

## Humanism in the Modernist Era

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In the forward to Edward W. Said's book *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Akeel Bilgrami eloquently dissects the long, complicated history and understanding of humanism. He states that the diverse doctrinal formulations can be seen through defining poles.

One is its aspiration to find some feature or features that sets what is human apart – apart from both nature, as the natural sciences study it, and apart from what is super-nature and transcendental, as these are pursued by the outreach of theology or absolute metaphysics. The other is the yearning to show regard for all that is human, for what is human whenever it may be found and however remote it may be from the more vivid presence of the parochial.<sup>1</sup>

He continues to introduce Said's writings by characterizing the first pole, that of self-knowledge "as being constituted by self-criticism".<sup>2</sup> In other words, self-knowledge is a trait attributed uniquely to the human population, but Bilgrami's summary of Said's thought is that self-knowledge has to be informed by an ability to be self-critical. Only then can human achievement be understood. The second pole, Bilgrami notices that Said understands that the study of "Self" within restricted (parochial) boundaries can be too "cozy and insular".<sup>3</sup> The nature of this type of study is not as informed as the critical study of "Self" through "Other" - reaching beyond comfortable, known boundaries.

If we translate these poles from the context of the Humanities and re-appropriate them to the practice of architecture, the poles might be stated as such: one is the aspiration to design with the understanding of

what sets humans apart - apart from nature, technology and the sciences that study them. The other is the yearning to show regard, in built form, for all that is human, going beyond the individual to the individual within a cultural context and further to a global context. In this translation, it is clear that the two poles of architectural humanism are not opposites of each other, but influence and inform in direct relation.

The association of Humanism and architecture has a deep and varied history. The term is most commonly used to refer to the Renaissance. A period defined by "men whose Christian faith (was) enlightened with the secular authority of Greece and Rome, who believe(d) in universal truths and yet (were) curious of history and scientific discovery, whose ideals of human conduct comprise urbanity, tolerance, and serenity".<sup>4</sup> Humanism, as understood in the late-modern era of the built environment, has not been as pre-occupied with the notion of classical order, beauty and the proportional understanding of architecture in relation to the human form. It has been released of many of the previous formal issues of taste, and instead, humanistic architecture has come to represent an understanding and devotion to human behavior and comfort, as well as social and environmental intricacies.

This shift in communication of the humanistic model has created an opportunity for architecture to incorporate the historical through the re-appropriation of the vernacular, define appropriate technologies for environmental ecology, and study the physiological and psychological nature of humans - at the individual and societal levels. This architecture becomes the mediator between the human's relationship to nature and technology,

allowing each to be understood in more relevant terms. Furthermore, this humanism allows for a culture of the collective; as a means by which human beings are connected to each other through their common situation.

### Humanism I Modernism

The intention of this study is to bring forward a comparison of thought and work of the two architects in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who, most famously, were deemed as humanists. This is a study of the Egyptian architect, Hassan Fathy (1900-1989), whose influence in the design of rural communities spread throughout the Middle East, and Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), a force in 20<sup>th</sup> century Finnish architecture and design. Both men came of age during the height of the Modern aesthetic and choose to acknowledge its technological influence, but reject its lack of depth with regards to human comfort.

Comfort is one of those words considered taboo in architectural vocabulary. It is as if the concept of comfort is limited to oversized furniture and curtains hung at the window. Comfort is also attributed to the cultural notion that tradition is consistently a positive aspect of a community and that change will have a negative impact. These impressions of comfort are far from the principles that Fathy or Aalto were seeking to express through their work. From his review of the “functionalist” Stockholm Exhibition in 1930, Alvar Aalto writes the following with regards to housing:

The architect must be radical enough to refrain from designing superficial comfort, and instead seek solutions to the problem, providing a basis for more enduring architecture and ideas worth developing concerning the everyday comfort of residents.<sup>5</sup>

In this statement, Aalto is referring to a re-occurring thread in his work. The belief that human comfort can be achieved through a thorough examination of common human needs -

lighting that does not irritate the eye, materials that exhibit appropriate tactile qualities and spaces adequate for the intended function. This practice was one of using technical methods that resulted in a technical understanding of human experience, which (in theory) would generate a more informed design.

