Occidentalism: A Middle Eastern Approach on a European Theme of Urban Design

Giovanna Potesta and Mohammad Al-Jassar
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Abstract: In 1978, when Edward Said, published Orientalism, the West was close to the end of a period of nostalgic interest into the Middle Eastern Culture. There was a recognized view of Orientalism and all it implies. But there is also a reverse, the way the East looks at the West. J. Carrier published in 1995 Occidentalism. A positive interpretation of Occidentalism is fruitful in Architecture. We have experimented with this approach with the class of students of the Architecture Department, 3rd year, of Kuwait University. The problem presented was an urban design theme, focused on the redesign of a piece of a dense built area in Florence. The students offered a range of varied proposals giving the project their interpretation of Italianity. Additional consideration has to be given to the fact that they didn’t visit the city, so their knowledge of the site is absorbed through their instructors and the information they got from different sources, not last Google Earth.

Keywords: Occidentalism in Architecture, Orientalism in Architecture, Urban Design Strategies

Since the times of its “Renaissance” the West has been looking at the East, the Orient, with a feeling of admiration mixed to a certain grade of pleasure and superiority for the cultural differences. The word Orient signified not just a geographical place, but a mental place, where all the expectations and prejudices about the “other”, or the “exotic” in the literary sense, were nested. Orientalism is not only a field of studies but it is also a fashion or an ideological structure. Edward Said in his 1978 essay Orientalism tried to analyze the multiplicity of nuances that the term implies.

The mutual interaction between West and East changed the polarity of the exchange over time. Since the Byzantine period the East had provided nurture to a Europe deprived of the past cultural achievements until the West, reinforced by newly gained cultural bases, shifted the relationship to its side. In other words, during the so called period of Western “dark ages”, the flourishing of culture was centered in the Arab world. The Arabs developed and transmitted the culture of the Greek classics while the many populations and tribes of Europe were struggling for survival. Once Europe had produced the means for its re-birth, the East, either Middle East or Far East, preserved its integrity in a condition of isolation, and in many cases suspicion of the “others”, scarcely interested in the transformations that Europe and America were carrying out.

In the recent past, the oil discovery along with globalization, dramatically changed the attitude of the Middle East. The Middle East looks at the West from the opposite direction; however, with two fold paths, either emulating the West or refusing it.
On this topic is significant the essay of James Carrier, Occidentalism, published in 1995. Carrier focuses mostly on the negative look that the Middle East casts at the West.\footnote{In the Introduction to Occidentalism: Images of the West, Carrier says: “…Although the “Orient” may have appeared in the Oriental Studies to be a term with a concrete referent, a real region of the world with real attributes, in practice it took on meaning only in the context of another term “the West”. And in this process is the tendency toessentialize, to reduce the complete entities that are being compared to a set of core features that express the essence of each entity, but only as it stands in contrast to the other”.
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Although the pessimistic vision of Carrier and of many other authors in the same stream, the young generation of educated Arabs has clear evidence that also the West has values and cultural identities that form a heritage to save.\footnote{For the negative attitude of the East toward the West see also: I. Buruma, A. Marqalit, Occidentalism: the West in the Eyes of its Enemies, 2004.} For this part of the Arab population the otherness of the West is infused of a glance of nostalgia, seen in a romantic way with ideal places and images coming from a fantasy world. This glance is not so far away from its reciprocal, that one which the West casted on a world full of mystery and extravagances. The indulgence for mystery and extravagances is even more interesting in a world widely globalized, where the marketing of mass produced products reaches any corner of the planet.

But at this point the chain of mass communication with its standardized products is broken because the commercial products are not always in congruence with the products of the mind, where there is still space for the fantasy speculation that can produce different results. When we look at something that is far away from us we tend to idealize and romanticize it, even in the present world where everything is unified by globalization. In this paper we have called the combination of mass communications and the romantic glance Occidentalism.

