

Personal Statement

Nasser Rabbat

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My scholarly focus has evolved in recent years from the cultural to the intercultural. To my mind, culture, that potpourri of historical, religious, and imagined markers of identity, is no longer a satisfactory disciplinary framework. My research has turned instead to the overlapping intercultural spaces where peoples have always met and exchanged ideas, views, beliefs, and practices, and, in the process, created architecture. This is the common thread that runs through several of my latest articles, which deal with diverse topics ranging from the shaping of the taste of the Turkish medieval elite, to the conscious appropriation of classical principles in early Islamic architecture, to the changing political meaning underlying the architecture of Hassan Fathy, the father of modern vernacular architecture.

In advocating a re-conceptualization of Islamic Architecture as a coherent yet fluid, multifaceted, and open-minded field of study, I formulate three questions: How can we study a culturally defined architectural tradition without reducing it to essential and timeless categories? How can we critique the dominant architectural paradigm without totally discarding the idea of paradigm itself or turning away from its instructive examples? How can we rethink the periodization of Islamic architectural history in a more representative way without cutting it off from a comparative historical framework? These broad programs of research inform my next book project: writing a critical historiography of Islamic architecture, critical not only in pointing out the biases and shortcomings of past inquires, but also in highlighting the theoretical and ideological preconceptions underlying present inquires.

My affiliation with the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture taught me to approach Islamic architecture as a scholarly field in the process of redrawing its epistemological and methodological contours in order to become a more active and integral component of world architecture. This view is guided by a personal sense of responsibility toward the discipline and by a belief that those who specialize in a field of study should not only question what they study or how but also why they are studying it. To this end, my lecture courses and seminars present architecture in ways that illuminate its interaction with culture and society and stress the role of human agency in shaping and reshaping that interplay.

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I also see the Aga Khan Program as a unique vehicle to assess, adjust, and redefine our role as educators in a fast changing global setting and to foster academic links with the producers and interpreters of architecture in different parts of the Islamic world today. What I have been trying to organize is a "community of interest" that brings together the members of our small group at MIT —students and faculty— with colleagues across the department of architecture and the Institute as well as in centers of study and research in the US and abroad. This objective has informed my policy in choosing the participants in the three extra-academic programs I supervise: the speakers at AKPIA's "An Evening With" lecture series, the recipients of our travel grants, and the postdoctoral researchers in our visiting scholars programs. In this intellectual network, the role that I assigned to myself some years ago as interpreter of Islamic architecture and urbanism past and present has expanded in scope and methods but it certainly has not lost its strong humanistic grounding.