In Fathy's work, comfort was rooted in the refinement of traditional forms through their inherent climatic and symbolic value. Through a careful, tempered investigation of technical advances as a necessary means to achieve architectural change, Fathy altered the housing conditions of thousands of Egyptian and Arab people. In a statement often quoted from the 1986 book, *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture*, Hassan Fathy wrote:

If possible, I want to bridge the gulf that separates folk architecture from architect's architecture. I always wanted to provide some solid and visible link between these two architectures in the shape of features, common to both, in which people could find a familiar point of reference from which to enlarge their understanding of the new, and which the architect could use to test the truth of his work in relation to the people and the place.<sup>6</sup>

For both Aalto and Fathy, the advances in material technologies and construction methods being practiced in Western Modern architecture fed their own humanistic practices. Fathy, for the most part, rejected modern mechanical technology as a viable solution for arid climatic conditions. The value of vernacular elements (windtower, internal courtyard, malkaf, mashrabiya), meant to control temperature through an understanding of the wind and sun, was (to Fathy) not merely a symbol of the heritage, but constituted a climatic comfort at a material level and at a human, cultural level. By rejecting mechanical means of temperature comfort, perhaps one would assume this to be his hesitation of change, but upon closer inspection, is a plea for an understanding of the impact of design decisions on the welfare of the individual within a greater community. In the postscript from the same book, Hassan Fathy wrote:

Modern science can develop human capabilities to use natural sources of energy far beyond what has been achieved in vernacular architecture. This requires a systematic application of science and a comprehensive comparison of modern and traditional structures. But if modern science is to revitalize architecture in this way, the principles that produced the traditional solutions must be respected. This is the only way modern architecture can surpass, in human and ecological quality, the achievements of vernacular architecture in the hot arid regions of the world.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout his career, Fathy studied and documented construction methods of the Arab region. This followed his interest of not only understanding the ecology of materials and methods of construction, but also the spirit and response of the inhabitants. He felt that the blind translation of architectural formal language and technologies designed for other cultures and climates would lead to the distancing of the human within the natural and social world. Thus, his admonition to architects to practice with at least a moderate respect for the historical development of vernacular structures; for their functional value as well as their spiritual significance. This reiterates the previous interpretation of both Fathy and Aalto; neither felt that the modern aesthetic or technologies went deep enough to satisfy the human condition. Yet, the human condition that they each sought to address was of a universal nature; spatial honesty (individual and social needs), quality of light, thermal comfort, and tectonic integrity.

Alvar Aalto often spoke of new materials and the rational execution of their incorporation in modern architecture. His general line of thought was that rationalism did not go far enough. He thought that the heart of the rational was to actually deal rationally with the human aspects through which design affects and is affected.

My aim was to show that real rationalism means dealing with all questions related to the object concerned, and to take a rational attitude also to demands that are often dismissed as vague issues of



View from Gishla (Ottoman Government building and Military Post Office) built by Midhat Pashr, Turkish Governor in Baghdad.

individual taste, but which are shown by more detailed analysis to be derived partly from neurophysiology and partly from psychology.<sup>8</sup>

More specifically in the same article, Aalto writes:

Modernism has dabbled in the world of forms arising from analyses of new materials, new working methods, new social conditions, and so forth, turning it into a pleasant hodge-podge of chromed tubes, glass plates, cubist forms and astounding colors. It seems as if everything possible was done to give the new architecture a more cheerful and, presumably, a more humane look, and yet one is left with a stale taste in the mouth because of its lack of any real human content.<sup>9</sup>

It is evident through these excerpts that Alvar Aalto had shifted from his primary practice of neoclassical tradition as expressed in his very early work and was quickly progressing through the practical, analytical nature of rationalism. This period revealed his desire to deepen the rational vocabulary beyond technology of materials and the aestheticism of formal resolution. Moving into his mature years, his emphasis on linking “architecture with the dynamic systems of living nature” guided Aalto’s intervention of architectural form and technology within the natural world.<sup>10</sup> The objective



Al-Rasheed Street, in the centre of Baghdad. Photo taken on 25th march 2006 by Dr. Ghada Sliq (Baghdad University)

of this architecture was to mediate and understand the experience of the human; thusly enriching it.