The source of our investigation comes from the experience we have carried out with a project conducted by 4thyear students at Kuwait University, department of Architecture, on a problem area located in Florence, Italy. The area used for the project was developed in the nineteenth century as residential area. However, several buildings in the site were built during the period following WWII, during the Italian economic boom of the 1960s. And just like most projects of that time, a lack of proper design, integrating the public realm, was evident in the buildings chosen for the student’s project.

In this paper we will talk about an experimental design studio in which the students designed a project in an urban context that is far from their own, not only distance wise but also culturally. The outcome of the experiment surprised us as instructors of the course. While studying the project “in situ” will surly produce a much richer design, the students were able to develop and design a variety of successful solutions utilizing modern information technology such as Google Earth as example. Through Google Earth the students were able to locate and identify the urban fabric that surrounded their site; in particular through the colored panoramic views of the surrounding streets they were able to see the height of the buildings, the inclination of the roofs, and the scale of the public realm, to mention a few. In addition, work on foreign environment has enabled the students to concentrate their attention on the vital problems of the project rather than on preconceived notion of what the site should look based on local Florentine examples.

The resulting architectural language varied from student to student, according to their personal interpretation of Florentinity. Nonetheless, most of the students incorporated into the project some aspects of what we call “Occidentalism”. This is mainly due to their cognitive image of what Florence, the cradle of renaissance-influence into the world, as a place of
exotic spaces with magical atmosphere that dazzles the mind. As an example, the idea of
public squares, or piazza, was almost an unquestionable answer to the urban problem
presented to the students. We asked the students to strongly consider the concept of public
gathering spaces as places that foster social interaction and provide cultural sustainability.

The concept of piazza is not shared by all the western culture. For instance, American
students usually are not comfortable with the idea of piazza as originally intended in the
European culture. They think about piazzas as big commercial platforms without a specific
identity.\(^3\) For the Arab students, on the other hand, it is not easy to understand the concept
of the piazza as intended in Europe, especially in Italy.\(^4\)

The Islamic city is very stingy of public open spaces for climatic and religious reasons. The “souk”, the gathering place in which both genders can go, is shaded, and usually quite
congested even in terms of space use. Many other gathering spaces are gender oriented and
preserve a character of intimacy that is a constitutive component of the Islamic culture (see
Morris 390 and Petruccioli 32,). In addition to its environmental aspects, the courtyard is
the Islamic gathering place. In most cases the courtyard is designed for the associational
needs of men or women independently and in some cases collectively. The courtyard is always
part of something else, the house, the mosque, the palace, and it is always enclosed. The
access to the courtyard is always through a gate, a specific passage point that underlines the
difference between being inside or outside. These aspects in a certain measure influenced
the project the students carried on in Florence.

**Historical Background of the Project**

Design V studio is given to fourth year design students at Kuwait University. The purpose
design V is to focus on socio-cultural sustainability in architectural design. This is achieved
by bringing design projects that challenges the student’s mind on how to respect the context
of an existing site while at the same time provide new solutions to arising problems within
the context. This is especially true in historic contexts that need contemporary solutions to
social and cultural dimension of the site. On the micro level, the design assignments tried
to fosters the ability of the student to be more creative in finding solutions to the real problems
of urban renewal in mixed use areas. Solutions that can foster social interaction in public
while at the same time provide security and economic revitalization to deteriorating sections
of the city.

As mentioned above the project that we gave in the fall of 2009 was located in a historic
context in Florence, Italy. The project was on Gioberti street, immediately outside the eastern
border of the medieval city. Gioberti street is one those radial arteries leading from the city
to the other Tuscan cities. The part that was object of analysis is very close to the last circle
of city wall. The simple and narrow houses are nineteen century reconstructions of former
medieval houses. Some of the free empty spaces along the street were filled in after the
WWII in the period of blind enthusiasm of building reconstruction. The architecture of these
relative new buildings is not well designed, is quite poor and unpleasant. The challenge, as

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\(^3\) One of the authors, Giovanna Potesta’, was the designated instructor of American students studying abroad in
Florence. In her experience from 1999 to 2008, American students did not, at first, understand the meaning of the
piazza. However it was only after they studied for some time in Italy that they began to absorb the meaning of the
piazza.

