



Hassan Radoine.- *Architecture in Context: Designing in the Middle East* (Chister West Sussex: John Wiley and son Ltd., 2017), 256p.

Hassan Radoine's *Architecture in Context: Designing in the Middle East* is presented as a new textbook for architecture and design students, primarily those from or studying in the Middle East, though the text would be considerably relevant for any contemporary designer working in the region. Taking as its point of departure the paradox of the modern Middle Eastern city –that of contemporary works devoid of context in the midst of often centuries-old urban centers– *Architecture in Context* explores the dichotomy between the history of Middle Eastern aesthetic design theory and the current trend amongst architects to reject that history in favor of imported (i.e. European) forms. It is not that modernism and Middle Eastern architecture are incompatible, says Radoine, but rather that contemporary architecture in the region lacks the dialogue with its own past that makes such modernism meaningful or relevant. Whether referring to the glittering fantasy of Gulf skyscrapers or to the fetishized application of ornamental motifs in North Africa, Radoine highlights how the rapid urban development of recent decades has rushed this conversation, resulting in a patchwork landscape of forms both static and unsustainable. The remedy, according to Radoine, is to be found neither in emotional regionalism nor in the international style, but in engaging with what he calls “context,” that immense and elusive term that grants architecture a purpose beyond the mundane.

In order to elucidate what he means by context, Radoine has divided his book into four chapters that lay out elements of consideration for the contemporary architect, from the technical to the theoretical, but always with an eye to these elements' role in a Middle Eastern environment. The first chapter, entitled “Architecture in the Middle East: A Background,” is just that, an overview of architectural trends in the Islamic world, from the ancient through the colonial eras. For the architectural or urban historian, this is well-trodden territory, but for emerging architects or designers, this brief overview should prove enlightening. Radoine outlines various modes of urban planning, detailing how the ancient and Antique top-down models encouraged orthogonal matrices that underscored social hierarchies. These matrices were then filled in by the urban sprawl of the medieval and early

modern *medina* typology before being re-expressed (often tangentially) in the modern colonial era. This history presents the reader with the underlying components that have contributed to the contemporary issues that Radoine feels face contemporary architects, issues like mobility, privacy, urban density, and environmental sustainability. By connecting the region's development history to these contemporary issues, Radoine emphasizes both how urgent these issues are, and simultaneously how much they have been neglected. Modern solutions to these problems, when addressed at all, have largely acted as a temporary bandage rather than long-term solutions. For example, the presence of tower-block housing in rapidly expanding urban areas like Cairo, Casablanca, and Istanbul, has both elided the plurality and diversity that Radoine sees as intrinsic to cities of the Middle East, while also removing important contributors to quality of life—like private outdoor space—from the reach of the middle class.

The second chapter, "Architectural Vocabulary: Elements of Local Style," attempts to outline what it is about architecture in the Middle East that grants it its *genius loci*, its sense of place, without veering into the pastiche. This is perhaps the book's densest and most significant chapter, and though it strays into repetition at certain occasions, this chapter's great success is in breaking down the elements of Middle Eastern architecture that underscore the region's aesthetic philosophy without veering into the trap of pastiche. These elements are loosely separated into five interwoven layers: biological, cultural, physical, social, and environmental. Each of these, in Radoine's view, must be considered when embarking upon a new project, and while the cultural and physical layers are often given great prominence, the others are no less relevant for their comparative invisibility. Of these layers, the social and environmental issues are most urgent in contemporary Middle Eastern architecture, and Radoine stresses this throughout *Architecture in Context*. For him, the glittering superstructures designed by what he terms rock-and-roll "starchitects" are inherently temporary, the vast resources required for their upkeep simply too expensive to last beyond the finite wealth gleaned from Gulf oil reserves. The glass windows lining skyscrapers, the energy needed to cool them, and the psychological disconnect between such displays of wealth in the face of mass poverty.

The rest of the chapter goes on to define explicitly what underlying qualities ought to be further explored, and again Radoine contextualizes this analysis within the *longue durée* of Middle Eastern aesthetics. His explorations of light and geometry are most successful, though this is likely because they have been poorly manipulated and misunderstood in the past.

