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Tony Fry

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## REVIEW

# Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam; Visualizing the Invisible; Built upon Love

by **Tony Fry**

**Tony Fry is the main  
contributing editor to  
*Design Philosophy Papers*.**

This essay starts with a review of Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas*, State University of New York Press (SUNY series in Islam), 2005, 262 pages.

How significant is this book to DPP readers? Far more than most readers might think.

At a fundamental level, this book refuses a discrete, functional and aesthetic placement of design, and its more recent characterisation within the ‘creative industry,’ as an activity produced by a particular ‘techno-creative’ subject. It does this by placing design in a hermeneutic milieu wherein the designed is understood by thought and ideas lodged in the creativity, art, religion and spirituality of Muslim cosmology. Within this milieu, the inter-relations

between mystical ideas, space, bodies and the architectural are explored. What this exploration demonstrates is that architecture (and thus design) is implicated in the formation of a culturally constructed universe that becomes the reality of the place of dwelling of dimension of one's being. All that is, exists by virtue of God's inscriptive power – the world comes from the word, it is written, designed. This universe predates, and sits alongside, the ungraspability of how astrophysics *designates* it as a constantly expanding entity.

While others have acknowledged that to pose mysticism as the opposite of science is to construct a false dichotomy. What Akkach make powerfully clear is that both act as systems of ordering. In the western tradition, the line from magic to alchemy and then to chemistry was a continuum (Robert Boyle, one of the founders of modern chemistry in the mid 17th century was also an alchemist). In the Muslim world, the rise of astronomy, mathematics, geometry and optics were all influenced by early, and deeply mystical, Islamic thought. There was equally the shared influence of Greek thought by philosophers of both traditions (Islamic thinkers were especially influenced by Aristotle and to a lesser extent Plato). This history sits alongside the complex passage of texts and translations through which ideas not only travelled but were transformed.

In the structure of his book, Akkach systematically exposit the directive force of design in relation to four regimes of order: discursive; metaphysical; cosmic; and, architectural, together with the manner of their symbolic connection. In so doing he reveals the pre-modern design thinking (one could actually say theory) of al-Ghazali, a celebrated theologian and mystic, whose thought provides the narrative path the book follows.

The book is more than a fine piece of scholarship to be valued by Islamic and non-Islamic scholars; it is a work of love and a corrective to Eurocentric understandings of the history and theory of architecture and design. At a time when Muslim culture is often vilified, exposing the complexity of its thought is also of political value to anyone seeking to counter crude, reductive and stereotypical arguments.

Next I review Stephen Read & Camilo Pinilla (editors), *Visualizing the Invisible: towards an urban space*, Techne Press, Amsterdam, NL, 2006, 194 pages.

I started reading. Have I read this book before? How could I, because I only picked it up for the first time a couple of days ago, so my answer had to be no. But the familiarity of the material (a collection of seventeen essays) from much earlier collections like *Zone 1/2*, edited by Jonathan Crary et al in 1986, from conferences and publications, like the Sydney Postmodern Cities Conference of 1993, plus the widely cited text by the likes of

Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, Henri Lefebvre *et al* that so much of what's presented stands on, made it feel like yes. Maybe this remark is only of critical significance to anyone who has been around for a while. But maybe the postmodern tenor of the text and its sometimes say nothing images (mostly the kind of computer generated material that has become the tired fare of urban design) may equally seem dated to recent generations.

The essays and projects explore the urban as a contemporary condition using a (broadly) phenomenological approach contra to 'normative or reformative' approaches claimed to have dominated planning since its inception. The emphasis is on questions of the everyday, non-linear space, time, hybridity, exchange, interactivity and akin thematics from structuralist and post-structuralist thought.

The contributors from many parts of the world (mostly staff, graduates or students of the Faculty of Architecture at Delft University of Technology) do have something to say, and what they seek to understand, the nature of the urban, its past, present and future, is certainly worth struggling with. Like any collection of many authors, some contributions are better than others, and a few are strong and perceptive. The essays are compressed into less than 200 pages, of which around a third are images. This makes for very short pieces on very complex issues that are framed by an assertion of the urban as an environment able to support ways of life, economies and articulations with 'the world.' Numerous problems of contemporary urban life and form are acknowledged and explored, including problems of: community and communication; spatial fragmentation; network formation and deformation; the relation between centre, edge and periphery; socio-economic difference; disjunctural temporality; forms of hybridity, and more.

