

## **Faith and the Environment\***

### **An Inquiry into Islamic Principles and the Built Environment of Muslims**

Ismail Serageldin

#### INTRODUCTION: AN APPROACH TO THE SOURCES

As the Muslim world shakes and stirs in a fitful search to reaffirm its independent identity, it confronts the cultural as well as the political realities of a world dominated by the West generally and the United States specifically. This has lead many in the Muslim world to define their identities by emphasizing the "otherness" of the Muslim being from the hegemonic world context.<sup>1</sup> Doubtless there is much truth to this "otherness", but emphasizing it at the outset leads to a "rejectionist" approach which, to my mind, is narrow and constrictive and in fact does not do justice to the richness and variety that Muslim culture has

---

\*See inter alia Ismail Serageldin, "Faith and the Environment: An Inquiry into Islamic Principles and the Built Environment of Muslims in *Space for Freedom: The search for Architectural Excellence in Muslims Societies*, The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Butterworth Architecture, 1977, pp.213-225, and "Report No 27, Award Cycle III, AKKA, Geneva, Dec 1985. (Unpublished).

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of how this process and its dynamics are affecting the self-image of Muslims, see among others Ismail Serageldin, "Individual Identity, Group Dynamics and Islamic Resurgence", in *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, edited by Ali E.H. Dessouki, praeger, New York, 1982, P. 54-66.

For an indication of the relationship between this process and the built environment, see Ismail Serageldin "Design and Social Change in the Contemporary Muslim Society" in *Ekistics* Vol. 47, No. 280, January 1980, p. 45-46.

achieved in the past, and can achieve again, by the more self-assured process of adaptive assimilation that characterised its confrontations with the Greek and Roman cultures at the time of the early Muslim conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries A.D.

The built environment, as it relates to Muslim societies and to the natural environment, is the main concern of this paper. It too has been subjected to this search for authentication, widely interpreted as "Islamisation". Strident cries have arisen to reject foreign "imported" models of architecture and development, and to return to the sources, unfortunately within the same narrow general conceptual framework that has guided many other aspects of the contemporary Islamic revival.

The basic approach proposed in this paper is different from this "rejectionist" mode of thinking. It returns to the original sources of Islamic doctrine: the *Quran* and the *Sunna* of the prophet, and relates these to the historical context of past experience and present realities. It seeks to derive an appropriate approach to dealing with the built environment of Muslim societies at the beginning of their fifteenth century A.H. and the end of the twentieth century A.D. regardless of

how this derived approach is similar to, or different from, western experiences. On the other hand, there is a parallel and more subtle danger in initiating the search for a Muslim identity (in any specific domain of cultural expression) solely in terms of Muslim sources. This is the "bending" of source texts to provide literally specific detailed guides for contemporary actions, thus ignoring their context, to fit in a particular writer's viewpoint.

I do not believe that any reading of the *Quran*, at any level<sup>2</sup>, or a study of the *Sunna*, will provide detailed instructions on how to design a house in Morocco or Indonesia, or how to design the thoroughfares of Cairo or Istanbul. Those that have tried to derive specific examples from these sources are doing both themselves and the sources a disservice. Themselves by ignoring the wider context in which we live and which must provide the major "givens" of the problems to be addressed, and the sources by demeaning them to the level of a "handbook" or "textbook" rather than treating the *Quran* as the eternal

---

<sup>2</sup> There are several levels at which the *Quranic* text can be read. This is an issue that has concerned theologians, philosophers and mystics for many centuries, including most recently the work of such eminent scholars as Prof. Mohammed Arkoun who seeks to subject the text to a semiotic analysis. This search for understanding is enjoined by God: "(Why) Do they not seek to ponder (understanding the meaning) the *Quran*." (*Quran*, 47:24 and 4:82).

message of inspiration and guidance for all times and the *Sunna* of the Prophet as the embodiment of exemplary behaviour. If God had desired to give people specific instructions on how to build structures in the twentieth century, He could certainly have done so explicitly.

What then is the return to the sources likely to produce? Surely no instructions as to the size of rooms or height of doors. Rather, this systematic review of the sources should produce a general set of *principles* that should help guide the searcher towards what is an appropriate response to the problems confronting Muslim societies today and tomorrow.

In developing this appropriate response to contemporary problems, the past experience of Muslim societies must also be taken into account. Not only is it the basic determinant of the "heritage" which provides Muslims with exemplars of the achievement of past generations, but also it serves as the basis for defining the elements of a cultural continuity which are essential in any search for authenticity and assertion of self-identity. Nevertheless, one must be wary of accepting the actions of past generations too readily. The history of the Muslim peoples (like all

other peoples) is one that is replete with failures to live up to the ethical and behavioural norms of their avowed credos. Sifting the wheat from the chaff is the task of the historian, the philosopher, the jurist and the theologian. Suffice to state this as an issue and proceed with our search for these general principles and our attempt to spell out their application to the problems confronting contemporary Muslim societies.

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

*Stewardship of the Earth.* The starting point of my search for a definition of the Muslim approach to the environment is based upon the intended role of man<sup>3</sup> in this world. I am firmly convinced that the intended role for humans is that of “*stewards of the earth.*”

---

<sup>3</sup> The choice of the words "Man" and "his" does not connote any sexist bias, but simply is a shorter, more elegant stylistic convention than to refer to "Humans" and "his/her" throughout the essay. The *Quran*, however, goes out of its way to explicitly emphasise that these injunctions apply to all humanity men and women alike:

*For Muslim men and women,  
For believing men and women,  
For devout men and women,  
For true men and women,  
For men and women who are  
Patient and constant, for men  
And women who humble themselves,  
For men and women who give  
In charity, for men and women  
Who Fast (and deny themselves),  
For men and women who  
Guard their chastity, and  
For men and women who  
Engage much in God's praise,  
For them has God prepared  
Forgiveness and great reward.*

(*Quran* 33:35)

This concept of "*stewardship of the earth*" deserves elaboration. It plays a central role in the vision of spiritually guided material development advanced here, but it is curiously under-represented in the scholastic tradition of Islamic theology. Yet, the references to it are plentiful in the *Quran*.