\(^4\) This observation came to the authors of this project process.
mentioned above, was to ask the students to produce better projects for these lots, considering the historical conditions of Florence and the needs of the contemporary inhabitants.

The students were divided into two class sections, one taught by Dr. Giovanna Potesta’ and the other one by Dr. Mohammad Al-Jassar, each section consisted of about twenty students, both males and females. Each section had a one teacher assistant that helped in the studio. The main assignment was split into two parts: first, a full site analysis which included a study of the history of Florence; second, a design scheme for three lots placed in an urban context. Since the project was located in Florence and the students could not travel that semester due to various technical reasons, we, the instructors, decided to take the challenge and still assign the project. As we began organizing the course assignments, we realized the fact that the students could not travel and see the site might become an interesting challenge worthy of examining its results. It was clear that the students’ knowledge of Florentine culture was limited since they live a Middle Eastern culture. Hence, the possibilities of bringing new concepts to foreign landscape without visiting the site became an interesting experiment for both the instructors and the students.

Hence, as a way of familiarizing the students with the site, we asked them to do a research on key words taken from an article about the history of Florence and present their findings in group presentations. Ten words were picked, each word was given to a team of four students and they were asked to give a 5 to 10 minute presentations of their findings to the rest of the class. It was to our astonishments that the students did an excellent job in their research; this might have been contributed to their lack of knowledge of Florence which drove them to try and find as much information as possible. The students where then asked to do a full site analysis utilizing whatever information they can get a hold of that would provide information on the site. One of the main tools they have used was Google Earth, in which they located the site from a birds-eye view as well as from a street escape views. They were able to construct a full 360 degree views for all the streets surrounding the site.

One of the issues that came up during the course of site analysis was the ability of the students to understand the Italian culture from a firsthand experience. Hence, we decided to introduce them to the culture by showing them Italian movies that take place in urban context. We also invited a Kuwaiti who lived and studied in Florence to the studio so that the students could get a vicarious experience of Florence.

**Historical background of the city.** We gave the students an historical background focused on the urban form. The need to focus on urban form rather than individual buildings stems from the fact that most academic classes present individual buildings as representation of the culture in which these buildings are located. The idea that any student gets when they learn about these buildings, regardless of where they are receiving their education, is that those buildings are really in isolation, detached from their context and represent iconic symbols embodying the character of a culture. However, Florence, like most of the cities in the world, is not formed by its monuments, but rather the monuments emerge out of its fabric.

Florence, like many other South-European cities, was founded by the Romans as a colony in the first century B.C. (see Fanelli and also Morris, p.174). The roman gridiron structure, at the centre of the city, is still recognizable from an aerial view. The extension of the roman city is very limited even compared to the medieval expansion, but the orthogonal system of streets has survived over times. The old buildings have been destroyed and rebuilt more than one time, always on the foundations of the roman blocks retaining the memory of the place through the palimpsest of urban layers (“insulae”) (see Fanelli and Mumford).
After the fall of the Roman Western Empire and the long period of limited constructive activity, in the twelve century the city initiated a new period of prosperity. The external routes close to the city wall, already inhabited by immigrants without citizenship, constituted the spine system of the medieval expansion. Churches and Town Hall were the new focus of civic centers during the medieval Christian era (see Fanelli).

The real innovation in the urban form of the city was the birth of the convent complexes, first of all Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella. The monastic orders coming from France brought to Italy the model of associative life of the friars, sacred to God, but at the same time widely immersed in the care of the poor and needy (see Fanelli).

