

**Resource Architecture –
XXI World Congress of Architecture, 22 to 26 July 2002 in Berlin**

Plenum 4: Space and Identity

Architectural Politics of Belated Modernity: Re-Traditionalizing the Islamic World

**26.07.2002
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Belated modernity is not only a sequence of transformations merely chronologically different from the “timely”, or “punctual”, modernities which characterize the luckier parts of the world, but is a situation structurally different from the “other” modernities. I do not want to go so far to propose that the modernities other than the “timely” ones are “failed” modernities. No parameter, or criterion, can convincingly prove a situation of failed modernity which is unable to change a society structurally. On the other hand, what is vital for all the modernities are not their achievements and failures, which are frequently confused with the value judgements of their observers, but their destructive energy in front of the “ancien regimes” in which they were born. Beginning with the early Turkish experiments in the 18th century, whole Islamic world destructed and is still destructing energetically its centuries-old social structures. However, the problem is to create new social and cultural structures and practices to cope with the needs of a changing society. In this respect, a belatedly modernizing society radically differs from the other modernities. It is not able to content with the new practices and structures substituting the old ones which are evaluated incomparably precious, and more important than that, indigenous, while the new ones are regarded as alien imported features.

What I intend here is to define one of the architectural consequences of belated modernity in the context of an anxiety that makes such societies extremely sensible towards the loss of traditions. A by-product of this sensibility is the aesthetical instrumentalization of cultural differences. At the first sight, it seems that the anxiety of the loss of traditions and, consequentially, the identity mania have nothing to do peculiarly with the Third World. As rightly posited by Thomas Meyer (1), the identity mania and the variations of fundamentalism are not only the socio-political problems of the Third World, but also of the economically developed countries in Europe and America. But, as far as the recent architectural developments in the Third World are taken into consideration, the need to aestheticize the cultural differentiation seems vital only for the belated modernities. Although the loss

of traditions were observed in the 19th century Europe with the same anxiety as those are in the belated modernities, the responses and reactions seem to be completely different in them.

Why is the need to aestheticize the cultural differences so instrumental in such a belatedly modernizing society? I only attempt to answer this question in the sphere of architecture which forms a component of the general anxiety of those countries.

As those are experienced elsewhere, the traditional cultural practices gradually extinct in the nonwestern world along with the processes of modernization. Besides centuries-old architectural practices and the traditional patterns of demand and supply also decayed. Along with the death of traditional cultural-artistic-architectural practices, the cultural dichotomy which was described by Adorno for the western modernities, is experienced in the nonwestern world (2), though its consequences are inherently different. The dichotomy of popular (or mass) and high cultures appears also in the belatedly modernizing societies. New architectural practices were to take their proper places within this cultural system. The architectural production under the aegis of popular culture, the first component of the dichotomy, is not thought by the high culture half of the system as an adequate means to realize the project of modernization intending to create an indigenous modern architectural culture. The pop-cultural architecture has its own practices, criteria and parameters all of which are posited by an attitude defined by the commodification of culture. This means that none of them is related with, or depends on, aesthetic and cultural discourses. In this respect, they slightly differ from the pop-cultural practices of the western world. The differences have to be traced mainly within the formal aspects of its products. Contrastingly, high cultures in the western and nonwestern worlds do not have even a slight structural resemblance. On the other hand, in the belatedly modernizing societies, the architecture under the aegis of high culture finds itself an extremely small area of existence. Nearly whole architectural production of such a society is contained in the sphere of the pop-culture area. From the "architecture without architects" in the illegal squatter housing settlements to the identical apartment blocks of the inner city, pop-cultural architecture characterizes every belatedly modernizing society almost alone.

Huyssen, who discusses the situation in the "timely" modernities, argues that mass culture has been always the hidden subtext of modernism (3). High culture in the belated modernities has, however, three subtexts one of which is hidden and the others are openly expressed. The first, and explicit, subtext is what is defined as "western culture". The newly emerging high culture of the belatedly modernizing society legitimizes itself in a challenge against the cultural practices which are declared as "western". On the other hand, it has

to deal with the other subtexts: traditional cultural practices which block the way proceeding towards modernity and the new but prolific mass culture of the majority. These are the heavy burden of a high culture which is demanded and practiced by a tiny minority. Besides, this is a rather contradictory burden to be borne. The need to aestheticize cultural differences, which are frequently expressed by the intelligentsia in the nonwestern societies, is an indirect derivative of the triple functions, or subtexts, of their high cultures.

The "raison d'être" of the first subtext, of "western culture", seems perfectly clear. "Timely" modernity of the west gives an impression to swallow up culturally the nonwestern world. Its productive energy economically and culturally so great as to be incomparable with that of the latter. All the means and channels of information and communication are controlled by it. Consequentially, it has so impressive an image of powerfulness that no nonwestern people seems to have an alternative in the future other than consuming its products forever. They pathetically fear as if they will never be able to create authentic cultural products and feel obliged to use the languages, industrial and cultural products of the western world. These pessimistic discourses, the results of this atmosphere of desparation, can only draw reactionary itineraries for modernity in the nonwestern world. The projects to create indigenous and necessarily nonwestern modernisms have to be the axis of these reactionary attitudes. This means that, for any modernizing nonwestern society, the cultural opposition towards the west is a vital necessity. In this sense, the "western culture" as a subtext is nothing but an empty category symbolizing everything the "other" one contains culturally. Put differently, the creators and "consumers" of the high cultures, who describe themselves as symbolically identical with the totality of their own societies, can only legitimize their existence and their efforts in such a reactionary manner against the fictive cultural totality of the "other".