In the original Arabic, the word is *Khalifa (istakhlafa)*. It has appeared in various passages of the scriptures and has been translated by eminent scholars such as Yusuf Ali<sup>4</sup> variously as vice-regent (of God on earth), agent, inheritor, successor. To me, the concept of "stewardship" captures best the prismatic nature of this assignment.

It is apparent that this special assignment was central to the very role of man in the cosmos: Thus it is God's design that man should go to earth as his "vice-regent" as witnessed by this passage from the story of Adam:

*"Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a VICE-REGENT ON EARTH." They said: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make Mischief therein and shed blood?— Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises*

---

<sup>4</sup> Yusuf Ali, (*The meaning of) The Glorious Quran, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Masri/Dar Al-Kitab Al-Lubnani, Cairo/Beirut, N.D.*

*And Glorify Thy holy (name)?"*

*He said: "I know what ye know not." (Quran, 2:30)*

The intent that this injunction is universal comes through more clearly in the Arabic where the word (*Khalifa*) which here appears as "vice-regent" is the same as that used for "inheritors," "successors" in other passages addressed to all believers:

*"He it is that has made*

*You INHERITORS IN THE EARTH:*

*If, then, any do reject*

*(God), their rejection (works)*

*Against themselves."*

*(Quran, 35:39)*

And yet if there is a privilege attached to this assignment, it is hostage to the execution of special responsibilities, hence the stewardship concept:

*"Then We made you heirs*

*In the land after them,*

*TO SEE HOW YE WOULD BEHAVE"<sup>5</sup>*

*(Quran, 10: 14)*

Exercising that stewardship involves two complementary strands:

- The pursuit of "development of the earth", "taming" nature to serve man's purpose, cultivating its resources and increasing its bounty.

This pursuit, is that of a steward, not a rapacious exploiter, i.e. it is

---

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note the broad interpretation that prominent scholars like Yusuf Ali ascribe to this injunction:

*"This is addressed to the Quraish in the first instance, for they had succeeded to the 'Ad of the Thamud heritage'. But the application is universal, and was of the Abbasid Empire in the time of Harun-ar-Rashid, or the Muslim Empire in Spain or the Turkish Empire in its palmiest days and indeed, apart from political power, to the Muslims and non-Muslims of our own days." Yusuf Ali, op.cit.. p. 487 (emphasis added).*

balanced with limits imposed on greed and personal ambition, to nurture the underlying sustaining system.

- The society of men who work this earth and enjoy its fruits and bounty must be organised in a just and mutually supportive manner; a "justly balanced" society.

In the rest of this paper, these two themes recur in different forms. Some of the ways of the expected behaviour of the "stewards of the earth" are spelled out to the extent that they provide some guidance to the appropriate development of the natural as well as the built environment.

Insofar as one can identify such principles they can be grouped in a descending hierarchy based on scale:

- *Stewardship of the earth*: guiding principle of man's role in the cosmos.
- *Relationships with nature*: of particular relevance to rural settlement, ecological considerations in urban settlements, and conservation issues.

- *Relations between men*: of particular relevance in the congested, intricate patterns of settlements associated with urbanisation, where the Organisation of space is closely tied to economic, financial and social issues.
- *Individual behaviour*: of particular relevance in the design of individual dwellings, choice of decorative expression, etc.

That the boundaries between these levels are not absolutely defined is self evident. Indeed, almost any issue is best studied by reference to more than one of these "levels" of principle. Their articulation in this manner here is merely a matter of convenience that facilitates and clarifies presentation.

*Relationship with Nature.* The role of man in dealing with nature is guided by two general principles whose balance must be maintained at all times:

- There is an order and a balance in the cosmos and in this world which must be respected. This leads to the need for environmental protection, including wildlife of all types.

- It is the role of man to develop the natural resources of this world and to benefit from the rewards of this development. Thus a minimalist, anti-developmental approach cannot be maintained in the face of injunctions to the contrary.

The evidence for the need to respect the intrinsic balance in the natural order of things is sprinkled throughout the holy *Quran* in reference to God's meticulous order in all things, starting from the scale of the cosmos, of the sun and the moon:

*"And the Sun  
Runs his course  
For a period determined  
For him: that is  
The decree of (Him)  
The Exalted in Might,  
The All-Knowing.*

*And the Moon, —  
We have measured for her  
Mansions (to traverse)... "* (Quran, 36:38-39)

This meticulous order runs through all things,

*"He to Whom belongs  
The dominion of the heavens  
And the earth...  
It is He Who created  
All things, and ordered them  
In due proportions."* (Quran, 25:2)

"...Every single thing is

before His sight in  
due proportion. " (Quran, 13:8)

"Verily, all things  
Have We created  
In proportion and measure." (Quran, 54:49)

Clearly, therefore, this implicit order that God created "in due proportion" in all things must be respected by those to whom he has granted stewardship of the earth. In today's jargon one would say that we are enjoined not to destroy the ecological balance, but to respect it.

Furthermore, we are reminded that our co-inhabitants on this planet are to be treated as communities like ourselves, i.e. the systematic destruction of species would be indefensible in this scheme of things:

*"There is not an animal  
(That lives) on the earth  
Nor a being that flies  
On its wings, but (forms  
Part of) communities like you." (Quran, 6:38)*

Thus, conservation of wildlife is part of our responsibilities on this earth. Elsewhere (Quran, 6:59) we are told that all things dry and green are of His domain, and not a leaf falls but by His will. Thus the

protection of wildlife, vividly referred to as “communities like you” is expanded to all the natural environment.

