The Fiction of Architectural Identity in Contemporary Morocco

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The question of the political use of architecture and urban design as a means to create and promote cultural identities through which social control and coercion are implemented is of great political and academic interest. It has generated a wealth of literature and heated debates. Yet it has mainly been addressed within Western and colonial contexts, and largely ignored with reference to the post-colonial period. In the context of a developing country such as Morocco, marked by the perception of architecture and urban design as a formativdimension of cultural identity, the intervention of international organizations in development and housing programmes is often perceived as biased and neglectful of basic cultural phenomena. For instance, relying on a fundamentalist discourse on authentic traditional Moroccan family life style, government officials oppose the economic standards of international organizations and their disregard for the Moroccan cultural requirements for specific forms of space and ownership. No matter whether the claim is contradicted by the informal and formal practices of urban production, the official discourse stands as political defence of national cultural identity.

The forms of urbanization and the spread of shanty towns and informal housing in the new urban landscape, along with a succession of spectacular urban riots (1981, 1984, 1990) have been reflected upon in different ways by national and international scholars. But the problem with existing approaches is that they are dominated by concerns of population, urban geography, and academic compartmentalization. To address this lacuna, at one level, it is crucial to remember that the urban context is not simply a reflection of the demographic and economic evolution of society. Indeed, the well-documented and frequently researched notion that urbanism uses space to ‘regulate’ the economy and grant financial opportunities and subsidies to targeted groups obscures a much deeper political process in the construction of urban space: the maintenance of social control and coercion not only through a Haussmannian conception of space (Walter Benjamin) but also more subtly through the construction of a politics of cultural identity embodied in urban design.

While colonial architecture and urbanism have received substantial scholarly attention in the last two decades, post-colonial urban design has yet to be seriously studied. Students of the colonial period have generally shared the assumption that a politics of urban design shaped colonial architecture and city planning. They all suggest that colonial architecture and urban design were a medium for the production of images of cultural identity and otherwise.

The question of traditional architecture and its relevance for contemporary practices in Islamic countries was addressed by the programme of the Aga Khan Award for Architectural Heritage through many seminars and publications.

The Moroccan case

The galloping urbanization of the last decades and the ensuing social and housing problems have attracted the attention of many academics and international organizations. Unfortunately the literature concerning these issues is extremely limited. But the politics of urban design did not receive much attention from scholars in the field. Despite the consistent and conspicuous involvement of the state in defining a new architectural culture, and its claim of initiating a revival of authentic national identity, scholarly works continued to view urbanism as limited to its role in the regulation of economy and regional planning.

It is vital to study the implementation of that politics and to show how and why, despite its alleged rejection, the colonial architectural legacy has been a main source of inspiration to the foundation of a nationalistic discourse on architecture. This nationalism is clearly both a discursive entity created by narrativity (Homi Bhabha 1990) and marked by a distinction between the political reality of national identity, which is inscribed by governments, the colonial precedents, and the cultural realm, where different ‘nationalist’ patterns are perpetuated (Partha Chatterjee 1986 and 1993). Moreover, it is necessary to discern the many components of this architectural reformulation, pointing out its intracacies.

- The construction and ritualization of an official discourse on architecture. Le Discours sur l’Architecture. To commemorate the sign of the King’s 1986 speech ‘Le Jour de l’Architecture’ (Architectural Day) was officially declared by the Minister of the Interior in 1992. It is celebrated each year by the Ministry of Urbanism in collaboration with the Ordre National des Architectes (National Order of Architects). The commemoration has been constructed as a ritual. The ceremony opens with a Qur’anic recitation and a speech comprised of His Majesty’s 1986 Speech on Architecture. Nothing could be more telling since any religious ceremony begins with a Qur’anic recitation.

- Institutional strategies, and reformation of laws. The second important effect of the royal speech comprises the reform of the law on urbanism and the creation of new institutions of city planning. After the 1961 urban riots in Casablanca, urbanism, urbanism, was deeply attracted to the strategic attention of the state. The political reaction to these riots was to reform the administrative organization of the city and to create a state agency specialized in urbanism. Following the royal speech, with its diverse guidelines for architecture and urbanism, it was considered time to reform the law on urbanism, which was inherited from the French.

- The reformation of law and the institutional changes functioned as complementary de vises of failure of the national policy and of coercion in the management of urban development.

- The share of the professionals: One of the strategies of the new politics was related to the need to mobilize all the actors involved in architectural production. The professional associations, and in particular that of the architects, were called to play a major role in the policy of the style. However, most of the reactions remained unspoken. Why is it that, in a country where democracy is supposed to be progressing, and where architectural production is far from being uniform, such an important debate has to be avoided?

This can be hypothesized that because of the weaknesses of their professional status, the controversies about their knowledge, and the competition with other professionals, most architects became part of the game by supporting it, or by not publicly taking any critical position. Building on Foucault’s view (1997) that power is productive of knowledge, it can be argued that the architect’s political involvement was the opportunity to promote the profession of architect and to re-create a professional knowledge.

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