Radoine describes the relationship between light and architecture in terms of a dynamic interplay on multiple different levels. Light is both an element of form, changing the curvature of a line as it moves across space, and a definer of space, dictating the dimensions of architecture seeking to remain cool yet well-lit and private. Light is also a prospective source of energy, and Radoine stresses its potential in a climate that receives so much direct annual sunlight. He encourages architecture that considers the sun as part of a microcosm within building, capable of both generating electricity and, when used properly, part of a natural system to regulate temperature. And of course, light is also metaphorical, known amongst historians of Islamic architecture for its paradisiacal connotations, and while such connotations are not necessarily appropriate for contemporary contexts, Radoine does emphasize light's ability to enhance the emotional connotations of architecture. In his discussion of geometry, Radoine touches on similar themes, examining geometry's relationship to architectural form and allegory. He is primarily concerned with delineating how these themes can be misappropriated in the quest to develop a contemporary regional style, which often results in a kitschy, plastic artifice pasted on to a modular/curvilinear surface, rather than a coherently balanced structure.

By outlining these elements as somehow distinctly Middle Eastern in their application, Radoine opens the conversation for how they may be brought from their role in the hallmarks of Islamic architecture into the twenty-first century. He suggests that by understanding their underlying organizational principles, we can put these elements into a dialogue with modern architectural, spatial, and urban questions, engaging a modernist aesthetic in an intellectually robust manner. It is these interactions which are explored in the book's third chapter, "Cultural and Contextual Meaning," where Radoine attempts to apply these principles to questions of contemporary urgency, such as cultural and environmental sustainability. Coming after the previous chapter, in which so many of these principles are outlined, and the ways in which they are integrated into multiple different "layers" of design, this exploration feels quite repetitive at times, retreading ground that Radoine has already explored. It is clear that he is reluctant to put forward concrete examples of how these tensions should be negotiated, and most of the sites cited through the book's photos are negative or critical examples. This is not entirely a shortcoming, but rather indicative of the pervasive problem that Radoine is trying to address. This becomes the focus for his fourth and final chapter, "Trends and Discourses of Contextual Architecture," which examines the "growing number of contradictions, dichotomies and ideological controversies as well

as the social and political turmoil [that] appear to be complicating the way contemporary architecture might be revisited” (199).

Radoine is clearly frustrated with what he sees as the two options given designers in the Middle East today: either to move towards an “international” style, characterized by its use of technology to utterly reject its social, cultural, and environmental context, or to regress into a nationalistic pastiche that has more in common with the Disneyland imaginarium of the “Orient” than their own past. This is a valid and much needed criticism, and exploring the dichotomy of this choice emphasizes the extreme degree to which the landscape of Middle Eastern architecture has become sharply accentuated by shallow interpretations of what it means to be modern. Radoine is not necessarily interested in answering this question, but rather presenting the question in a variety of more tangible forms by expressing them through media like energy, ornament, social responsibility, or setting. It is this tendency to break down the question of Middle Eastern modernism into its component parts that makes this book such an excellent resource for students, granting them the tools to approach architecture and urban design from specific angles, and demystifying some of the glamour surrounding “starchitects” like the late Zaha Hadid.

A secondary concern appears to be two social critiques that hang over the narrative of modernization, that of environmental sustainability and wealth distribution. These are complex issues not easily addressed in a text that is meant to broadly cover the Arabic-speaking world, but nevertheless deserve more direct attention than they are given here. Though Radoine frequently mentions sustainable building methods as a major concern for architects in the Middle East –citing as pressing threats the expensive cooling systems required of glass-and-steel skyscrapers, for example, or the urban sprawl taking up valuable arable land– the urgency of the issue is somewhat underplayed. Even beyond the economic instability of such a model, current models of climate change predict that the earliest burdens will fall inordinately upon the Middle East, with recent studies predicting summer temperatures to reach 50°C by the end of the century.¹ Moreover, the disparity in wealth distribution across the region means that large swathes of the population will feel these effects more keenly, with the poorest groups left unable to survive the increasingly hostile environment. Radoine does point out that there are cheap, sustainable methods for combating these effects, but they are often reliant on the kind

1. J. Lelieveld et. al., “Strongly increasing heat extremes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the 21st century,” *Climatic Change* 137 (1) (2) (2016), 245-60.

of large-scale implementation that is rarely given precedence either through governmental or private enterprise.

In sum, *Architecture in Context* is a valuable book for two contributions to architectural education. The first is his eloquent negotiation of modern architecture's faltering steps in the Middle East, predicated on a postcolonial discourse that rejected local forms without engaging the logic as to why. This intellectual break, which Radoine positions in the postcolonial era after World War II, resulted in a landscape devoid of context, a gap this book begins to bridge through its historical narration and critique. The second contribution is its elucidation of the means by which the above conversation can be held, thereby granting invaluable tools to the students who undoubtedly will turn to this text in the course of their study. This is not a volume of solutions; there are no simple answers to the dichotomies outlined and the intellectual questions posed. But the first step in advancing any conversation is to acknowledge the problem at its heart, and that is what Radoine has done with *Architecture in Context: Designing in the Middle East*.

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