The idea of piazza, so representative of the Italian social life, has its literary origin in Florence. Piazza was the lane in front of one of the Florentine churches, San Felice in Piazza. The piazza in front of San Felice and the other churches was at the time not more than a small open space, a parvis, just like a breath, a pause before entering the religious building. The public associative spaces were the yards in front of the mentioned convents, where people gathered to be taught, healed, reassured. The piazza in front of the Town Hall was the other public space of significant importance, where the citizens heard the speech of the community representatives in time of peace or war. It was also the site of public civil ceremonies and public executions. The Cathedral represented the beauty and the building achievements of the Florentines, but the real life of the citizens was acted around the religious pole at the center of quarters. The factious spirit of the Florentines was, since that time, embodied by the convent complexes far away from the geometrical focus of the Cathedral (See Fanelli and also Benevolo).

The Renaissance gave an identity and a structure to the idea of piazza, but before that even a single one treatise had been written, Brunelleschi set the model of piazza with the project of the Innocenti Hospital (Morris 157). But the everyday life still continued in the alleys, in the areas jointed to the churches, in the small yards surrounded by workplaces and houses of merchants and artisans, but not in what later came to be known as piazzas. Groups of citizens unified by family or political relations built their houses around a minor centrality, a small piazza, often focused on a well. This small piazza and the streets around it have worked as centre of the daily associative life for centuries, until the recent exposure of the central areas to intense fluxes of cars’ and tourists’ traffic (see Fanelli).

The nineteen century planning of the city emphasized the aspects of bourgeois enjoyment, typical of the period. The creation of boulevards, pedestrian riverbanks, public parks and gardens, diverted the “florentinity” of the place to a more international taste. Although the many structural differences in the organization of space over time, the European urban fabric is traditionally formed in a hierarchical way, with a progressive itinerary from larger to smaller spaces. The gathering places are always public and the difference between inside and outside is not represented by the same element of the Islamic tradition. The piazza even the small piazzas surrounded by the medieval houses, were open to the public and not filtered through a gate (Morris 163-164). Intimacy was and, is still now, intended in a different way, it is more family related than gender related.

Stating the problem of the general identity of the city today. Florence is nowadays a city congested by the traffic, with an overlapping of functions in the central area and a progressive extension of residential areas without any other service along the plain of the Arno River. The intensive chaos of the centre determined the escape of the citizens, but not yet a consistent distribution of functions and services throughout the communal territory.
The intensive expansion of the built parts of land increased the number of roads and the car traffic. Mostly all the routes converge to the historical centre where still exist most of the administrative and cultural functions. The old historical centre of the city is now traffic free, but a good substitutive traffic system is not operating. The areas of the nineteen and twenty century enlargements are intensively occupied by cars, but the lack of livable spaces and the lack of car parking determine the conditions for a further moving away of the residents.

The Occidentalist Glance

At this point we can say that the students had a big amount of verbal, bibliographic and visual material about Florence and they could look at the city in 2D, 3D and different perspective views provided by internet. So the documentation was wide and very similar to the one that can be generated by any firm working in a foreign country.

We allowed the students to use a design approach that they deemed appropriate. One oriented to a modernistic approach, the other one more styled to a traditionalistic design.

All students respected the distributive inputs, the required heights, and the lining up with the other buildings. However, one group of students worked the masses without worrying too much of the stylistic analogy. In such case the modernistic approach, based on the contrast of styles, appeared to be easier and more successful. The other group of students tried to re-propose the language of local tradition. In this case there was a higher percentage of inappropriateness due to cultural misunderstanding or scarce assimilation of the local architecture. In both the cases there was misinterpretation about the typology of the houses.

