

# IASTE 2012 Conference Report

## Tradition as Prescription, Polemic, Possibility and Provocation

MRINALINI RAJAGOPALAN

IASTE's 2012 biennial conference, held in Portland, Oregon, marked the 25th anniversary of a robust debate on tradition and the built environment — a debate that was begun by the organization at its first conference, held in Berkeley in 1988. “What are traditional dwellings and settlements? How do they arise and why do they persist? How do we in academia study them and to what end?”<sup>1</sup> These were some of the questions that motivated IASTE's first meeting in 1988. Twenty-five years later, with a vastly changed membership, as well as a more international presence as a result of this journal and the association's biennial conferences, IASTE continues to grapple critically with the overlapping concepts of tradition and the built environment.

In this broad (and admittedly impressionistic) survey of the 2012 conference I will attempt to place IASTE's discourse into a broader epistemic landscape regarding tradition and its role in the built environment. Tradition has been both a seductive and sturdy trope in the study of the built environment. It has appeared sometimes as prescription (as in the study of early vernacular architecture); sometimes as polemic (as in the beginnings of postmodernism and its applications to architecture and urbanism); sometimes as possibility (as in the interdisciplinary turn toward understanding the built environment as social and cultural history); and sometimes as provocation (as seen in the more deconstructivist stance taken by IASTE in recent conferences, such as “The End of Tradition?” (2000), “Interrogating Tradition” (2008), and the 2012 conference, “The Myth of Tradition.”) Through these four modalities — of prescription, polemic, possibility and provocation — tradition reveals itself to be that most generative type of episteme, a moving target which resists singular definition yet which is infinitely productive precisely because of its deeply contested meanings.

### PRESCRIPTION

If it has been 25 years since IASTE's establishment, it has also been 48 years since the publication of Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects*.<sup>2</sup> A passionate plea to consider nonpedigreed architecture mostly in the non-Western world, Rudofsky's exegesis was a thinly veiled attack on modernism, launched precisely at the moment of its denoue-

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ment. From the ancient amphitheaters of highland Peru to the troglodytic dwellings of Sicily, this form of “traditional” architecture seemed to offer sudden and much needed succor from the cold, rational, grandiose narrative of modernism. Of course, in order for such “traditional” architecture to serve its purpose, it was important that its builders remain invisible and unnamed — the faceless mass of a happy, cooperative collective, instead of known individuals intervening in their environments. As Rudofsky wrote then, “There is much to learn from architecture before it became an expert’s art.”<sup>3</sup> What he meant was that there were no experts — indeed, no expertise — simply a naturalized response between man and the built environment.

Rudofsky’s book appropriated tradition as prescription. Tradition would become the bromide for the follies of modernism, and the “traditional people” would provide the compass for the spiritual rejuvenation and recentering of modern man. But missing from this articulation of tradition as prescription was the agency of traditional peoples themselves. Concomitantly, the traditional environments they built could only be understood via the deterministic lens of climatic or topographical factors. Indeed, understanding the political motivations, historical contingencies, or cultural hierarchies embedded in traditional environments would have disturbed their potential as innocent prescriptions for the recalibration of modernism.

From its very beginning, IASTE has sought to overturn, or at the very least interrupt, this narrative of tradition as existing in an apolitical realm diametrically opposed to modernity. More pointedly, it has from its inception chosen to dismantle the notion that tradition can be a panacea for the anxieties of modernism, arguing that tradition and modernity are mutually constitutive in any realm of the imagination. This work of locating tradition centrally within the metanarratives of modernity (rather than at its periphery) continues today, and could be seen most vividly at the 2012 conference in the keynote presentation by Nasser Rabat. Rabat spoke, for example, of the Orientalist imagery rife in Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1950s master plan for Baghdad. That proposal, by the veritable doyen of architectural modernism, contained a statue of Aladdin at its center, which epitomized a bizarrely eroticized imagination of the Middle East. Similarly, in her 2012 conference presentation, Patricia Morgado described how Diego Riviera’s and Juan O’Gorman’s appropriation of traditional Aztec and Mayan motifs lay at the heart of a Mexican domestic modernism.

