Expertise and Architecture in the Modern Islamic World

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The architect, like other professions in the modern world distinguished by specialist training (doctors, engineers, etc.), cannot be conceived easily without some notion of ‘expertise’. The architect’s authority derives from their mastery of certain skills, their fluency in technical vocabularies, and importantly the accumulation of *experience* – ‘expert’ from the Latin *expertus*, the past participle of *experiri*, ‘to try’.^[1] [2] It is the centrality of ‘expertise’ to architectural practice that has facilitated, on the one hand, fevered scholarly interest in ‘architecture without architects’ (those outsider or subaltern exceptions that prove the general rule), and, on the other, the easy identification of architects with the great projects of techno-scientific regulation, standardization and disciplining seen to characterize our modern world.^[2] [3] As Peter H Christensen suggests in his introduction to the volume under review, it is due to the latter that the history of architectural practice in the modern Islamic world has been focused primarily through the lens of ‘hegemony, subjugation and force’ (p. 3). Colonial and postcolonial eras facilitated the global peregrinations of Western-trained experts and the dissemination of modern technologies, either for paternalist uplift or developmental agendas, and as such have been routinely presented as ‘harbingers of erosion’, corrupting the earlier ‘purity and clarity’ of Islamic artistic and building practice (p. 3). The essays assembled in *Expertise and Architecture in the Modern Islamic World* look to challenge this scholarly consensus, providing a more nuanced narrative of historical change and in the process opening up the very category of ‘expertise’ for interrogation.

Christensen, an architectural historian at the University of Rochester, sets out the volume’s two organizing principles in his useful introduction. In the first place, the collected chapters aim to demonstrate the ‘constancy of change’ in the history of Islamic architecture, working against the presumption that there ever existed ‘pure’ forms that could be corrupted. Second, the volume wants to complicate familiar narratives of domination and imposition that shape histories of interaction between European or North American powers and the Islamic world when it comes to architecture. This may be read as an implicit critique of a certain vision of postcolonial studies, calling for a departure from homogenizing concepts of colonialism and binaries of colonizer/colonized or West/other, though this argument is never animated outright. The volume can, however, be comfortably situated in the wake of the ‘global turn’ in modern historiography, privileging complex and multi-layered engagements and entanglements, ‘convergence’ and ‘connection’ rather than ‘power’ and ‘resistance’. The risk of such analytical reorientations is that they might go too far the opposite,

obfuscating power relations or at least underplaying them, but this is not a pressing issue in the present volume. Christensen has compelled his contributors to consider ‘the vicissitudes of historical and cultural context’ (p. 18), in which the disproportionate force of external interventions and the political and psychological pressures animated by ‘technicalism’ on societies and economies remain abundantly clear.

Consistent with these methodological reorientations, the expert-positioning of the architect is explained not as some stable status sustained by a Eurocentric power/knowledge nexus, but rather as a contingent and oft-contested act of claim-making, one that necessarily negotiates challenges of collaboration and compromise. Expertise is here not a quality but a process. At various points in the collection there is an appeal to the idea of ‘interactional expertise’, wherein knowledge is generated ‘through transaction and multilateral engagement’ (p. 5). Alyson Wharton, in her essay on the Balyan family of Ottoman court architects, explains this form of expertise as straddling ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ worlds – exposed to the traditional labours of the *kalfa* (master builder) as well as the professionalized sphere of modern architecture – though fully inhabiting neither (p. 89). The desire for ‘full’ expertise, she writes, is imagined as ‘a complete practical training in a specialist area. Interactional expertise, in contrast, can be acquired from socialization alone’ (p. 117). This understanding exhorts the historian to heed the multilayered interactions that facilitate and delimit building practice in a necessarily complex context. ‘Expertise’ cannot be the constant property of an individual or institution. As Christensen shows in his introduction, the story of one public monument in Istanbul – the *Alman Çeşmesi*, or German fountain – can be told as involving the ‘collective insight and talents of the Kaiser, the sultan, a diplomat, an architect, a poet, an epigrapher, a mosaicist, and two policemen, a multi-level and multi-national admixture that became more the norm than the exception in the modern period’ (p. 10).