Yet these injunctions should not lead us to fear the use of the world's resources for the benefit of mankind:

*"Say: Who hath forbidden  
The beautiful (gifts) of God,  
Which He hath produced  
For His servants,  
And the things, clean and pure  
(Which He hath provided)  
For sustenance?"* (Quran, 7:32)

*"Lost are those who:...  
... forbid food which  
God hath provided for  
them.* (Quran, 6:140)

*... Eat and drink: but waste not  
by excess, for God loveth not  
the wasters.* (Quran, 7:31)

Thus the Muslim outlook is not one of withdrawal from this world to admire its unique balance from a distance, nor is it one of asceticism<sup>6</sup> and total rejection of the joys of the senses and the pleasures of possession and procreation:

*"Wealth and children are the allurements of the life of  
this world..."* (Quran , 18:46)

---

<sup>6</sup> Indeed a prominent Islamic scholar goes further and notes that “asceticism often means the negation of *art* and *beauty*. It has no necessary sanctity attached to it.” (Yusuf Ali, op-cit., p. 348, f.n. 1014).

Mankind is enjoined to work to develop these wonderful endowments and enjoy the fruits of these labours, but they are enjoined to do so with respect for the environment and to partake of all things in moderation and under no circumstances to be wasteful. These are prescriptions that any rational human being would welcome, especially in the light of the environmental degradation that unchecked greed and thoughtless exploitation of resources have brought about.

*Relationship between Men.* The domain of *Mu'amalat* (transactions) that covers the relationships between humans in the context of a societal Organisation has been particularly well elaborated in the scriptures, the *Sunna* and has constituted the bulk of the corpus of Islamic *Shari'a* law and *fatwa* rulings over the centuries. It is not necessary here to elaborately retrace these developments, rather we can sum up some of the more relevant highlights.

In any societal context guided by Islamic principles certain fundamental relationships vis-à-vis others in the community play a

central organising role. All Islamic jurisprudence is based on the concept of the welfare of the community and the interest of the majority tempered by the protection of the rights of the minority.<sup>7</sup>

Since we shall return many times to the physical expression of the Islamic societal Organisation it may be pertinent to spell out my understanding of the key aspects of this society. In general, in accordance with the principles of Islam, the Organisation of society would have the following broad features:

- Freedom: Islam is an ideology of liberation. It sets the believer free from all the fears and shackles that can be imposed in this world. This freedom however is not complete license to rampage on earth where the strong destroy the weak. It is a freedom that is circumscribed by the bounds of law:

*"O -ye who believe! The law  
of equality is prescribed to you...  
... In the Law of Equality there  
is (saving of) Life, to you  
O ye men of understanding;*

---

<sup>7</sup> This issue has been especially well discussed in relation to modes of governance, democracy, the Islamic state and the related literature. For a particularly pithy, short but thoughtful statement, see A.K. Aboul Magd, *Hiwar- la Muwajaha* (Dialogue, Not Confrontation), *Kitab Al-Arabi*, Kuwait, 1985, p. 109-122 (in Arabic).

*That ye may restrain yourselves.”*

*(Quran, 2:178-179)*

It is imperative therefore that any society that tries to live with such Islamic principles be one where the freedom and dignity of all its members are carefully protected by a legal framework<sup>8</sup> that does not allow the humiliation of any minority or any individual, male or female. This freedom should be reflected in familial as well as societal contexts, and interpreted in its broadest sense.<sup>9</sup>

- *The Search for Knowledge ('Ilm) and Truth (Haq):* The pursuit of knowledge is the single most striking feature in a system of great revelation such as Islam. The word *'Ilm* (knowledge) and its derivatives occurs 880 times in the *Quran*. But knowledge is not perceived as neutral. It is the basis for better appreciating truth (*Haq*) which is revealed but which can be "seen" by the knowledgeable in the world around them. Indeed, believers are enjoined to look around and to learn the truth. The Prophet exhorted his followers to seek

---

<sup>8</sup> On this theme of basic human rights in Islam see *inter alia* Ali Abdel Wahed Wafi, *Huquq Al-Insan fil Islam (Human Rights in Islam)*, Cairo, *Dar Al-Nahda*, 1979 (in Arabic), and Mohamed Fathy "Uthman, *Taqrir Huquq Al-Insan bayn Al-Sharia Al-islamiyya wal Fikr Al-Qanuni Al-Gharbi* (The affirmation of Human Rights in Islamic and Western Law), Imam Mohamed Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Dahrendorf in developing his fascinating theory of social processes has rediscovered (unknowingly) these Islamic ideas and elaborated persuasively on the need for bonds (ligatures) as well as freedoms (options), in order to establish true happiness. See Ralph Dahrendorf, *Life Chances*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979.

knowledge as far as China, then considered to be the end of the earth.

Scientists are held in high esteem: the Prophet said that the ink of scientists is equal to the blood of martyrs. The very first word of the Quranic revelation was an order to *read* and then to learn, and to seek knowledge.

- *Action and Industry*: Action and industry are the way of salvation. The faithful are enjoined to Act: "...and do good deeds, and your actions will be seen by God, His prophet and the believers." (Quran, 9:105)

Such actions should be for the common good, but even when the religious instructions are oriented towards one own's task then we are exhorted to undertake them with discipline and precision, and to produce quality work.

The Muslim faithful are told that they are responsible for their fellow men and they are asked to take an active role in redressing inequity where they see it to the full extent of their abilities (*Hadith*: If one of you sees something that is wrong, then let him set it right; first with his hand, and if he cannot then with his tongue, and if he cannot then with his heart, and that is the weakest of all possible forms of faith).

It clearly follows from the above that these exhortations place a heavy emphasis on being active in *this world* and acting well at all levels. Contemplative meditation is looked upon as a means of self renewal in order to be able to undertake more and better things in the future, not as an end in and of itself.

