

Spiritual Duets

Nader Ardalan

Harvard University, Fellow, Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Nader.ardalan@gmail.com / www.ardalanassociates.com

Theme

Design is a witness to our perception of reality. Dependent upon the scope of that perception, the idea of “reality” can vary from the limited, tangible aspects of things perceived to include the most hidden and sublime. The creative collaboration of an architect and artist in quest of something sublime in design was our inspiration.

Theme Development

Karl Slamminger, sculptor/painter, was 41 and I was 37 when we were invited to contribute to the opening exhibit of the National Museum of Design at the Cooper Hewitt in New York in 1976 that was entitled *Man Transforms*. The collaborative work that we had realized to that date had all been of the nature where an object of art-sculpture, painting, hangings- was placed within an architectural environment. We had often discussed how essentially invalid this process was, for the integrity and totality of the created work was limited by the segregation of the art from the architecture. In short, we sought an expression where art and architecture knew no separation and sought to exalt one another in a new expression of Unity based upon timeless principles.

The large exhibit room provided allowed us a specific and unique exploration of the integration of traditional values and design principles with contemporary needs and opportunities. It was our belief that through such a process a desirable cultural continuity was obtainable and that a sense of permanence that is universal, is possible within this world of rapid change. Blind imitation or nostalgic recall of past “styles” was not, of course, our aim; rather the generative, timeless essence of the creative imagination, as posited in the treasury of traditional wisdom, was the domain of our inquiry and the foundation of our work. The world of symbolic forms and, most particularly, that of qualitative mathematics and geometry, were reinvestigated in the knowledge that the world of intuitive thought or creative intellect is a necessary complement to our rather limited, contemporary base of rational design. The framework of specific ideas that structured our collaboration, which was entitled, *Hamdami* (Persian, meaning breathing together), were the following:

A sense of place making based upon the concepts of triplicity (body, soul and Spirit) motivated the selection of the mandala symbol and its spatial interpretation in Persian architecture, the *Chahar Taq* (Four Archways). The *Chahar Taq* plan and volume was determined by an even-numbered mandala of an orthogonal geometry that grew from a center in increments of 4, 16 and 64 squares. The 64-square mandala was enveloped by a curtain- the traditional “veil”- that helped contains and defines the total place in space. Next, the entire form was pivoted in space until the four sides of the mandala came into perfect “fit” with the four cardinal directions.

The Concept of space and shape grew from the preceding, becoming proportionally and spatially defined by the Fibonacci scale based upon the measure of man. The cube of man, 68” x 68” x 68” was the result. Its division into four cubes 34” on a side provided the basic building block of the work and from each corner of the 16-square mandala a double helix of square plan spiraled toward the center and, in the trace, created a new transformation of the square into the circle.

The material chosen to best express this transformation was Lucite, for it inherently manifested appropriate transcendent qualities while being very much a material of our epoch. Of particular interest to us was the manner in which the material, through cleaning and polishing, was able to free itself of its encumbrances and literally glow with the light of its own essence.

A central shaft of light, brilliant and pure white was chosen to illuminate the unseen ontological axis of the work and through reflection to illuminate the entire form itself. Here the central white light could be a metaphor for Unity, while multiplicity could be alluded to through reflection. Similarly, through *sound* the same metaphor could resonate and heighten, aurally, the primary purposes of the expression.

Finally, the fundamental ingredient of the expression was *man and his movement* through the work. The penetration of the container, as manifested by the black veil, was through four *vesicas* or gateways on the axis of each of the cardinal directions. The experience and perception was of the three primary possibilities of motion in the universe- in, out and around.

Energized by the success of our *Hamdami* exhibition, we next moved to explore the application of the same themes at a larger architectural scale in the Bu Ali Sina University project in Hamadan, Iran. Here the context was an actual crossing point of four covered “student streets” under a *Chahar Taq* in a linear movement system that connected four courtyards surrounded by classrooms. The larger design scale, now measuring 64 feet across and shaped as an octagon, required that Karl and I be complemented by my structural engineer, Zareh Gregorian. Together, we concluded that the four double helical structures should be made of hollow steel tubes shaped as octagons that would each spiral upward and toward the center to generate a unique domical space. We placed a lantern at the oculus to allow natural light to shine through, which worked with natural light and ventilation that came in through the four openings formed over each of the covered streets. The entire outer form was covered by copper panels that patinated over time, harmonizing well with the buff brick of the building walls. The resultant form was a spatial order that could be found in the fabled, traditional Bazaars of Iran. However, it was completely innovative and had never been realized before, yet evoked a timelessly sublime space.

Concluding Thoughts

Over the years, Karl and I have continued this self transformative process of creative design in a number of world cultures. *The New Man* by Thomas Merton poetically captures the universality of this quest: *It is quite usual, when a man comes into intimate spiritual contact with God, that he should feel himself entirely changed from within. Our spirit undergoes a conversion, a metanoia, which reorientates our whole being after raising it to a new level, and even seems to change our whole nature itself. And then, “self-realization” becomes awareness that we are quite different from our normal empirical selves. At the same time we are vividly conscious of the fact that this new mode of being is truly more “normal” than our own ordinary existence. It is more “natural” for us to be “out of ourselves” and carried freely and entirely towards the “Other”- towards God in Himself or in other men- than it is for us to be centered and enclosed in ourselves. We find ourselves to be most truly human when we are raised to the level of the divine. Thus in a single act we accomplish the double movement of entering into ourselves and going out of ourselves which brings us back to the paradisiacal state for which we were originally created.*

Where is this place? It is not a place, it is God.