

Mud & Mirror

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Introduction

In the *Great Kavir*, Iran's largest desert, lays the ancient city of Yazd. Compact, dense and composed of paradise garden courtyards built of mud, straw, unfired and kiln fired bricks, plaster and glazed faience, it is the epitome of holistic, ecologically designed sustainable urbanism. Highly adaptive to its hot/arid environment, the city exhibits an economy of frugal means that is culturally relevant to its local cultural traditions that extends back centuries to its Zoroastrian origins and its post-Islamic present.¹

For this paper, it will serve as the case study context for the pivotal aesthetic theory of "*Khesht-va Ayeneh*" –Mud & Mirror. This concept of the unity of opposites, known also in the west by the Latin term *Coincidentia oppositorum*, pervades much of the fundamental philosophic, poetic, artistic and architectural world view of ancient Persia. It will be posited and demonstrated through selected case studies that this same theme has influenced design thinking up to the present times. With a wide diversity of theme interpretations in the world, it deserves greater research attention and application than it has been accorded in contemporary times.

Let us begin with one of the most ancient of these thematic interpretations by recalling the prophet Zoroaster (1000 BC.) who proclaimed *Ahura Mazda* (the light of wisdom) as the uncreated God, wholly wise, invisible, benevolent and good, and upholder of *asa* (“the truth”).² In contrast, he spoke of *Ahriman*-the dark, destructive spirit, the “demon”, whose essential nature is expressed by the epithet “the lie”. In this ancient Persian Avestan unity of opposites, both spirits are essentially actors in the primeval choice between truth and lie, good and evil, the great drama dominating the life of man and the destiny of the world.³

This similar pivotal concept of *Coincidentia oppositorum* can be traced to pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus (ca. 535-475 BC)⁴. Although philosophers, as already alluded to in Persian sources, had for some time been contemplating the notion of opposites. The contribution for which Heraclitus was noted for was the conception of a single, divine law of the universe, a principle of order and knowledge which he termed *Logos*.⁵ The universe of Heraclitus was based on constant change, but at the same time on permanence. This timeless concept of the complementary unity of opposites of permanence within change has formed one of the profound frameworks of philosophic thinking that has endured time in both the east and the west.

Mircea Eliade, the eminent 20th century historian of religion, extensively used the term.⁶ Carl Jung in his psychoanalytic quest for self-realization proposed that the simultaneous penetration of the inner unconscious and ultimate union with the outer conscious mind was the key activator of the complete man.⁷ He often proceeded to analyze situations in terms of “paired opposites”, by using the analogy of the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang, just as man contains the nature of woman and woman the nature of man.⁸

In alchemy, and more specifically related to traditional man, the crafts and architecture, the quest of the Great Work is for *Coniunctio*, the sacred marriage or union of our divine spirit with the human soul, and finally with the body- symbolically depicted as the union or coitus of King and Queen.⁹

When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the Kingdom. -
*Gospel of Thomas, 22*¹⁰

MUD

The Egyptian architect, Hasan Fathy wrote: “Learning to manipulate clay, stone marble and wood, man penetrates their properties and his techniques gave expression to his aspirations towards the divine”...The negative consequences of the industrial revolution have disturbed the natural organization of the divine concept for humanity... I want to bridge the gulf that separates folk architecture from architect’s architecture...The abstractions of the technologist and the economist must be continually pulled down to Earth by the gravitational force of human nature.”¹¹

In the mud city of Yazd, the transmutation of mud and straw into transcendent architecture is a living expression of the inner aspirations of the traditional craftsmen towards the divine. In the same way, the delicate inter-weaving of silk threads with wools colored with natural dyes into geometric and floral patterned carpets are expressions of a mystical participation with nature in life.¹²

MIRROR

We are reminded of the twelfth-century Persian mystical conceptions of Subhuddin Suhrawardi, who ranked everything in existence according to the intensity of light it possesses. The Ultimate Source, the Light of Lights, he placed at the apex of a pyramidal hierarchy at the bottom of which is the phenomenal world of matter that exists in darkness: characteristics of the world that we inhabit. The quest of the creative intellect, he posited, is to be as a brilliant mirror that pierces through the successive veils of shadows, thereby reflecting the true light of the Absolute within ourselves.¹³

They reveal the unique metaphysical dimension of Persian heritage and its cultural Gestalt: a historic worldview that seeks to explore a deeper spirituality through the richness of the phenomenal world, according to which, through “Everythingness,” one may sense the transitory “Nothingness” and its corollary opposite. Within the apparent nothingness of the empty desert, mindfulness can reflect the vast rich everythingness of the universe.¹⁴