- *Justice*: The concept of justice is absolute in Islam and not relative as in some Christian theologies (due to the projection of the concept of responsibility for original sin). Muslims perceive all their actions as part of the great test in which they have to succeed by acting in a *just* manner. The worldly interpretation of this is Islamic legislation which seeks to set the limits for what is permissible between man and man. It defines the foundations of a theory of rehabilitation and punishment and the manner in which punishment should be meted out.<sup>10</sup> Jurists have to update and enforce the law in the pursuit of an idealised form of justice that should be as absolute as it can be on earth. Scholars still recognise that some things go beyond the means of the Muslim community and are in the hands of the creator (in the hereafter). But it is an essential feature of the Muslim society that it

---

<sup>10</sup> See *inter alia*: Mohamed Selim Al-'Awwa, *Fi Usul Ai-Nizam Al-jana'i Al-Islami* (on the foundations of Islamic Criminal jurisprudence), *Dar Alma'aref*, Cairo, 1979 (in Arabic).

should seek to establish justice here on earth and not await the kingdom of heaven.

- *The Public Interest*: The concept of the public interest governs legislative innovation. It is perceived as a justification for changing the past forms and coping with an ever-changing present and future. The systematic means of introducing legislative innovation is both checked and helped by the pursuit of the public interest. It is aided by the liberal interpretation that "all that is not expressly forbidden is allowed."<sup>11</sup> Mechanisms and processes of introducing these innovations have been worked out in great detail in order to ensure that they are still consonant with the ethical principles of the *Quran* and that evolution does not, over time, lead to the abandonment of the basic ethical principles set out in the original seventh century society in Medina.
- *Concern for the Poor and the Weak*: Justice must be tempered by mercy, and compassion must be the prevalent feature of the Muslim

---

<sup>11</sup> "... He hat explained to you in detail what is forbidden to you (Quran 6:119). Hence anything not explicitly prohibited is allowed. For further discussions of this concept see *inter alia*:

- *Abdel-Wahab Khallaf Ilm Usul Al-Fiqh* (the Science of Jurisprudence) *Darl Al-Qalam*, Kuwait 1970 (originally publ. 1942 in Arabic) (esp. p. 115-116).

- Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Al-Halal wal Haram Fil Islam* (The accepted and the forbidden in Islam) Wahba, Cairo, 1980 (in Arabic) (esp. p. 18-21).

community. The faithful are enjoined time and again to show mercy towards those who are less fortunate, to show compassion to the needy, and to be magnanimous in victory and forgiving when in power.<sup>12</sup> It is relevant that the Muslim system was the first to introduce a form of social security and welfare assistance whereby the poor and the weak had a *right* to part of the public treasury and did not have to rely on the charity of those who are more fortunate.<sup>13</sup>

In order to promote a development pattern consonant with the above, an entirely new approach is required. It is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to develop such an approach.

Nevertheless, and without falling prey to the excessive emphasis on "otherness" decried at the outset of this paper, it is still possible to mention the conceptual difference which this approach implies vis-à-vis the traditional western neo-classical economic approach:

- It requires a holistic view of development, social, political, cultural, physical, and economic; and

---

<sup>12</sup> "Those who spend (freely) whether in prosperity or in adversity; who restrain anger and pardon (all) men; - for God loves those who do good." (Quran 3.134)

<sup>13</sup> See *inter alia* Yusuf Al-Qaradawi *Mushkilat Al-faqr wa Kayf 'Alagaha Al Islam* (The problem of poverty and how Islam dealt with it), Wahba, Cairo, 1980 (in Arabic). Al-Qaradawi makes plain that these rights of the poor apply also to non Muslims (see esp. p. 103) where he cites the treaty of *Khalid Ibn Al-Walid* with the Christians of Hira as it was reported in *Abu-Yusuf's Al-Kharaj*.

- It is primarily focused on human beings, not on economics *per se*.

*Individual behaviour.* Much of the behaviour demanded of Muslims is implicit in the preceding discussions in terms of relations with nature and relations with each other. Other aspects (piety, charity, etc.) are obvious and do not need restatement. Yet one additional aspect is of particular relevance to this discussion and that is a call for a certain *humility* in individual behaviour. This comes across clearly in many passages in the *Quran*, for example:

*"...Nor exult over favours bestowed upon  
you for God loveth not any  
vainglorious boaster."* (Quran, 57.-23)

*"And swell not thy cheek<sup>14</sup>  
(For Pride) at men,  
Nor walk in insolence  
Through the earth;  
For God loveth not  
Any arrogant boaster."* (Quran, 31.18)

*"...For God loveth not the arrogant,*

---

<sup>14</sup> Yusuf Ali explains:

*"The word cheek in English, also means arrogance or effrontery, with a slightly different shade added, viz. : effrontery from one in an inferior position to one in a superior position. The Arabic usage is wider, and includes smug self-satisfaction and a sense of lofty superiority"* (Yusuf Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 1084, f.n.3603).

*the vainglorious..."*

*(Quran, 4:36)*

*"...Verily, He loveth not the arrogant." Quran, 16:23)*

These and many other passages when combined with other injunctions lead to a composite picture of the appropriate behaviour of the individual Muslim, which was summed up by one prominent Quranic scholar thus:

*"And it flows naturally from a true understanding of our relation to God and His universe and to our fellow-creatures, especially man. In all things be moderate. Do not go the pace, and do not be stationary or slow. Do not be talkative and do not be silent. Do not be loud and do not be timid or half-hearted. Do not be too confident, and do not be cowed down. If you have patience, it is to give you constancy and determination, that you may bravely carry on the struggle of life. If you have humility, it is to save you from unseemly swagger, not to curb your right spirit and your reasoned determination."<sup>15</sup>*

This moderation and humility is in sharp contrast to much of the ostentatious consumption and self-glorification that are found in the constructions of many Muslims, especially many of those who have exulted in new found wealth.

*"Exult not, for God loveth not  
Those who exult (in riches).  
But seek, with the (wealth)  
Which God has bestowed on thee,  
The Home of the Hereafter..." (Quran, 28:76 -77)*

---

<sup>15</sup> Yusuf Ali, op.cit; p. 1084, f.n. 3604.

## THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

*Rural Settlements.* The majority of Muslims today are rural dwellers- The vast mass of silently suffering impoverished peasants that constitutes the bulk of Muslim society today must be the starting point of our discussion, even if the urban scene is where the most exciting, innovating and challenging confrontations between Islamic values and westernisation are taking place.