The empty category, which is titled as "western culture", is not the only subtext of the high cultures in the belatedly modernizing societies. Premodern cultural practices and structures are also the implicit objects of challenge. However, the nature of the challenge is a problematic, and even a controversial one. It is almost an affair of love and hate. On the one hand, the high culture has to overcome the obstacles of the traditions on the way proceeding towards modernity. On the other hand, the very same traditions have to be idealized and sublimated as to become the "essence" upon which the modern cultural foundations of that society will be built. For example, the practices of "hammam" have to be exalted, while traditional hygiene is being condemned because of its obviously non-scientific basis. The traditional family has to be declared as a paradise of humanistic relationships, while traditional patterns of gender relations are being gradually abolished. The solidarism of the traditional community structures has to be sublimated, while the escape

from the "mahalle" is the only way for being free from the suffocating atmosphere of the premodern structures of "Gemeinschaft". The resulting contradictions can only be avoided again by making the traditional culture an empty category. In other words, the premodern cultural practices and traditions are expected to transcend their own historicity, and become nontemporal and omnipresent realities devoid of their original contents.

The newly emerging area of mass culture has generally been the implicit subtext of any nonwestern high culture, like that is in the "timely" modernities. For example, in Turkey, high culture continually opposes the indigenous pop music called "arabesk", beginning from the 1960s. In architecture, the pop-cultural morphology of the apartment blocks, and the system of "quid pro quo", which provided several generations of urban dwellers modern homes, are the objects of the constant criticisms of the Turkish high culture. Like the first and second ones, the third subtext of the high culture is also an empty category. It has potentialities to create cultural consciousness by defining actual counter-positions, though it seldom occurs. In the proceeding paragraph, what makes this subtext an empty category is going to be discussed within the attitude of high culture, accusing ideologically the "mass" who "misunderstands" the modernity.

In a belatedly modernizing society, the high culture has always been in a struggle with inner and outer enemies. As those are in the other high culture areas, in architecture too, the inner and outer struggles are paradoxically interrelated. In whole cultural practices, this interrelationship is the main factor which defines the scope and content of the discourses. The discourses I called "re-traditionalizing" are the results of a contradiction which stems, on the one hand, from the search of a cultural identity to be declared to the world, that can only be defined within the traditions, and on the other hand, from the intention to destroy the very same traditions inside, which block the path of modernity. Thus, traditional cultural structures have to be destroyed first (because modernity can only be built on this levelled area), and then, have to be reconstructed. Generally, these two have to be done simultaneously. The resulting re-traditionalized cultural structures have to be not plural but singular, i.e. national, because belated modernity is always simultaneous with the nation-building processes of a country. What makes the practices of popular culture a target is this need to singularize the cultural atmosphere, which is vital for a project of nation-building. Mass cultural practices, however, cannot be singular. They are inherently plural, though seldom pluralistic. Because, when the capitalistic process of commodification becomes the guiding principle, cultural practices and artifacts have to become tautologically diversified. Thus, they can easily become a threat for any disciplinary singularizing attempt like the project of nation-building. Because of this reason, high culture has to pretend mass culture not to see, or simply

ignore it. Or in some cases, the people, who experiences the practices of mass culture, and its products are generally condemned by the agents of the high culture: they are the "others" who misunderstand modernization, as if there is an orthodox modernity to be understood properly. As a result, they have to be reeducated. However, it is a futile disciplinary attempt to rectify the situation which is thought to be misshapen by the mass who creates the popular culture. In reality, what is aimed is to reconstitute the long-lost singularity and inner consistency of the traditional systems within the gown of modernity. Everything that was solid long melted into air, but the discourses of the belatedly modernizing society desperately seeks to solidify which was vaporized.

At this point, the aestheticization of the cultural differences becomes instrumental for making architectural discourses work. Within the high cultures of the belatedly modernizing societies, cultural differences, which are ordinary and natural elsewhere, become invariables valuable "per se". The fact that the disresemblances between the cultures are natural characteristics for any society is tend to be ignored by the newly emerging nation-states. Thus, they intend to produce architectural images of disresemblance. Without doubt, the most important virtue of those images has to be their disresemblance to the western models and images. The products of popular culture, obviously dissimilar to the western models, however, are not placed in such an exalted position. Because, what make disresemblances aestheticized are not the morphologies but the discourses formulated by the three empty categories defined by the subtexts of the high culture. In these circumstances, the extremely limited extent of the high cultural production is thought by those who create it to represent the whole belatedly modernizing society with all its complexities. They agonizes over it as if all the cultural burden of the very same country is on their shoulders. However, it is just an illusion which depends on an over-estimation of its own real extent.

As a result, the argument I expressed at the beginning that the cultural dichotomy, which was theorized by Adorno, and then by Huyssen, for "timely" modernities, has to be inherently different in the belatedly modernizing countries. For an in-depth understanding of architecture in the Third World, we have to go behind the mere morphological analysis and to study this specific dichotomy in its own context.

Notes:

(1) Thomas Meyer, *Fundamentalism and the Politicization of Cultural Differences*, Zed Books, London & New York, 2001.

(2) cf. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by J. Cumming, Verso, London & New York, 1979, pp. 120-67;

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated, edited with an Introduction by R. Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 16.

(3) Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other", in A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide - Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1986, p. 47. For a detailed discussion of the relationship of high and mass cultures: Andreas Huyssen, "Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner", in *ibid.*, pp. 16-43.