But architecture is not a science. It is still the same great synthetic process of combining thousands of definite human functions, and remains architecture. Its purpose is still to bring the material world into harmony with human life. To make architecture more human means better architecture, and it means a functionalism much larger than the merely technical one. This goal can be accomplished only by architectural methods - by the creation and combination of different technical things in such a way that they will provide for the human being the most harmonious life.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in a paper entitled "The Art of Living in the Cultural Revolution" written in 1978, Hassan Fathy stated this thought on contemporary architecture:

What are we to do when we want to achieve contemporaneity in our modern architecture? What is our standard of reference for housing people? If we want our buildings to be contemporary, probably we have to make our buildings fit the latest findings of modern science. We have made great progress in the physical and mechanical sciences, but we have made much less in the human sciences, the science of the human-being.<sup>12</sup>

The systems of thinking may share similar qualities, but the physical and emotional nature of their built work belongs to an extended and divergent set of circumstances. Both men saw their countries politically and physically occupied. Finland was under Russian control from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1917 and Egypt was occupied by Great Britain for 74 years starting in 1882. Each country had economic and social reactions to independence. Nationalism and cultural identity became significant in the structure of communities, and Fathy's and Aalto's work sought to respond to this reordering. The political nature of their countries and their own political beliefs affected where they worked, how they worked and who they worked with, but it did not seem to erode the underlying humanist assumption threading throughout their careers. Each had a keen ability to recognize that their theories went beyond the Finnish citizen or the Egyptian and could be applied to the universality of humankind.

### Universality

If humanism were to have any influence during the Modern era, it could not remain held by the underpinnings of regionalism. Modern architecture, through its use of technological standardization and honesty of expression, could easily be acclimatized throughout the world. But, a practice built on the understanding of limited, isolated, individualistic needs of a small group of people would only perfect itself in a vacuum. This manner of practice would not support the second pole of architectural humanism as stated earlier. For an architect with humanist philosophies to be relevant, his/her process would have to be tested against and informed by knowledge of 'other'.

What is relevant about the work of Hassan Fathy is not necessarily that he used mud bricks in Egypt and understood the vernacular function of wind towers to provide a temperate interior environment. Instead, what is relevant about his work is the manner in which he approached this work. James Steele, in the Introduction to his book

*An Architecture For People: The Complete Works of Hassan Fathy*, describes Fathy as having “six general principles which guided (him) throughout his career”.<sup>13</sup> This is the list that Steele presents: ‘the primacy of human values in architecture, the importance of a universal rather than a limited approach, the use of appropriate technology, the need for socially oriented, co-operative construction, the essential role of tradition, and the re-establishment of national cultural pride through the act of building.’<sup>14</sup> This illustrates that what guided Fathy was not just finding a functional solution for housing people in hot arid climates, but what he was really attempting to do was generate a process of practicing architecture that could have universal import.

The bulk of Alvar Aalto’s built work was completed in his Finnish homeland. The expression of his humanist ideology was identifiable within this natural surrounding and cultural acceptance. However, his process was not limited by this context. Apparent his various articles and published lectures, the universality of his practice was the application of material technologies within the guiding principle of designing for the human. His research and experimentation with material and form was led by his insistence that the perceptual and sensual experience could lead architecture to more appropriate technical advances. In what appears to be an unpublished lecture written in 1939 in New York City, Aalto discusses the aspects of research within the notions of architectural analysis and synthesis. Scattered throughout the justification for an “International Institute of Architectural Research”, these statements are typical of his thought.

