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From basic needs to cultural values and local identity

Saïd Mouline

Always the product of a particular history and of specific technologies, constructed space results from the complex interaction between human beings (anthropos) and their physical environment (topos). This dialectic relationship shapes and produces human settlements. Unrelenting growth propels humanity toward cities and raises the crucial question of what role sustainability can and should play in urban civilization. Within the next two decades urbanization will reach nearly 75 per cent of the earth's total population.

Concerning the future of the urban environment, the world faces enormous challenges. Insights made and recommendations proposed at world meetings, despite their significance, unfortunately did not yield the expected

results.¹ But the issues must remain central vis-à-vis our collective efforts to improve our ecosystems. To achieve this common objective, another mode of understanding is required that entails acting in an efficient and accurate way. Such action necessarily comes to bear upon the construction industry. This fueled the incentive for establishing the Holcim Foundation for Sustainable Construction. The premises for this foundation are based on the results of the Rio Earth Summit held in 1992, which set out to draw the world's attention to the need for rational ecological development.² Holcim took up this challenge and decided to create an award program dedicated to giving merit to projects that promote sustainable construction.

The First Forum of the Holcim Foundation held in Zurich, Switzerland, in 2004 was essentially devoted to the theme of “basic needs” and their relation to the built environment. These discussions framed the target issues around which the subsequent award cycle was launched. What is sought is a proactive stance for innovation, specifically in fields involved with design and construction. And it is here that the work of architects and engineers prevails. Whereas most international architecture awards and competitions primarily place emphasis on the designer's skills to produce signature work – giving priority to visual appearance – the Holcim Awards are distinctively different.³ Other criteria are established: a different base, a more comprehensive range of references, and alternative targets. Concerning the base, no one

person or institutional will is given preference. Instead, multi- and transdisciplinary work as well as collective participation on projects is promoted – constituting the fruit of a widely shared vision as foregrounded by the worldwide network of universities involved in the overall undertaking.

Concerning the range of references, they are not centered on a specific community, neither are they affixed to a particular architectural theme. Instead, the operative parameters touch upon issues that cut across geographical borders and implicate a broad spectrum of architectural themes. Concerning the targets, the purpose of the Awards is not to narrowly classify works or design proposals in terms of a specific scale. Instead, evaluation is made regardless of scale, thus recognizing that achieving sustainable environments requires approaches from the very small to the very large. As a matter of fact, the Holcim Awards honor a matrix of considerations. The yield of these considerations must be born of a process of creativity and innovation driven toward the production of ecologically humane developments. In this respect, the Awards face both the present and the future. This is what distinguishes the Holcim Foundation, a distinction lent credibility by the results of the first cycle. Basic needs, while generally addressed, are now framed within a more specifically defined scaffold of objectives. These goals pertain to environmental technologies applicable to both the scale of buildings as well as to that of the urban domain. Moreover, cultural values and local identity are given a premium in defining

such objectives. This is to say that the human factor must be integrated in upstream decision-making processes, and not treated downstream as an afterthought. It seems obvious that some aspects of sustainable development in urban civilization are not easy to understand. Some values, such as cultural ideals, local identity, communal solidarity, a sense of belonging to a place – whether a town, a city, or a country – are all values that are more difficult to grasp than are basic services such as road systems, sanitation networks, clean water supplies, electricity, or healthcare. Until now, only a few studies concerning the construction of human space and its attendant challenges have been successfully undertaken. This is where Holcim is making a contribution, providing leadership, fostering networks of knowledge, and promoting innovative practices by addressing diverse projects around the world. The knowledge gained is geared toward a sensible regulation of urban civilization. No sustainable construction could exist without maintenance and communal management, neither could it be conceived without urban and social regulation, regulations that above all respect cultural values and local identity.

1 Cf. the “U.N. Conference on Human Settlements,” held in Vancouver from May–June 1976 and in Istanbul in June 1996.

2 Cf. the “U. N. Conference on Environment and Development” held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992.

3 Compare for example the Pritzker Prize, founded in 1979 by Jay Pritzker and considered the most prestigious annual distinction in Architecture, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, founded in 1977 by His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan for Islamic communities and held every 3 years, or the architectural prize of UNESCO, founded in 1989, and the Gold Medal given by the International Union of Architects and awarded every year since 1984.