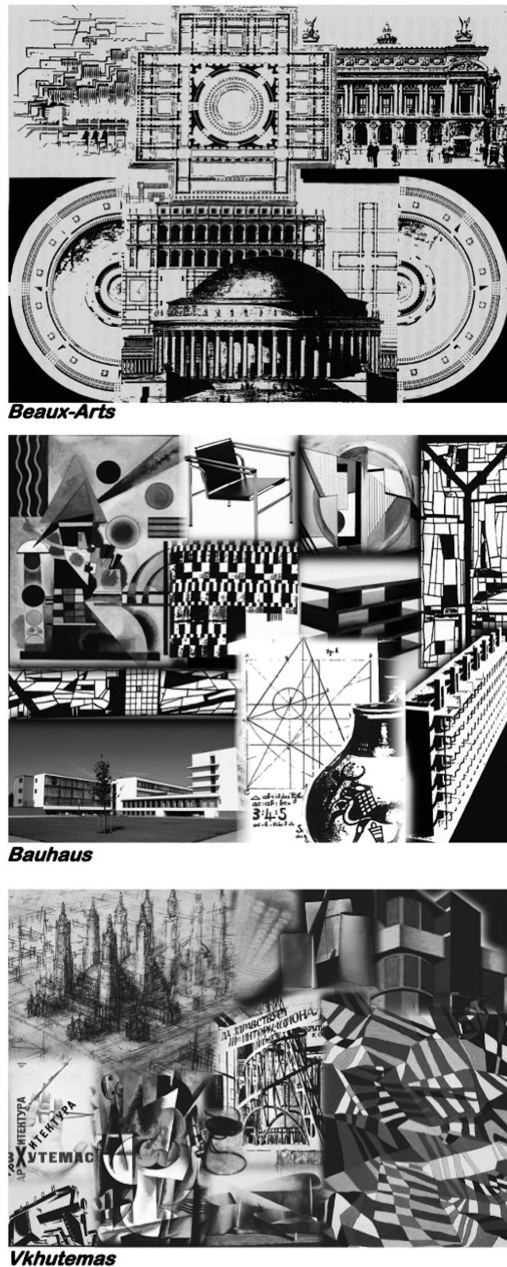
Figure 15.1: A representation of the inherited models of architectural education. Source: Ashraf M. Salama, *Spatial Design Education: New Directions for Pedagogy in Architecture and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2015), 63, 65, and 68.

discourse and was later questioned in national postcolonial debates. Such ideas were then revisited amidst the rise of nationalist particularism, international architecture, cosmopolitanism, and globalization, all constructs that, despite their consequences, liberated the discipline of architecture from the older, fixed prototypes and embraced the influences of different world orders on the production of architectural knowledge.

An integral part of the discussion within the preceding contextualization and problematization is a number of questions and possible topics, which can trigger thinking about architectural education in the Middle East and its contents, structures, processes, routine practices, and religious and cultural particularities. These may include:

- How do various contemporary interests – such as tradition, identity, modernity, vernacularism, post-colonialism, poverty, sustainability, and globalization – originate within architectural curricula?
- How do the preceding interests act as drivers or catalysts for studio projects and processes?
- How do international accreditation approaches and processes address the particularities of the Middle East? And how do schools develop contextualized approaches to international standards?
- How do international partnerships and summer schools inform studio practices and enrich cross-cultural dialogues between students from the Middle East and students from other parts of the world?[6]

Responding to these questions goes beyond the scope of this discussion. Yet, there have been a few studies that instigated efforts toward providing responsive answers relevant to the content and context of the Middle East. However, these studies represent individual attempts rather than general trends.[7]

Sustained Negative Idiosyncrasies

Following models inherited from the west and adopting techniques practiced by their western counterparts, architectural educators in the Middle East strive to impart the knowledge requisite for successful practice; however, the approach to this is often divergent and may depend on the priorities and ideals of the educator. Nevertheless, despite the amount of knowledge that may be imparted, it is the way in which such knowledge is transmitted that actually has significant professional and social implications.[8] Concomitantly, there is an urgent need to confront issues that pertain to the nature of reality – 'what' and the way in which knowledge about that reality is conveyed to future professionals – and 'how'. Traditional teaching practices suggest that gaps frequently exist between 'what' and 'how'.

