

Phenomenal and Spiritual Sustainability

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Summary Statement

This paper will address both academic research and professional applied design studies related to re-conceiving the future built environments of the Persian Gulf Countries to better achieve their Phenomenal and Spiritual Sustainability potential. A case study has been selected to represent one particular worldview application of this approach.

Background Research

The Gulf Research Project is a multi-year academic program being carried out at Harvard University's CMES in association with the Architectural Association of London and the American University of Sharjah, UAE. The program advocates the need for a thorough research that would result in documentation of the existing traditional urban fabric of the region, development of sustainable guidelines and innovations in environmentally and culturally more sustainable design strategies than the current planning, design, construction and real estate practices and models that are being used now in this region. For the most part, current practice here has produced the world's highest per capita carbon footprint and demonstrates serious shortcomings due to high energy consumption, land / sea pollution, transport congestion and inappropriate technology.

Coincident with these "hardware" short comings are "software" social disadvantages of a loss of quality in the built environments that lack human scale, an inspiring cultural identity and a sense of spiritual well being. The ultimate intention of this research is to raise consciousness of the need and benefits of "Holistic Sustainable Design Thinking".

Applied Design Case Study –The Desert Retreat

In thinking about the Desert Retreat, an intimate, private extended family place for a UAE National of Persian origins in the remote deserts of that country, I came to the conclusion that what can be valuable in the design theme and its architecture is to set a high standard of archetypal significance. Not just to repeat the historic "pastiche" version of traditional architecture, nor the aseptic "Avant Garde" devoid of culture, but to search for what Joseph Campbell called the "Monomythic" and primordial common ground narratives of space, time, forms, signs and symbols from the region and around the world to be realized in a unified New Creation of traditional values and contemporary opportunities.

Structure of Reality

“T’was a fair orchard, full of trees, fruit, vines and greenery.
A Sufi there sat with eyes closed, his head upon his knee,
Sunk deep in meditation mystical.

“Why”, asked another, “Dost thou not behold
These signs of God the Merciful displayed
Around thee, which He bids us to contemplate?”

“The Signs,” he answered, “ I behold within.
Without is naught but symbols of the Signs.”

- Rumi, 12th C. Iran

Here we are reminded that in the traditional Persian metaphysical worldview, reality has two structural dimensions, the “inner”, understood by our intuition and the “outer” perceived by our sense receptors. Architecturally, the Hidden Oasis, Walled Paradise Garden and the Courtyard, with their inward spatial orientation, have come to symbolize this duality in archetypal space making. From this view the very unique conception of “Positive Space” comes into play where Sacred Space, not exterior shape or object, is the dominant focus of this design approach.

Spiral Time

Unlike the classic Greek conception of cyclical, “Circular time” or the orthodox Christian idea of “Linear Time” that begins with Genesis and moves progressively towards the Day of Judgement and the Apocalypse, the Sufi Islamic conception of “Spiral Time” commences with the Creation and through cyclical motion repeats the very act of creation, but in an ever ascending spiral, around an ontological axis, seeking ever higher levels of transcendence and ultimate union with the Absolute.

This brings us to one of the most remarkable realizations of this particular culture, termed *Khalq Jadid* or the “New Creation”. The “New” means a cyclical, transcending, timeless manifestation of archetypal ideas. It is to this timeless world to which the late Lou Kahn in Isfahan referred when he said:

“Traditions are just mounds of golden dust, not circumstance, not the shapes which have resulted as an expression in time....And if you can just put your fingers through this golden dust, you can have the powers of anticipation.”

Form/Surface

Geometry and number are the language by which form and surface define space. The Pythagorean system governs the traditional Sufi perception of the quantitative and qualitative understanding of mathematics. There is a *Batin* or inner essence which distinguishes the *Zahir* or external personalities of phenomenal shapes, surfaces and patterns that give symbolic meaning for their appropriate immanent and transcendent use.

Light Matter

The traditional craftsman associates himself with the transformation of matter and temporal creation through the science of Alchemy in order to transcend the 'timebound' materiality of the physical world. This Alchemical approach has a twofold aspect. On one hand, it deals with the transmutation of the soul of the artisan, while through the traditional arts and crafts, it is the science concerned with the processes of adapting to nature, the environment and the transformation of heavy matter to pure light as both aesthetic metaphor and phenomenal product.

In keeping with the essential nature of the site, the retreat is to be constructed of architectural concrete made from the red sand of the site, washed and blended with exposed aggregates from the adjacent Hajar Mountains to alleviate its visual heaviness. Teak and sandstone complete the material palette that complement the ecologically adapted oasis landscape selection. The place should evoke a primordial sense of the origins of mankind, somewhat as the historic remains of the region give one the awe inspiring sensation of ancient beginnings.

Conclusions

To truly understand sustainable design, we need to begin with a culturally attuned cosmic, systemic awareness of the context and physiology of human existence on both a phenomenal and metaphysical level. The mandate of good design is to beautifully reflect this poetic vision with contemporary means, thereby transporting the beholder beyond the material.