An edited volume is a useful vehicle for pursuing such interventions: the variety of topics covered by diverse contributors allows for a robust demonstration of evidence in support of its argument. The reader learns about Bavarian philosopher-gardeners in 19th-century Istanbul (Türker), Paris-educated Armenian architects navigating the Ottoman Renaissance (Wharton), French engineers and draughtsmen traversing Egypt and Sudan in an age of nascent Arab revivalism (Troelenberg), Tunisian mural artists exploring national identity on the walls provided by a growing post-independence hotel industry (Gerschultz), American investors and Israeli industrialists riding the tides of economic liberalization in the ‘New Levant’ after 1973 (Handel and Nitzan-Shifan), and more.

Admittedly, the essays are inconsistent in their interrogation of ‘expertise’ as category, with some contributors simply tracing the stories of individual experts and leaving any broader conceptual or methodological conclusions to be determined by the reader in dialogue with other chapters. Despite Christensen’s urge to move away from the ‘sweeping obsession with agency’ that characterizes conventional architectural histories (p. 18), a minority of the essays exhibit just that tendency, paying precious little attention to questions of reception, use, potential misinterpretation or the ways in which designs might have unanticipated consequences for spatial imaginations and rhythms.

These reservations aside, the volume includes some incredibly rich meditations on architecture, history and modern Islam. Mrinalini Rajagopalan’s essay on Syed Ahmed Khan’s 1847 text *Asar-us-Sanadid* is a highlight, exploring how the Muslim reformist’s study of Delhi’s built environment disrupted British imperial claims to authoritative knowledge concerning India’s historic architecture. Rajagopalan is particularly interested in the way both indigenous intellectuals and colonial *archons* created architectural archives imbued with ‘affective tendencies and emotive imaginaries’ (p. 77), even as they laboured to justify their work as a scientific matter of documentation. Eva-Maria Troelenberg’s suggestion, in her contribution to the volume, that the act of *drawing* may be approached as a ‘cross-cultural epistemological technique’, or indeed as a ‘contact zone’ where the modern draughtsman grapples with the aesthetic heritage of a particular context, is a tantalizing methodological provocation, explored with reference to the 19th-century Marseilles-based architect Pascal Coste. Another fascinating case is provided in the essay by Neta Feniger and Rachel Kallus, which recalls the work of Israeli ‘experts’ in Iran after 1962 – prior to the 1979 revolution, in the shadow of the Cold War and amidst a climate of Pan-Arabism – to animate an obscured moment where

alliances were forged through architectural knowledge, technical assistance and disaster management. Feniger and Kallus are reflexive about the lack of Iranian sources in their account, presenting the contribution as an invitation to further research and a reminder of the very real obstacles posed by borders and geopolitics in such transnational investigations.

In fact, two of nine essays in the collection concern Israeli architects and/or planners, which in itself presents an argument for the constitutive role that Israel has played in the dynamics of the modern Islamic world. This is perhaps the most provocative challenge to the idea that a history of architecture in this area must be oriented around the fate of 'pure' or 'Islamic' forms; as Christensen relates, the scholar's obligation is to recognize an ever-changing terrain for building practice across a broad spectrum of contexts. The question of what should be considered 'Islamic', then, is left open – for better or worse. The volume, which emerges from a 2015 special issue of an academic journal, was finalized before the appearance of Shahab Ahmed's posthumously published *What is Islam?*, but the engaged reader might pursue a productive dialogue here with Ahmed's line of questioning, his asking the questions 'what is Islamic about Islamic philosophy?' or 'is there such a thing as Islamic art?', for instance.^[3] [4] What is Islamic about Islamic architecture? What, for these contributors, constitutes the/an 'Islamic world'?