In the traditional design pedagogy typically followed in the Middle East, architecture students are habitually encouraged to utilize site visits and walkthroughs of the built

environment to observe different phenomena. Unfortunately, however, research indicates that such casual visits and exercises are often not structured to support any form of investigation or inquiry. Likewise, for large classes, a site visit is often confronted with logistical difficulties that may result in little opportunity for individual student mentoring. In this context, two major idiosyncrasies can be envisaged; these continue to characterize teaching practices in many schools around the world, but in particular within the Middle East and can be outlined as follows.[9]

Learning theories about the phenomena versus getting an in-depth understanding of the phenomena's behaviour: When teaching any body of knowledge, there is a frequent tendency to present it as a body of facts and to present architectural theories as a process of criticism. Knowledge is usually presented to students in a retrospective way, through the extensive exhibition of the performance of an architect's work over time. Often abstract and symbolic generalizations used to describe research results do not convey the feel of the behaviour of the phenomena they describe. Additionally, knowledge acquired in this rote manner is often internalized, as it has no outlet for application.

The real versus the hypothetical: Educators tend to give hypothetical design projects which result in the neglect of apprehending many important contextual variables. Typically, educators focus on offering students ready-made interpretations about the built environment rather than providing them with genuine opportunities to explore issues that are associated with the relationship between culture and the built environment. Even if they do give them such a task, they place emphasis on one single culture, which is usually their own. To ameliorate this glaring pedagogical shortcoming, learning from the actual environment should be introduced wherein students experience active learning in parallel to problem solving.

Many architectural educators in the Middle East are aware of this lack and advocate for introducing real-life issues to architectural education. While published experiences have debated innovative practices in the design studio,[10] there has been less emphasis placed upon the way in which structured experiences could be introduced in theory and lecture-based classes.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI): A Milieu for the Critical Thinker

While many pedagogical concepts have been developed by western scholars within the western context, the notions I am introducing here are very relevant to the Middle East as they are centred on the particularities of the context both in terms of the content of knowledge and the content of experience.

Emerging from the fields of organizational behaviour and management, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has been described as 'the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential'. It is also viewed as a form of action research that is visionary in nature and aims to create new ideas and images that aid in developmental change.[11]

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) can be considered under the rubric of AI, as an instructional method developed during the 1960s in response to a perceived failure of more traditional forms of instruction and rote learning wherein students were required to simply memorize and reproduce instructional materials.[12] Active and experiential learning are sub-forms of inquiry-based learning: in this methodology progress is assessed by how well students develop experiential and critical thinking and analytical skills rather than how much knowledge they have acquired. A number of recent studies challenge university educators to develop integrative teaching approaches that more fully represent transformative pedagogies: educators need to move away from thinking of students as passive listeners and encourage them to become active learners.[13] However, despite this being easier said than done, the incorporation of active learning strategies into the daily routine of classroom instruction has now become a necessity.

The most significant characteristic of active learning is student involvement: students are actively engaged in individual or group activities during the class session. These may include reading, discussing, commenting, and exploring tasks, ideas, and theories. Rather than a declamatory orator, the instructor takes on the more active role of facilitator and/or monitor and can thus provide students with immediate feedback.[14] Notably, in active learning sessions students are involved in accessing higher order thinking; this simultaneously involves the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of a wide spectrum of issues and phenomena. In the context of an active-learning university classroom, students are engaged not only in doing things, but also in reflecting and thinking about what they are doing.

Experiential learning has developed into an important paradigm based on the works of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and David Kolb.[15] They argued that a practical, hands-on experience should be an integral component of any teaching/learning process; this rationale must apply to classroom settings. Therefore, experiential learning goes against learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes in contact with them as part of the learning process. Experiential learning is first-hand learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied.[16]

Moving Forward with Responsive Approaches

In the context of architectural education in the Middle East there are educators who mistakenly equate experiential learning only with 'off campus' or 'non-classroom' learning, not conceiving how it could be very effectively applied to the classroom setting. For example, instead of providing students with lectures about theories of architecture and the work of famous architects, a class in the history of architecture or urban design or a class in design theories might incorporate periods of student practice in theory exercises and critical thinking problems. Likewise, a class in 'principles of architectural design' or in 'human-environment interactions' might involve critical analysis exercises on how people perceive and comprehend the built environment. Both classes could require field visits to buildings and spaces during which students are in close contact with the environment, thus enabling them to better explore aspects of culture,

diversity, and people's behaviour, while actively being part of that environment. Hence these mechanisms involve an experiential learning component, which, in turn, enables students to experience and explore first-hand the problems they examine or discuss in the classroom.