The students tented to replicate the spatial organization of the single unit that is the most common typology in the Gulf Region. The requirement was to design apartments for Italian middle class users, whose apartment sizes range between eighty to one hundred square meters. However, we found the students to have difficulty understanding the Italian spatial standards, and have employed Kuwaiti standards instead. They initially started designing apartment that ranged between three to four hundred square meters. During class discussions we realized that they were thinking about their houses. Moreover, they had in mind the image of the Italian Palazzo, thinking that it was the normal residential condition for Italians.

The other misconception was related to the idea of piazza as we mentioned above. Part of the project requirements was to create an open commercial public recess, or “piazzetta”, spatially and formally connected to the urban fabric. Again, the students had difficulty designing a public space which incorporates the intimate nature of an Italian alley or “piazzetta” yet maintaining its public nature. They tended to replicate the concept of private courtyard, with a gate, a doorway or some connotation that indicate the passage from one place to another. The idea they formed in their mind about Italian urban fabric was a mix between the American trend of a mock monumentality, often alimented by post modern echoes – that is what they see in most of the Gulf cities nowadays – and the awareness of the concept of intimacy and strict division of spaces coming from the traditional Arab culture. Another trend in class was based on the need of decorating the place, a small commercial courtyard, with monumental accessories, such as columns, theaters or fountains derived from preformed images of Italian urban spaces.

Sometimes an iconic building, such as the Rotunda by Palladio or Palazzo Rucellai by Alberti, worked as a reference. In the mind of students the iconic buildings are isolated from
their contest. They do not have idea that those are particular buildings, born for a particular class, in a determined period and under certain privileged conditions. An attitude that is very similar to that of the Orientalists’ paintings of colorful bazaars, beautiful odalisques serving the sultans, and exotic architecture. Another predetermined image in the mind of the students was that of the rural house with small windows, natural material, and tilted terracotta roofs. It was evident that the students compartmentalize and idealize each category of building type; hence, it became a complex task to explain to the students that Italian architecture does not fall into one typology.

In general, it is important to respect the numeric standards proper to each culture, but it is impossible to determine a priori the right architectural product. From this experience we learned that the students usually operate in the other way round: they tent to transfer the quantitative standards of their culture into the foreigner culture, while at the same time duplicated images of what they perceived as appropriate Italian architectural styles into the project without taking into consideration the contextual reality of the site. This approach is very similar to the one of the Orientalists who depicted the East with images that did not correspond to a philological sensibility of the reality, but corresponded to the desire of the West to please itself.

Conclusion

This experiment made us think about the difficulty of transferring an idea of architecture from one context to another. We can consider the globalization of media, of engineering systems, a certain globalization of the architectural décor and façade language, but the way we look at the use of space, the use of architecture is different.

We do not deny an increasing phenomenon of homologation, standardization of architectural space for the sake of simplicity. Economic laws tent to level the cultural roots of people, to cancel the peculiarities that make each culture unique and meaningful. We travel around the world because we want to see different things, different landscapes, but we act as if we wanted to unify all known world to an already determined pattern. We believe that it is important to emphasize the identity of each culture, and to preserve it. Nonetheless, with the acceleration of communication technologies, and the reduction of travelled distances between localities, it is fundamental to be able to manage ourselves in the globalized world. At the same time we think that the new generation of architects needs to understand and to respect the diverse culture and uses of space in order to create a complex environment.

Orientalism and Occidentalism, in the sense we have used here, are an effort to redraw a world that is going to disappear. We were glad to see our students try to understand a culture that is “other” from their own, beyond the stereotypes that they started with. We have realized through their naïve glance how difficult is to assimilate something that is not part of our usual environment. At the same time this process has made us reflecting on our identity, on our diversity from the others. And sometimes a little of romantic imagination ads an exotic flavor to the final result.
References


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Dr. Giovanna Potestà received a PhD in Architecture and Urban Design, University of Florence in 2005. Since 1995, he has been an instructor in Architecture Design and Theory, History of Architecture, University of Florence. His research activity is focused on Architecture design and city form. Recently he has served as an assistant professor at Kuwait University, Architecture Department.

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