In the rural world, the relationship with nature is essential. Carefully tilling the soil to produce its bounty and enjoying it, while being charitable towards others and husbanding these precious resources is vividly depicted in this passage:

*"It is He who produceth  
Gardens, with trellises  
And without, and dates,  
And tilth with produce  
Of all kinds, and olives  
And pomegranates,  
Similar (in kind)  
And different (in variety):  
Eat of their fruit  
In their season, but render  
The dues that are proper  
On the day that the harvest*

*Is gathered. But waste not  
By excess: for God  
Loveth not the wasters."* (Quran, 6:141)

The use of cattle is encouraged:

*"Of the cattle are some  
For burden and some for meat..."* (Quran, 6:142)

Indeed this use of animals is elaborated in another passage very vividly:

*"And cattle He has created  
For you (men): from them  
Ye derive warmth,  
And numerous benefits,  
And of their (meat) ye eat.*

*And ye have a sense  
Of pride and beauty in them*

And (He *has* created) horses,  
Mules, and donkeys, doe you  
To ride and use *for show*;  
And *He has created* (other) things  
Of which *ye have* no knowledge." (Quran, 16:5, 6, 8)

It is interesting to note in this passage animals are referred to as more than beasts of burden but indeed they may be pedigreed animals bred for beauty and show, for grace, elegance and refined enjoyment.

Thus the passage is in no way contrary to the large-scale mechanisation of agriculture, if this be feasible, or the modernisation of

agricultural production with its consonant changes in the pattern of life of the rural built environment.<sup>16</sup>

So far there is no controversy. The heart of the issue of rural development, however, is the possession of land and the problem of land tenure. Here, Islam has a clear-cut preference to encouraging the development of fallow land and giving ownership to those who develop it.

(*Hadith*: "He who brings life to a dead piece of land owns it").<sup>17</sup> The accumulation of vast land holdings is discouraged by the mechanism of the inheritance code. More generally the type of exploitation of peasants and share-croppers by absentee landlords that is so prevalent in much of the Third World has been thoroughly condemned by the more general recognition of the problems of poverty alleviation<sup>18</sup> on the one hand and by the consideration of property ownership as a social function, not an absolute right or privilege:

---

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of some of these aspects see proceedings of *The Changing Rural Habitat*, Seminar Six in the series-Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, Beijing, Peoples Republic of China, October 19-22, 1981. Published by Concept Media for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2 Vols., Singapore, 1982.

<sup>17</sup> For an elaboration of the seconcepts see Dr. MustafaAl-Siba'i, *Ishirakiyat Al-Islam* (The Socialism of Islam), *Dar Al-Sha'b*, Cairo, 1977, p. 141, *et.seq.*

<sup>18</sup> See *inter alia Al-Qaradawi Mushkilat Al-Faqr. op.cit.* and Mohamed Abu Zahra, *Al-Takaful Al-ijtima'fil Islam* (Social Solidarity in Islam), *Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi*, Cairo, n.d.

*"...And spend out of the substance  
whereof He has made you HEIRS (stewards)." (Quran, 57:7)*

These principles, I believe, mean a more equitable treatment of the rural (vis-à-vis the urban) world, and a more enabling environment for those who till the soil. Though their voices are seldom heard in the political arena's of today, they deserve our attention and respect. They should not be disenfranchised, as is often the case, rather they should be empowered to build the dignified productive environment to which they are entitled, and to live in that symbiotic harmony with the natural environment which is so characteristic of well-balanced rural societies.

This enabling environment, however, will mean that rural dwellers will respond to their changing socio-economic surroundings in a manner that is compatible with their own self-image, which may differ markedly from the romantic images of bucolic rurality that many contemporary architects hold.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of construction and building techniques, it is clear that the injunctions against waste and for a just balance argue in favour of what

---

<sup>19</sup> For an example of this interaction between the physical expression of rural architecture and the changing socio-economic determinants of that environment, see Ismail Serageldin. "Rural Architecture in the Yemen Arab Republic" in proceedings of *The Changing Rural Habitat*, Seminar Six in the series-Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, Beijing, Peoples Republic of China, October 19-22, 1981. Published by Concept Media-for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Volume I : Case Studies, Singapore, 1982, p. 1-10.

is today called the “appropriate technologies” approach. That is not only the outcome of this argument from the scriptures but also the course of practical wisdom. That such an approach can yield structures and compositions of outstanding beauty and evocative power, has been definitively demonstrated by the work of Hassan Fathy,<sup>20</sup> which stands as an exemplar for all designers who would tackle the problems of the rural world in Muslim societies.

*Urban Settlement.* Harking back to the principles governing the relations between men (*Mu'amalat*) they clearly come most acutely into play in the congested and contested articulation of urban spaces. Here, it is easy to see some applications of these principles in terms of urban form. Thus, property rights, while fully recognised and protected, are not absolute. For example, access to water cannot be denied. The right of first refusal of the neighbour in the disposal of neighbouring property (*shuf'a*) is a fundamental organising principle. Investment is

---

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of Fathy's life and work see ) J.M. Richards, Ismail Serageldin and Darl Rastorfer, *Hassan Fathy, A Mimar Book*, Concept Media, Singapore, 1985.

encouraged and those who hoard gold and silver are warned of dire punishment.<sup>21</sup>

Within this broad framework, flexibility is the hallmark of guiding relations. *All that is not expressly forbidden is allowed.* Neighbours are encouraged to reach agreement by mutual consent rather than by arbitration. This approach has led to a variety of subtle and charming air-rights developments in old cities. It has also allowed organic linkages between different structures that abut, partly to accommodate expanding families and changing needs. It has therefore helped to create a living and changing environment that we have come to appreciate in the unique character of the old Medinas.