It is research in architectural synthesis itself that we need today - research in how to bind materials together, how to make a living totally from technical details - the HUMAN RESEARCH, how the human being reacts to this totality... Architectural research should provide for such an integration, and it is exactly the advantage of this research that we lack today... When I say human, I do not mean something separate and apart from

the technical world... The next step in technical development is to become more closely merged with human needs.<sup>15</sup>

The extensive research involving a fluid mixture of artistic expression, material technology, human behavior and the architectural integration of nature, illustrates that Aalto’s process is comprehensive and could be tested as such outside of a specific geographic locale.

### Baghdad

One of the few locations where the work of the two architects might have been commonly realized would have been in the vicinity of Baghdad, Iraq in the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> The Kingdom of Iraq at this time had been recently released from British control and a (British-installed) monarchy was established. King Faisal II was the final controlling member of the ruling family, and it was during this decade that fiscal attention was given to the development of the rural communities and the modernization of the city centres.

Fathy moved to Athens, Greece in 1956 to join Doxiadis Associates, where he was involved in the design of the Regional Plan for the Development of Greater Mussayib, a rural community outside of Baghdad.<sup>17</sup> In a recent, well-written article published in the *Journal of Architectural Education*, Panayiota I. Pyla eloquently articulates the importance of this collaboration in the career of Hassan Fathy. She states, “Operating in the midst of a development group, Fathy recast his social concerns in a global perspective, calibrating his formal sensibilities to Doxiadis Associates’ plans for mass housing.”<sup>18</sup> Since the principles of Fathy’s humanistic ethics were capable of being recast as a scientific approach to understanding the vernacular, his contributions to the Mussayib planning succeeded in tempering the strict rationalism of the potential standardized development. The drawings that Fathy produced for a high-rise housing block the Iraq Housing Programme appear more in the tradition of the International Style, consisting of repetitive modular



River Tigris Front and the beginning of Abu Nuwas Street, at the South of the City.



Tahir Square, and Sadoon Street on the right, in the city centre.

units. While appearing to contradict all of Fathy's professional principles, the buildings did "show an attempt, within extremely stringent parameters, to mitigate an unremitting typology with innovative ideas for cross-ventilation and layers of privacy, without doors."<sup>19</sup> Due to the political climate of the country during that time, much of the collaborative design work remains unrealized, and the work that did get built was met with varying acceptance. The collaboration of thought between Constantinos Doxiadis and Hassan Fathy is where the advances were truly successful. Each man developed an altered sense of his own beliefs.

Similar to the cultural motivation that is currently taking place in Abu Dhabi, where Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, current President of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Abu Dhabi has allocated land and resources for the cultural development of the city,<sup>20</sup> King Faisal II devoted abundant financial resources to the development of the country's architectural presence. Many renowned Modernist architects of the era were invited to submit work for potential design commissions. Alvar Aalto was one of these invited architects. His 1955 competition entry for the National Bank of Iraq in Baghdad illustrated his ability to relocate his knowledge and study of human experience to a completely different climate than he was accustomed to working. "He devoted considerable attention to the problem of shielding rooms in his seven-storey bank palace from light and heat, carefully studying

the incidence of the sun's rays at various times of the year and from various angles".<sup>21</sup> This competition entry is claimed to have not even been discussed by the review panel. Two other projects were begun by Aalto, but remained unrealized. These were the Baghdad Art Museum and the plan for Baghdad's Main Post Office, both of which were being worked on in 1957.<sup>22</sup> Due to the political overthrow and assassination of King Faisal II in 1958, the visions for the modernized city centre were abandoned.

## Conclusions

The Humanist ethic and its inherent association with architecture are evident to any practitioner or conscious citizen. An architecture that places human experience as its primary focus will be expressed differently than an architecture that begins with a technological tool as a generator for design. The desire to design through a rational expression of human understanding lies at the heart of this thesis. This premise has been thoroughly contemplated by philosophers and architectural critics for centuries. The simple offering as set forth in this article is meant only to frame it through a specific context. That context being two men from distant worlds who lived their lives within nearly the same decades, witnessed political and social uprisings, respected the needs of the common man and used their knowledge and position to influence change. Granted, they were

simply human and faltered and tested and blundered as humans are prone to do, but their ability to join the tectonic, the natural and the technological into compatibility with the human is to be noted as paramount. They saw the science and nature of human experience as it relates to place and time. Their written thoughts imparted their sophistication beyond the expression of these thoughts in their built work.