If these examples can be dismissed as creatively frivolous attempts to temper a universal and placeless modernity with caricatures of place and culture, the Jeffrey Cook Award-winning paper by Itohan Osayimwese (included in revised form in this issue) brought up a more vexing history. Osayimwese’s presentation focused on Hermann Frobenius’s nineteenth-century catalog of African dwelling types as framed by a colonial gaze. Yet, as Osayimwese convincingly

illustrated, this ethnographic work in fact constructed the groups it purportedly documented via scientific and objective means. In other words, it was a taxonomy that served to lock in place the role of tradition as defined by the colonizer for the colonized. Although this work preceded Rudofsky’s study by several decades, the question lingers: Was Rudofsky’s mobilization of tradition as prescription really so different from Frobenius’s colonial project of documentation?

## POLEMIC

If it has been 25 years since IASTE’s establishment, it has also been 40 years since the publication of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steve Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas*.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most well-recognized critique of the hegemony of modernism and its inability to recognize the value of the ugly, the ordinary, the vernacular, the undesigned, the disposable, and the commercial, Venturi and his colleagues sought to bring attention to the “stuff” that surrounds us in American cities. The authors sought not only a radical redefinition of what constitutes architecture, but more importantly, what constitutes architectural tradition.

One point of similarity between *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Architecture without Architects* is the attention each brought to the role of nonprofessionals in designing the built environment. Yet, unlike Rudofsky, who portrayed the creators of nonpedigreed architecture as simply reacting to their most basic needs, Venturi and his colleagues saw environments such as Las Vegas essentially as the creation of nonprofessionals asserting themselves through architecture. Here, all kinds of tradition (mostly low-brow) were deliberately mobilized to create an urbanscape that was directly consumerist and most effectively fashioned around the fantasy of the highway strip. Art historians like Hal Foster and architectural historians like Dell Upton have pointed out, however, that *Learning from Las Vegas* was never meant to be a prescription for architectural symbols or the establishment of new traditions. Indeed, its radical nature rested in its power to function as pure polemic — an open-ended argument that refused the metanarratives of modernism.<sup>5</sup>

For example, the argument submitted by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour of a “duck” (a building that expresses its function through sculptural form) vs. a “decorated shed” (a plain building on which signs and ornaments are applied) exploded for the first time the myth that modernism could stand apart from symbolic associations or ornament. Indeed, the authors effectively pointed out that by rejecting the historicism of Neoclassical traditions and references to ornament, the modernists created their own palette of tradition. Reinforced concrete, ribbon windows, *pilotis* — these became the tradition of modernists, and modernist ducks were in the 1970s a dime a dozen in every city across the world. The Barbican in London could be the Boston City Hall; the Na-

tional Congress building in Brasilia could be the Secretariat in Chandigarh; the modernist housing blocks in Singapore could just as easily have been built in Cleveland, Ohio. What mattered was that these were ducks of modernism — easily recognizable symbols of that great movement that had so heroically rejected symbolism itself. Traditions had thus persisted despite themselves.

I thought about Venturi and Scott Brown's now legendary debate of ducks and their somewhat startling reappearance in our world as I listened to Rabat talk about the proliferation of architecture as a consummate signifier of itself in the new Middle East. From the exponentially exaggerated Burj al-Arab (which could also be the Burj Khalifa, the Petronas Towers, Taipei 101, or David Childs's new Freedom Tower in lower Manhattan) to Zaha Hadid's spectacular vision of the Performing Arts Center in Abu Dhabi (which could also be any number of Guggenheims from Bilbao to Abu Dhabi, or the Esplanade — lovingly known as the Durian — in Singapore, or the Bird's Nest Olympic Stadium in Beijing). Like the modernist ducks of the recent past, these new ducks proclaim the arrival of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Doha on the world stage of contemporary architecture. Despite their aspirations to the avant-garde, however, these new ducks are deeply embedded within a set of global traditions that have profoundly changed the nature of public space through the power of private capital.

The global traditions of the avant-garde and contemporaneity are not the only traditions that operate in the creation of new landscapes in cities such as Abu Dhabi or Beijing. As Rabat reminded us, these spectacular statements of architecture belie the brutalities of labor through which they are produced. The new global landscapes that feature the most fashionable starchitecture of the moment bear no imprint of the thousands of itinerant and unrepresented migrants who have taken these designs from drawing board to reality. Where, for example, is the body of the Indian immigrant worker in the gleaming architecture of Abu Dhabi or Dubai? Where is the space in Singapore for the tens of thousands of migrant workers whose unceasing labor has created the environments that are the city-state's passport to intelligibility in a global imaginary? Here again we see the eerie specter of traditions past. Are these new landscapes so different from colonial cities such as New Delhi, which sought to deny the troublesome body of a politically conscious Indian seeking self-determination? Or modernist cities like Brasilia which sought to erase the traces of the peasant turned construction worker, on whose back the city was built? The utility of tradition as polemic might thus lead us to the question: If the starchitecture of the contemporary moment are the ducks of our time, is the new Middle East the old colonial tabula rasa?