Indeed this emphasis on the relations between neighbours is exceptionally strong in Islam. Thus:

*"And do good—  
To parents, kinsfolk,  
Orphans, those in need,  
Neighbours who are near,  
Neighbours who are strangers,  
The Companion by your side,  
The way-farer (ye meet),*

---

<sup>21</sup> "... Those who bury (hoard) gold and silver and spend it not in the way of God: announce unto them a most grievous penalty." (Quran 9:34).

*And what your right hands possess.*"<sup>22</sup> (Quran, 4:36)

This is wider and more comprehensive than the general "Love thy neighbour" since it encompasses even animals and emphasises practical service above and beyond sentiment.

While this does not yield a specific *physical* prescription for the urban form of cities or even urban dwellings, it does encourage designers to create public spaces that enable *social interaction* between neighbours and way-farers, and immediately brings to mind images of a living, thriving dense townscape.

The key element in articulating this townscape becomes the street, its alignment, its scale, and its availability for pedestrian as opposed to motorised use. Broken *alignments* built at the *human scale*, with possible overhangs and air-right developments, and with adequately spaced enlarged areas for social interaction are characteristics to be encouraged. Activities allowed in the street are key determinants of the area's character: commercial, residential, mixed, etc. *The mixed use*

---

<sup>22</sup> Yusuf Ali explains the phrase:

What your right hands *possess*: anything that has no civil rights. It includes *captives or slaves* (where *they exist* in any form whatever), people in your power, or dumb animals with whom you have to deal.

They are all God's creatures and deserve our sympathy and our practical *service*. Cf. Coleridge's "Rime of The Ancient Mariner": "He prayeth best who loveth best, All things both great and small, For the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all." (Yusuf Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 191, fn.n 553)

pattern is again implied in the heavy emphasis on social interaction. It is interesting to note in this context that western town planning has now come full circle after experimenting for a century with exclusionary single use land zoning; it is now promoting mixed use developments that today carry a substantial economic premium for the developers. The United States has seen the emergence of the "Festival Market Place" of the Rouse Company as the saviour of downtown redevelopments. Boston's Faneuil Hall and Baltimore's new harbour are but artificially recreated modern versions of the old *sug's* and bazaars so characteristic of any old Muslim city.

For a variety of other reasons, not least of which is respect for *privacy*, this townscape should also enable a transition from the public domain to the private sphere without injury to either. When coupled with the general prohibition against ostentation and self-aggrandisement, I believe we are led to favour a *high-density low-rise residential environment*<sup>23</sup> which would also be quite economic in aggregate terms,

---

<sup>23</sup> For a compelling case see Charles Correa, *The New Landscape*, The Book Society of India, Bombay, 1985 (especially p. 51-53).

(i.e. in the interest of the community as a whole).<sup>24</sup> It would also avoid much of the anomie that has accompanied large scale high-rise residential complexes<sup>25</sup> and has led in its extreme form to the destruction of Pruitt-Igoe.

The pattern of urban settlement is largely determined by a wide spectrum of technological and geographic considerations that have nothing to do with Islam *per se*.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, within the broad "skeleton" so determined, the "flesh" that is so definitive in determining character and defining the experiential aspects of architecture and urbanism, that "flesh" remains in the domain of the designer.

Yet one still stands confronted by the problem of the scale of the modern metropolis<sup>27</sup> and the problem of the tall building,<sup>28</sup> so characteristic of this century's technology and economics. On the

---

<sup>24</sup> there is much evidence for this, including the famous United Nations Model Neighbourhood project in Peru (1968-1975). See *inter alia* Peter Land "The United Nations Model Neighbourhood project in Peru: prototype for Tomorrow?" in Frank P. Davidson, L.J. Giacoletto and Robert Salked (eds.) *Macro-Engineering and the Infrastructure of Tomorrow* (AAAS selected Symposium 23) Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado; 1978. p. 35-43. Also Peter Land "Houses for the Horizontal City" in *Process Architecture* No. 14, 1980 p. 121-159.

<sup>25</sup> It is well established that human beings have emotional responses to their built environment, see for example Rikard Kuller "Architecture and Emotions" in Byron Mikellides (ed.) *Architecture for People*; Holt, Reinhart and Winston; New York, 1980, P. 87-100. For views on the mixture of awe and alienation inspired by Highrise structures see Donald J. Conway, ed., *The Human Response to Tall Buildings*, Community Development Series, Vol. 34. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1977.

<sup>26</sup> See Ismail Serageldin "Infrastructure, Technology and the Pattern of Urban Settlement", in the proceedings of Development and Urban Metamorphosis, Seminar Eight in the series - Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, held in Sana'a, Yemen Arab Republic, May 25-30, 1983. Published by Concept Media for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Volume 1 : Yemen at the Crossroads, Singapore, 1983, p. 27-32.

<sup>27</sup> See proceedings of *The Expanding Metropolis: Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo*, Seminar Nine in the series - Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, Cairo, Egypt, Nov 11-15, 1984. Published by Concept Media for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Singapore, 1985, p 3-15.

<sup>28</sup> For an interesting essay on the subject see Ada Louise Huxtable, *The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered: The Search for a Skyscraper Style*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1984.

former one must recognise the need to strike a balance between the imperative of rapid modernisation and growth on the one hand and the need to preserve historic districts<sup>29</sup> on the other. This can surely be done without losing sight of the *character* of new developments, avoiding what Charles Correa has rightly called the bureaucratic solutions of cloning structures.<sup>30</sup> On the question of tall buildings much remains to be said; although the new building for the National Commercial Bank in Jeddah (designed by SOM's Gordon Bunshaft) shows us that, with imagination, designers have a lot more to offer than the boxy curtain-walled pattern of the "typical" western office building. But more will be said on this subject later in this essay.

*Individual Structures.* When addressing individual structures we should first distinguish between individual dwellings and other types of structures. For *dwellings*, it behoves us to recall the injunctions on

---

<sup>29</sup> See inter alia: Roger Kain, *Planning for Conservation*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981 and proceedings of *The Expanding Metropolis: Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo*, Seminar Nine in the series - Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, Cairo, Egypt, Nov 11-15, 1984. Published by Concept Media for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Singapore, 1985, p. 3-15.