The limiting framework of this study was to examine Hassan Fathy and Alvar Aalto through their own words, not the words others have written about them or their architecture. By removing the subject of the study away from the work itself and looking to their thoughts on their own work and the context of their own practice, the analysis is able to shift from the physical manifestation of an idea (which is often diluted by traditional obstacles of economy, deadlines, and bureaucracy) to the nature of the theoretical intention of a practical paradigm.

One pole is the aspiration to design with the understanding of what sets humans apart - apart from nature, technology and the sciences that study them. The other is the yearning to show regard, in built form, for all that is human, going beyond the individual to the individual within a cultural context and further to a global context.

By returning to the poles of humanism from Said's writings and this article's previously offered translation of them (through an architectural assertion), a proposition can be made. Within this examination of Fathy and Aalto, it should be evident that each architect exhibited these poles in extremely different physical, formal manners. However, the underlying thought behind their approaches can be equally justified and overlapped while tested against the postulates of these humanist poles. They each understood what was clearly human and they yearned to show regard for all that is human.

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## Notas

- 1 Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Forward by Akeel Bilgrami, p. x.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. xi.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Joseph Hudnut. "Humanism and the Teaching of Architecture." *Journal of Architectural Education*. Vol. 15, No. 4. (Winter, 1961). p. 13.
- 5 Alvar Aalto. *Alvar Aalto: In His Own Words*, ed. Goran Schildt, trans. Timothy Binham. (Finland: Goran Schildt and Alvar Aalto Foundation, 1997). p. 75.
- 6 Hassan Fathy. *Vernacular Architecture: Principles and Examples with Reference to Hot Arid Climates*, eds. Walter Shearer and Abd-el-rahman Ahmed Sultan. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986). Preface, page xx.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 8 Alvar Aalto. "Rationalism and Man" (1935). *Op. Cit.* p. 92.xs
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 10 Goran Schildt, ed. *Alvar Aalto: In His Own Words*, p. 98.
- 11 Alvar Aalto. "The Humanizing of Architecture" (1940). *Op. Cit.* p. 103.
- 12 Hassan Fathy, "The Art of Living in the Cultural Revolution" (paper, April 23, 1978). *Hassan Fathy Archives*, File No. 212. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Geneva. p. 13.
- 13 James Steele, *An Architecture for the People: The Complete Works of Hassan Fathy*. (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1997). p. 16.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Alvar Aalto. "International Institute of Architectural Research" (possible lecture notes. June 13, 1939, New York). *Alvar Aalto Foundation Letter Archive*. Helsinki. pp. 2-3.
- 16 Other locations common to both architects of realized or unrealized work were Boston, Massachusetts (Fathy; Roxbury Mosque 1980. Aalto; Baker House Dormitory, MIT, 1945) and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (Fathy; Jeddah Duplex Housing, 1970. Aalto; Urban Center plan, 1975).
- 17 James Steele, *Op. Cit.* page 111.
- 18 Panayiota I. Pyla, "Hassan Fathy Revisited; Postwar Discourses on Science, Development, and Vernacular Architecture" *Journal of Architectural Education*. Vol. 60, No. 3. (February, 2007). p. 29.
- 19 James Steele, *Op. Cit.* p. 116.
- 20 Current plans for the Cultural District on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi would house the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Contemporary Art Museum, the Louvre Abu Dhabi Universal Museum, a Performing Arts Centre, a Maritime Museum, the Sheikh Zayed National Museum and a Biennale Park with 19 pavilions. Design concepts for the first four of these projects have been created by Frank Gehry (Guggenheim Abu Dhabi), Jean Nouvel (Louvre Abu Dhabi), Zaha Hadid (Performing Arts Centre) and Tadao Ando (Maritime Museum).
- 21 Alvar Aalto Architecture Database, <http://file.alvaraalto.fi/> (search location: Baghdad; accessed, February 2008).
- 22 *Ibid.*