*Nonbeing is a mirror, the world the image, and man
Is the eye of the image, in which the person is hidden.
Thou art the eye of the image, and He the light of the eye.
Who has ever seen the eye through which all things are seen?
The world has become a man, and man a world.*

- *Gulshan-i-raz (The Rosary of Mystery)* by Mahmud Shabistari, 13th c.¹⁵

The extension of this dimension to Zen thinking in the metaphysical view is to the idea of “Nothingness” (*mu*), which is the non-articulated whole that is considered as the sole reality, while the articulated is called “being” (*yu* or *u*). In the Zen aesthetic Way (*gei-doh*), the supreme value of Nothingness finds its own reflection as an expressed image in the representation of Nothingness, i.e. the non-articulated whole as something pure and immaculate, as the supreme Beauty in a state “prior to its being smeared and polluted with “being”.¹⁶ The art of Noh play, Haiku poetry, or the design and construction of the traditional tea house by an architect and craftsmen are typical genre of this aesthetic practice. The core of this practice is that from contemplation upon essential “Nothingness”, a glimpse of “Everythingness” might be achieved by both the practitioner and the viewer.¹⁷

Contemporary Applications

As posited, the theme of *Coincidentia oppositorum* has influenced design thinking up to the present times. A few outstanding examples may serve to illustrate the point.

For instance, the influence of the Buddhist concept of nothingness can be seen on the contemporary works of the Japanese architect, Tadao Ando, one of whose designs for the Church of Light (1989)¹⁸ employs a full height cross of brilliant natural light that is cut into a dark empty, concrete chamber, which recalls the legacy of nothingness expounded by Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945), the father of Kyoto Philosophical School.¹⁹

Lou Kahn in the design of the Salk Institute allowed the brilliant California sun to cast dark, stark shadows in the open courtyard of travertine, creating a horizontal facade to the sky. “I sense light”, he observed, “as the giver of all presences and material as spent light. What Light makes casts a shadow and the shadow belongs to light.”²⁰ The inseparable complements of the shadow to light are yet again recalling the union of opposites. But then by adding to the

monumental silent nature of the courtyard space a single stream of water flowing to the Pacific Ocean, he also transcended space to the infinite, to eternity.

One of the most recent examples of its application can be seen at the 9/11 Memorial in New York City entitled "Reflecting Absence" by Michael Arad and Peter Walker.²¹ Surrounding the dark, mysterious depths of two enormous square reflecting pools, set within the footprints of the original Twin Towers, cascades of water, as thousand tears, describe the perimeter of each square feeding the pools with a continuous stream flowing away into a dark, mysterious abyss. The pools are large voids, open and visible reminders of profound absence. In the words of Peter Walker: "While the footprints remain empty, however, the surrounding plaza's design has evolved to include beautiful groves of trees, traditional affirmations of life and rebirth."

CONCLUSION

A reviewer asked: "Why and how does mirroring the other side of the absolute effectively reveal a deeper spiritual dimension?" The question perhaps calls for understanding the concept and qualities of mirroring.

The psychologist Heinz Kohut believed that the process of mirroring allows an individual to move from conceiving objects to be purely external to internalizing certain qualities he perceives them to possess, thereby making these qualities his own.²²

In a traditional Sufi view, the reflective mirror pools of Persia, found in even the humblest courtyard gardens of Yazd, reflect the blue dome of the heavens above, allowing an awakened soul to be led to contemplate the Hermetic Formula: "So as above, so as below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing"—the transmutation of the soul of the beholder to the pure, hidden gold of his essential spirit. In this situation mirroring establishes a sense of empathy and rapport with the Absolute within the pious individual. Since mirroring occurs subconsciously, it creates a subtle, egoless sense of heightened self-appreciation by having established a relationship with the Absolute.

Pope Benedict XVI: wrote that the image of God has to do with relationality. Regarding the Imago Dei within man, he wrote, "Its nature as an image has to do with the fact that it goes beyond itself and manifests something that it is not....It is the dynamic that sets the human being in motion towards the totally Other. Hence it means the capacity for relationship; it is the human capacity for God."²³

Coincidentia oppositorum!

¹ Yazd is the capital of Yazd Province, Iran, and a center of Zoroastrian culture. The city is located 270 km southeast of Isfahan. At the 2011 census, the population was 1,074,428. It is the driest major city in Iran, with summer temperatures very frequently above 40 °C (104 °F) in blazing sunshine with no humidity.

² Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Rutledge, London, 2001

³ Ibid

⁴ Kahn, Charles, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: Fragments with Translation and Commentary*.

London: Cambridge University Press, 1979

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton University Press, 2005

⁷ Carl Jung, *The Red Book*, W. W. Norton & Company, London, 2009

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, translated by William Stoddart,, Stuart and Watkins, London, 1967

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