Learning through experience involves not merely observing the phenomenon being studied but also doing something with it or to it, for example testing its dynamics or applying a theory to learn more about it and/or achieve desired results. Assessment of environments as a valuable research vehicle needs to be introduced in lecture courses; this can help establish a solid knowledge base about the built environment, which will enable students to have more control over their learning, knowledge acquisition, assimilation, and utilization in future experiences.

The previous discussion suggests that active and experiential learning as concepts and instructional strategies are actually two sides of the same coin: both underpin inquiry-based learning. While they may differ in certain terminology, both nevertheless represent interactive learning mechanisms that share similar aims and qualities, and both can be part of an AI process. Both increase student motivation by placing strong emphasis on the exploration of attitudes and values, knowledge production, and critical thinking skills rather than simply focusing on knowledge transmission or regurgitation.

While including assessment research and active and experiential learning as interactive learning mechanisms, it is also important to involve architecture and design students in assessment processes that are conducted objectively and systematically; casual interviews or observations may only reveal what is already known, not what has been learned and internalized. Through experiential learning, students are actively engaged; they learn about the problems and potentials of existing environments and how or whether they meet user needs, enhance and celebrate their activities, and foster desired behaviours and attitudes.

Underlying AI, relevant aspects of organizational change are important in the context of classroom instruction within a course or a program in architecture. Students are given the opportunity to organize themselves in teams, make selections of environments they see relevant to assess, collaborate effectively in group discussions, and collectively develop arguments and make qualitative and quantitative judgments about those environments. Addressing these aspects in assessment exercises or projects enable the development of skills that include listening and respecting the views of others and negotiating and reaching consensus in making judgments about the qualities of an environment. All of these skills are essential for successful architects and urban designers.

Towards a Decolonized Architectural Education

Architectural education in the Middle East continues to operate within a global world. There are significant opportunities to experience, experiment with, and learn from traditional and vernacular contexts. However, content should not be treated as the ultimate end-goal, but the approach to grasp and comprehend that content should be viewed as an important driver for contextualizing issues relevant to the particularities of the Middle East.

A considerable portion of students' education in architecture is based on 'experience', 'making', and 'active engagement'. Students are encouraged to study the existing built environment and attempt to explain it through theories or typologies, by always looking at and even referring to outstanding examples. However, underlying these approaches are hidden assumptions about the built environment. It is in this grey area, in this vague and often inchoate relationship, wherein lies the 'lesson' to be learned. Hence, the integration of structured learning experiments could effectively produce a more profound learning and foster the establishment of links between the existing dynamic environments, the concepts and theories that purportedly explain them, and the resulting learning outcomes. Accordingly, the contribution of AI lies in the fact that the inherent, subjective, and hard-to-verify conceptual understanding of the built environment can be refined and harmonized by the structured, documented interpretation performed in a systematic manner that promotes critical thinking and reflection. The dynamics of cities in the Middle East allow for the integration of AI and afford the introduction of structured experiments, which may range from experiencing the engagement with communities in unplanned urban settlements to learning from urban conservation projects in historic districts.

Experience through appreciative inquiry has the capacity to decolonize the content of the curriculum and the way in which knowledge is produced and reproduced. As approaches to learning, they enable the development of contextual knowledge that challenges the established canons of architectural education with a fundamental intention to instigate parallel architectural narratives that are not aimed at competing with, but are equally important to, western architectural authority. In this context, while critiquing context-specific values, norms, and practices, the thrust would be to develop typologies of knowledge that directly respond to unique opportunities – such as urban growth potentials and emerging satellite settlements or sustainable tourism development – and challenges – such as spatial justice and access to social infrastructure, ethnic and regional conflicts, mass displacements of refugees, and political and economic instability – among other undecorated realities facing Middle Eastern societies. The starting point would be the utilisation of the key, recently developed knowledge that interrogates the realities of architecture and urbanism in the Middle East and the wider Global South.[17]

Notes

This chapter was previously published as Ashraf M. Salama, 'Reflections on Architectural Education of the Muslim World within a Global World', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 8.1 (2019): 33–41. Updates, where appropriate, have been made to the present version.