For a discussion of the economic and financial issues involved to make conservation measures feasible see also Ismail Serageldin "Project Finance, Subsidisation and Cost-recovery. AKPIA at Harvard University and MIT *Adaptive Reuse: Integrating Traditional Areas into the Modern Urban Fabric*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, p. 92-102.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Correa, *The New Landscape op.cit.*, p. 96-100.

humility and the respect for privacy, as well as the sanctity of the home as the refuge of rest and peace and joy.

The physical layout of the house should provide for adequate articulation of public and private spaces and an appropriate transition to the public domain beyond (i.e. the street). The building should not be conspicuously projecting an image of wealth to generate the envy of neighbours and passers-by, but at the same time it should not be an ascetic structure devoid of decoration. On this latter point it is appropriate to note that outstanding Muslim scholars, including no less an authority than Muhammad 'Abduh<sup>31</sup> have ruled that paintings and sculptures are definitely acceptable in Muslim societies since the prohibitions against them derive primarily from the fear of idolatry. Since today this fear is irrelevant in the direct sense of idolatry, the prohibition is also irrelevant. Decoration and the use of paintings and

---

<sup>31</sup> At the time, (1903) Muhammad 'Abduh was Mufti of Egypt. See Mohammad 'Imara (ed.) *Al-A'mal Al-Kamila Lil Imam Muhammad' Abduh* (The Complete Works of Muhammad 'Abduh), Beirut, 1972 Vol. 2, p. 204-206 (in Arabic), see also Mohammed' Imara, *Al-Islam wa Qadaya Al'Asr* (Islam and the issues of our time) *Dar Al-Wahda*, Beirut, 1980, p.43-59.

sculptures, are all elements to be used by the Muslim in making his home a delightful place, along with the more traditional uses of plants and water.

In shaping the interior of his home to make it a place of restfulness, joy and beauty the Muslim is at liberty to do as he pleases, provided he observes the general dictum of *chastity*:

*"To every religion there is a character and the character of Islam is chastity."* (Hadith)

Outside of dwellings, no discussion of individual structures in Muslim societies can ignore the role of *the mosque*. It is central in the design of any Muslim agglomeration. It is not only the place of worship but also the key to community activities. Granted that the complexity of modern life has forced many communal public activities into specialised structures, the tendency towards limiting the mosque to its liturgical function, a "churchification of the mosque" is to be deplored. All the more so, since in western Christian cultures there is at present an active movement to open up churches as foci of community activity to improve the communications between the church Organisation and the

community and to better utilise the building at times where there are no religious services.

The architecture of the mosque is a complex subject which has received some critical attention, but certainly not enough. Some of the recent writing opens up avenues for speculation and reflection,<sup>32</sup> but considerably more needs to be done if we are to appropriately re-integrate the mosque building as an organising element in the increasingly complex patterns of contemporary settlements.

The *tall buildings* remains an important if puzzling question. Clearly there is nothing in Islamic teaching that prevents men from reaching for the stars and building ever higher structures if these are justified design solutions to particular problems, i.e. if the purpose of building such a tall structure is not mere self aggrandisement, but to provide an effective response to a set of economic, functional, and technical criteria. Indeed old Islamic towns like Shibam and Sana'a are comprised of skyscrapers. One can easily visualise new problems arising in geographically constrained commercial downtown spaces under the pressure of an ever

---

<sup>32</sup> See inter alia: Ihsan Fethi, "The Mosque Today", in S. Cantacuzino (ed.) *Architecture in Continuity: Building in the Islamic World Today*, Aperture, New York, 1984, p. 53-62.

increasing urban population. Yet one must remain uneasy. To the extent that "skyscrapers" are indeed synonymous with the "zeitgeist" of this century, they have been the focus of much attention though relatively little critical concern<sup>33</sup> The cultural dimensions of the tall building as an evocative work of art, an element of societal cultural expression rather than just as a symbol of commercial success and a projection of an "image of progress" remain tantalisingly unclear, insufficiently studied in the West and totally unstudied as they relate to the value structure and self-image of contemporary Muslim societies.

In many ways, this unease is well expressed in three examples from Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. The Bugshan tower, is a tall curtain-walled structure which after completion with a conventional facade was then "Islamicised" by covering each element of the flat façade with a small "paste-on" arched window frame! The Rush Housing project is a complex of tower structures that make no attempt at developing or even hiding the conventional international modernist credentials of their façades. They have earned almost universal indifference if not scorn

---

<sup>33</sup> One notable exception has been Ada Louise Huxtable, *op.cit.*, which compares very favourably with the lavishly illustrated piece by Charles Jencks *Skyscrapers - Sky Cities*, Rizzoli, New York, 1980.

from the Saudi community of Jeddah. They remain vacant years after completion (although this is for other administrative reasons). The third example is Gordon Bunshaft's striking National Commercial Bank building,<sup>34</sup> which while remaining the epitome of modernism has nevertheless imaginatively dealt with the problems of sun and glare by a use of three inset atria that span eight to nine storeys each. This building has been generally very well received in the community although it has no "Islamic" decorative elements whatsoever. The purity of the forms and the elegance of the composition strike a responsive chord in almost all who have visited it.

What can one make of these three examples with respect to what the Muslim faith tells Muslims about tall buildings? Nothing. The universal truth is that imaginative design is better than uninspired imitation or kitsch. Muslim societies are as entitled as any other to have their sensibilities engaged by imaginative, beautiful landmark buildings, which if they eschew mere "vain-glorious", "arrogant" reasons for being and respond appropriately at the level of function will indeed fulfill part

---

<sup>34</sup> See the eloquent description of that building in A.L. Huxtable, *op.cit.*, p. 61-62 and Arthur Drexler, *Three New Skyscrapers*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1983, . 20-33.

of the Islamic credo "God is beautiful and loves beauty". Indeed appreciation of beauty is one of the qualities that sets humans apart from the animal species.