## POSSIBILITY

If it has been 25 years since IASTE's establishment, it has also been 27 years since Spiro Kostof published *The History of Architecture*.<sup>6</sup> Rejecting the hegemonic narrative of architectural history as centered around the "master architect" and histories of "great men," Kostof urged the study of architecture as the intersection of complex vectors of social meaning (always in flux), technological innovation, economic change, political imprint, and symbolic appropriation. Kostof's dismantling of the master-architect myth bore similarities with Rudofsky's mission; but unlike the latter, Kostof offered the study of architecture as a range of possibilities. Among these were the possibility to understand the past but also the present; the possibility to understand the collective societies of the past but also the individual actor; the possibility to understand the numinous and indeed ephemeral traditions of the built environment but only via their persistent plurality. It is perhaps no small coincidence that IASTE germinated in Berkeley — in this fertile discursive milieu brought on and affected by the intellectual legacy left behind by Kostof. More importantly, IASTE was the product of a larger intellectual landscape where academic knowledge was never considered to lie beyond the need for social change. The most vivid example of this remains the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s, which fundamentally changed the nature of academic discussion at the university as well as the contours of specific disciplines at Berkeley such as Geography. Here then was the greatest tradition of discourse — its potential to move outside the merely pedagogical sphere and act as a catalyst for political and social change.

The notion of tradition as possibility also surfaced in some of the papers presented at the 2012 IASTE conference. In particular, I was stirred by the attention paid to the recent appropriation of public space from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park. Papers by Reim el-Zoghbi and Khaled Adham focusing on public space in Cairo during the Jasmine Revolution, and Aviva Rubin examining the spectacle of self-immolation as reawakened in Tunisia, remind us that the instabilities of regimes are always accompanied by the fragility of spatial symbolism — especially when the latter is controlled by the hegemonic apparatuses of dictatorships and militarized states.

Here, too, the specter of tradition looms large, particularly if we compare the appropriation of public space during the Arab Spring with the emergence of poststructuralism during the 1968 student riots of Paris. The political turmoil of that earlier period and the rise of intellectual traditions such as the Situationist International cannot be separated from one another. Theorists such as Guy DeBord and Henri Lefebvre, whose arguments arose from the study of the built environment during that moment of political crisis and dissent, centered the understanding of public space in their understanding of contemporary society. In the present moment, the forces unleashed by the Arab Spring evoke a

similar history, reminding us of our responsibility to revisit the built environment and its potential to radically change the contours of discourse. This then is tradition as possibility — the understanding that tradition may interrupt or even overturn the most authoritarian regimes simply by appropriating and reinterpreting the spaces that reflect and reinforce these political frameworks.

#### PROVOCATION

Finally, I come to the concept of provocation. At this point I would like to turn to the next IASTE conference to be held in Shanghai in 2014. Its theme, “Whose Tradition?” returns us almost full circle to these early debates regarding traditional environments. On the one hand, “Whose tradition?” may seem like an innocent reassertion of one of the original questions that framed IASTE’s first meeting — i.e., “What are traditional dwellings and settlements?” On the other, the question of who defines and authors tradition is an attempt to place agency at the front and center of tradition. This central question also leads to others, such as: Who are the guardians or stewards of tradition? Who gets to discuss and manipulate tradition? Who benefits from tradition, and who becomes its victims? These are more than simply questions of authorship. They are attempts to probe the enduring seduction of traditions as well as the unexpected agency of individuals, for if we have learned something over the past 25 years, it may be that the one cannot be understood without the other. “Whose tradition?” then, is first and foremost a provocation. It is meant to challenge still further any of us who wish to rest tradition upon a singular definition; to encourage us to resist the urge to let it slip into prescription; and to remind us that the study of tradition should always remain a provocation.

#### REFERENCE NOTES

1. J.-P. Bourdier and N. AlSayyad, “Dwellings, Settlements and Tradition: A Prologue,” in J.-P. Bourdier and N. AlSayyad, eds., *Dwellings, Settlements and Tradition: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).
2. B. Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964).
3. Ibid.
4. R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, and S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1977 [1972]).
5. See H. Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2011); and D. Upton, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” in A. Vinegar and M.J. Golec, eds., *Relearning from Las Vegas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
6. S. Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).