The other stated ambit of the volume, to challenge asymmetrical notions of Western domination *of* or imposition *on* a mute and receptive Orient, is certainly addressed in the text's attention to non-European protagonists and evidence of local contestations, but stops short of any radical confrontation with the diffusion model. This is broadly a story of how global forms and practices are adapted for or translated within Muslim cultures and societies, at times affected by the force of robust internal traditions ('from the practices of gardening to mosque design, from the mural to the master plan' (p. 18)). There is no real sense that the modern Islamic world is a generative site for new architectural forms or practices that then travel *elsewhere*, no sense that architects from 'the West' who work for a period in the Middle East, North Africa or South Asia are fundamentally changed by the experience and work differently when they return home. The closest we come to a discussion of 'splash back' or 'feedback' is in Łukasz Stanek's fascinating essay about a group of Wrocław architects who worked extensively in 1970s and 1980s Kuwait, and who upon their return to Poland after the first Gulf War are known as 'the Kuwaitis'. This designation seems to be a playful appreciation of their portfolio, rather than a suggestion they are importing back to Poland ideas or strategies from their Gulf experience; indeed, as Stanek argues persuasively, it is their ability to adapt to diverse local conditions that distinguishes them as a group, rather than any overriding style or set of principles. Another promising path for analyzing the Islamic world as generative site is seen in Jennifer Mack's short essay at the end of the collection. Here, she notes that Swedish architects have been enthusiastic about the prospect of designing mosques in Sweden's towns and cities, precisely because they offer a unique space for architectural experimentation, in contrast to the restrictive planning conditions secular buildings have to satisfy. This is, however, an aside in a chapter concerned primarily to communicate ethnographic reflections on pragmatism, community activism and the constraints of context.

Like any good edited collection, *Expertise and Architecture in the Modern Islamic World* reads as the start of a conversation, pointing to fertile grounds for further exploration rather than asserting the resolution of a debate. So, what might further explorations look like? For my part, I would have been interested to hear more about centres of professional training and architectural education in the Islamic world itself: the formation of regimes of expertise that might stand outside the usual networks of indigenous elites traveling to Europe for their education or apprenticing themselves to mobile Western architects. I was also left curious about the importance of south-south relations in this period, and especially in the 20th century. In every chapter, when there is an external authority or expert present, it is a European or North American one (though of course this could be contested based on how one understands Israel). Stanek's excellent essay is a minor antidote to this, in that his work illuminates the often-observed role of secondary Soviet powers like Poland in the project of socialist internationalism, and he at least alludes to phenomena like the Non-Aligned Movement and its approach to architecture. There is certainly more to explore here, and it will be important for scholars to untangle the implications of south-south relations for this concept and category of 'expertise'. This need not necessarily be limited to an age of decolonization, but could consider the transregional work

of groups like the Aga Khan Foundation, or indeed the recent assertions of China across the ‘new silk road’ and its forging of economic corridors into Pakistan, the Gulf and beyond.

Another promising terrain underexplored in this collection concerns the force and implications of anti-expert and anti-architect sentiment in the modern Islamic world. Christensen and his collaborators seek, as I have mentioned, to move away from a narrative that presumes the existence of ‘pure’ Islamic forms, but in performing this historicist gesture fail to interrogate the powerful investments located in the very idea of purity and the possibilities of a sacred architecture. Consider, for instance, an influential text like Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bhaktiar’s *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, first published in 1973. A central contention of this book is that acts of ‘creation’ are solely the prerogative of God, and that architects and builders should pursue their work in the terms and practices provided by tradition: only then can they guarantee the ‘spiritual validity of forms’.^[4] [5] Put simply, they are not meant to ‘create’ something new, but rather to ‘realize’ existing archetypes, with the help of devotional acts and open to divine guidance. To pursue ‘originality’ can only be an act of individual vanity. Now, Ardalan and Bhaktiar may occupy a minority position when one considers ‘actually-existing’ building practice in the contemporary Islamic world, but intellectually this work needs to be taken seriously. If God is seen to guide building practice, then what place for the ‘expert’? What role do such perspectives have in articulating the architect’s disillusionment with modernist principles, the very same sense of disenchantment Stanek explores in his discussion of Poland and Kuwait? What conditions fuel the pursuit of sacred architecture – its compulsions to purity, the deference to traditional methods – across the diverse sites and locales of the Islamic world?

For these and other questions, the present volume surely provides a useful starting point. As is often the case with academic texts, readers may be dissuaded by the hardcover price tag, especially if they are lucky enough to be subscribers to the *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* where a majority of the essays first appeared (volume 4, issue 2, 2015). That said, there is new material in the Intellect Books edition, and this is a well-produced and well-illustrated text that should be a welcome addition to any good University library.

[1] [6] Evan Selinger and Robert P Crease, *The Philosophy of Expertise* (New York, NY, 2006), p. 1.

[2] [7] See, for instance, Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).

[3] [8] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ, 2016), pp. 10, 46.

[4] [9] Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bhaktiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago, IL, 1973), p. 10.

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