## CONCLUSIONS

The return to the sources which we have tried to undertake in this essay lead to guidelines for dealing with environment, both natural and man-made, that are broad and all encompassing. Some would argue that these broad guidelines are basically what rational minds would propose for sound design principles and are therefore not specifically "Islamic."<sup>35</sup> That is of course true. With the exception of some particularly value-specific injunctions such as chastity, humility, and neighbourliness, most of the principles are those that rational humans would propose by themselves in order to maintain the natural habitat and develop enjoyable living surroundings. That is exactly what one would expect. It would have indeed been surprising if any reading of the sources had led to "irrational" instructions to despoil the natural environment and produce unpleasant, dysfunctional living environments for humans!

---

<sup>35</sup>For example, much of the same rational message of working with the environment can be found in Ian McHarg, *Design with Nature*, (Natural History Press, Philadelphia, 1969) Doubleday, New York, 1971 (paperback edition).

The absence of discernible specific physical attributes of the architecture these principles imply, which could be seen as a weakness by those seeking cookbook recipes and simple answers, is in reality a very real strength. A strength because this is precisely what allows Islamic culture to be adapted to the cold climates of the Himalayas and the hot tropical forests of Indonesia as well as the deserts of Arabia. It is this subtle overlay of Islamic principles over regional particularism, the former fully recognising and working with the latter to help improve the inhabitants' response to it, that have enabled Islam to have its true universal impact creating the "diversity within a unity" that the flowering of Muslim culture has demonstrated through the ages.

Contrast this with the heavy-handed physical framework of the Roman *Castrum* — that outpost of Roman civilisation that was implanted, as if with a rubber stamp, from the cold forests of Britain and northern Europe to the deserts of Libya! Identical layouts incorporated the *Decumanus* and the *Cardo*. Identical elements including the forum, the temple, and the *thermae* were used. All of this was done without so much as a bow to the regional realities of climate and culture.

The Islamic essence of any building or set of buildings is much more subtle than to be captured exclusively by the physical attributes of these buildings. To seek to define any architecture as "Islamic" exclusively through the detailed analysis of the architectonic features of the building would be like trying to measure the temperature or the humidity of a room with a yardstick. The yardstick is a useful tool to capture one aspect of the reality of that room, but temperature and humidity are equally valid aspects of that same reality even if they totally escape the yardstick's ability to interpret them.

This analogy is indeed suitable for our subject. To the extent that (some aspects of) the suitability of the structure's design can be measured by the comfort of temperature and humidity, the specific materials, layouts, dimensions of the physical structure must be well adapted to geographic localism to achieve it. So it is with a truly successful Islamic architecture: its physical attributes will be primarily determined by the specificities of geographic localism, but the end product will produce a certain spiritual harmony and facilitate a pattern

of social interaction that are truly in conformity with an Islamic world-view.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, however, the application of these principles will be far from homogeneous throughout the Muslim communities of the world, and the quality of the results within each community will themselves show a very large degree of variability ranging from the absurd to the sublime. These results can indeed be plotted into the six-celled matrix proposed by Kamil Khan Mumtaz<sup>37</sup> which defines three "horizontal layers" (the architecture of the elite, that of the commercially dominant classes, and the anonymous vernacular architecture) and two "vertical streams" (the spiritual and the materialist). But the "quality" of the product in each cell, or its "Islamicity" is still an elusive property to assess. Here, there are no simple answers. There can only be an ongoing patient search to explore the essential nature of beauty which a work of art achieves through momentary fusion between artist and task, what Sir Kenneth

---

<sup>36</sup>For a discussion of how this applies in the case of educational facilities, see Ismail Serageldin (rapporteur) "On Educational Facilities" in the proceedings of *Places of Public Gathering in Islam*, Seminar Six in the series- Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, Amman, Jordan, May 4-7, 1980. The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Philadelphia, 1980, p. 53-56.

<sup>37</sup>See Kamil Khan Mumtaz, *Architecture in Pakistan*, a Mimar Book, Concept Media, Singapore, 1985, p. 192-193.

Clark called "moments of vision"<sup>38</sup> and what is now being elucidated by an increasing number of Muslim scholars in the context of the Muslim world.<sup>39</sup> This self-knowledge, thus developed through painstaking analysis of past achievements and present realities, must then go to enrich the collective intellectual resources of architects practicing in the Muslim world. The myths, images and stimuli that they can bring to bear on any design problem must be enriched<sup>40</sup> with the type of concepts that transcend the simplistic physical reading of a monumental heritage and promote a deeper understanding of self and society within the context of an Islamic world view.

Only thus can we hope to promote a greater harmony between the built environments of Muslims and the eternal message of Islam.

---

<sup>38</sup>Kenneth Clark, *Moments of Vision and Other Essays*, Harper and Row, New York, 1981, p. I-17. See also Kenneth Clark, *What is a Masterpiece* Thames and Hudson, New York, 1979, in which he sums up his answer to the title question: "... it is above all the work of an artist of genius who has been absorbed by the spirit of the time in a way that has made his individual experiences universal." (p. 44).

<sup>39</sup>See *inter alia*: N. Ardalan and L. Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1973. T. Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, London, World of Islam Festival, 1976. Proceedings of *Architecture as Symbol and Self Identity*, Seminar Four in the series-Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, Fez, Morocco, October 9-12, 1979. The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Philadelphia, 1980.

<sup>40</sup>See Ismail Serageldin, Creativity and Imagination in Architectural Design originally entitled *Towards a Model of the Design Process*, paper presented to AKAA Think Tank Seminar in January 1985 (to be published in 1989) which argues for the enrichment of the basis of myths, images and stimuli that the architect has at his or her command to draw upon when dealing with a problem. But a better understanding of evolving social realities is also called for. See Ismail Serageldin "Thoughts for the Education of Muslim Planners of the Future" in *Ekistics* Vol. 47, No. 285, Nov-Dec 1980, p.428-432.