1   The term 'civil engineer' was first used in 1763 by the English Engineer Joan Smeaton to distinguish civil from military engineer. See Donald Drew Egbert, *Beaux-arts Traditions in French Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 117.

2   See expanded discussion on the history, evolution, and contemporary practices in architectural education in Ashraf M. Salama, *Spatial Design Education: New Directions for Pedagogy in Architecture and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2015).

3   See for example Ali Djerbi and Abdelwahab Safi, 'Teaching the History of Architecture in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco: Colonialism, Independence, and Globalization', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 62.1 (2003): 110–20; and an earlier collection of essays published in Ahmed Evin, ed., *Architectural Education in the Islamic World* (Singapore: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 1986).

4   See *Summary Report: Survey of Architectural Education and Professional Practice in Selected Areas of the Muslim World* (Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2007).

5   An earlier similar argument was introduced in an editorial of a special issue of *Charrette: Journal of the Association of Architectural Educators*. See Ashraf M. Salama, 'From the Global South: Pedagogical Encounters in Architecture', *Charrette* 5.1 (2018): 1–7. Currently, a comprehensive discourse is developed to capture the salient features of architectural pedagogies of the Global South with a view to contract a parallel, non-competing, but equally important content on the opportunities that teaching practices in the Global South can offer. See Harriet Harriss, Ashraf M. Salama, and Ane Gonzalez Lara, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Architectural Pedagogies of the Global South* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

6   Salama, 'From the Global South'.

7   *Architecture Education in the Islamic World* seems to be the first of its kind, an important edition that was based on Seminar Ten in the series of Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, held in Granada, Spain, in 1986. The book offers important arguments that contextualize architectural education within unique cultural and religious locales, with contributions from world-renowned scholars, theorists, and art and architecture historians including Christian Norberg-Schulz, Gulzar Haider, Hasan-Uddin Khan, Ismail Serageldin, Jamel Akbar, Mohammed Arkoun, Renata Holod, and Spiro Kostof. Issues related to architectural education and the content of knowledge needed in an Islamic milieu are debated, including discussions on the history and evolution of architectural education in Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey. This is coupled with a discussion of the content and structure of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and how architectural education in the countries represented in the book was influenced by various schools of thought and curriculum models within the Global North including France, Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States. See Evin, *Architectural Education in the Islamic World*. Additional surveys were undertaken by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in 1992 and 2007.

8   Sanjoy Mazumdar, 'Cultural Values in Architectural Education', *Journal of Architectural Education* 46.4 (1993): 230–37.

9   Ashraf M. Salama, 'Seeking New Forms of Pedagogy in Architectural Education', *Field* (University of Sheffield) 5.1 (2013): 9–30.

10   Ibid.

11   The work of David Cooperrider is a manifestation of the growing interest in Appreciative Inquiry. See David Cooperrider, *An Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization* (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing, 2000), 42.

12   See Russell A. Ackoff, *Redesigning the Future: A Systems Approach to Societal Problems* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974); Jerocie S. Bruner, 'The Act of Discovery', *Harvard Educational Review* 31.4 (1961): 21–32.

13   Salama, 'Seeking New Forms of Pedagogy'.

14   See Charles Bonwell, 'Building a Supportive Climate for Active Listening', *The National Teaching and Learning Forum* 6.1 (1996): 4–7; Euda Dean, 'Teaching the Proof Process: A Model for Discovery Learning', *College Teaching* 44.2 (1996): 139–44.

15   Classic writings on learning from experiences include John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Kappa Delta Pi, 1934); Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of Intelligence* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950); David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983).

16   Ashraf M. Salama and Laura A. MacLean, 'Integrating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into Architectural Pedagogy: An Assessment Experiment of Three Retrofitted Buildings in the City of Glasgow', *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 6.2 (2017): 169–82.

17   See Mohammad Gharipour, ed., *Contemporary Urban Landscapes of the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2018); Ashraf M. Salama and Marwa M. El-Ashmouni, *Architectural Excellence in Islamic Societies: Distinction through the Aga Khan Award for Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2020).