However, what is not confronted is the complexity of the urban as 'being in negation', i.e., defuturing inequity and the production of the unsustainable in the effort to sustain. This characterisation, if still only partially pictured, is graphically present in *Planet of Slums*, the recent book by Mike Davis. While Davis does a great job on the social and economic consequences of population pressures and globalisation, his analysis, in common with *Visualizing the Invisible*, does not get to grips with the extent of the environmental urban crises that are unfolding – crises of global warming, accelerated heat islanding, water shortages, poor air quality, suburban and peri-urban destruction of habitat and agricultural land, etc. This limitation of analysis is compounded by theoretical statements by one author, like 'we' live in a world that is increasingly less foundational. Certainly a third of the world's population, the Islamic nations, are a living refutation of this statement, and at a fundamental level, dependencies upon biophysical foundations ever remain.

The latter remark points to another shortcoming of the book: a 'poverty of theory'. This is a term British historian E.P. Thompson

threw in the face of Louis Althusser as the title of his 1978 essay. Effectively, what it means in the context *Visualizing the Invisible*, is that it suffers from a lack of praxis – theory devoid of agency. So said, it would be unfair to give the impression that this is a bad book within the genre of urban theory – there are many much worse. Rather my remarks underpin a major criticism of the genre itself. It seems that no matter how erudite or theoretically sophisticated the analysis brought to the urban by urban theorists, the complexity of cities and their dependence upon what they are not, does not arrive, gets stranded, or is flattened in streams of generalisations.

Finally, I review Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love: architectural longing after ethics and aesthetics*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 2006, 247 pages.

This is an extended essay that tracks back to classical Greece and then forward through the western architectural tradition to uncover connections between poetics and ethics, this, according to the author, in order to identify a more substantial basis of architectural desire than the instrumentalism and formalism that hold sway today.

It is a work of an individual predilection for architectural poetics projected as if it were the sensibility of the masses. It reminded me of a documentary made many years ago by the English poet and connoisseur of Victorian and Edwardian architecture, John Betjeman. He was walking down one of London's streets of architectural gems looking up at the buildings while pointing out that everyone else in the crowded street was looking down. Certainly the chattering classes can get upset when a bit of architectural heritage is under threat by a developer, but in the main most people do not give a stuff. They do not live in an architect designed home or work and shop in towns and cities of architectural beauty. Unless thrown into the choreography of the urban tour, they do not look at buildings. In fact, the whole phenomena of signature buildings by 'name' architects has completely folded into the discourse of tourism.

Similarly, corporate architecture and other modes of 'conspicuous architectural consumption' exist in another semiotic regime based on power and economic positioning. Meanwhile, hordes of architects spend their lives either as sole practitioners, working out of a spare room at home doing home extensions, attic conversions and other low budget jobs, or as employees of local authorities designing as per the prescriptive regulations of building codes and planning ordinances.

Against this backdrop, claims by Pérez-Gómez like "at once poetic and critical, the work of architecture provokes its interlocutors' imagination, deconstructing the mechanisms that merely fulfil pragmatic needs ..." and "... architecture opens up a space of desire in which fiction is interwoven with human actions;

it entices the inhabitant/participants to reach out to know and engage desire without being destroyed, transcending rather than hiding our moral condition” seems at best other worldly, at worst ridiculous.

The romantic aesthetic-philosophical indulgence that this work represents travels with a high idealism that wishes the world to be a better place and for architecture to serve the common good.

One can contest the form and content of the argument, not least by recognising the agency of hate as a determinate world-shaping force, or by striving to find a formulation of beauty that has purchase in the economics and structural instrumentalism that now drives architectural culture.

Likewise, one can agree that the embodiment in built forms of that which bonds communities has important ontological designing potential. Yet it is not enough – the social and biophysical unsustainability of the inequitable world we inhabit demands more of us and more of architects. For instance, the retrofitting of our cities so they may sustain their inhabitants in coming decades is an imperative that completely overwhelms a concern with the poetics of expressive forms (the source of the ethical paralysis of architecture). Responding to this imperative cannot be reduced to mere pragmatics. Retrofitting is as much about the cultural investment in place and rendering the space of community operable as it is about building fabric and infrastructural systems in an age of rapid climate change and other environmental problems that are ultimately grounded in anthropocentric myopia.

In many ways it is not the intellectual aim of Pérez-Gómez we need to reject, but its location and method. It needs to get out of the library into the shit that we find ourselves in. If not, it simply becomes another version of the sheltered workshop favoured by so many academics and artists. Love, as an affirmative being-in-the-world, is a doing, it is care, and is other than the debased emotionally and erotically interpolated subjectivist state the romantics have dumped on us.