



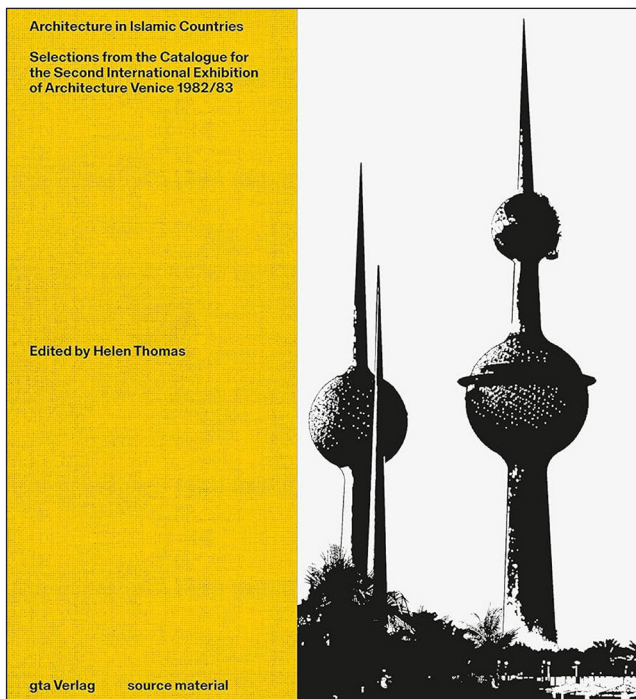
International Exhibitions of Architecture and Selective Cross-Histories

Nadi Abusaada, ETH Zürich, CH, abusaada@arch.ethz.ch

A review of Helen Thomas, ed. *Architecture in Islamic Countries: Selections from the Catalogue for the Second International Exhibition of Architecture Venice, 1982/83*. Zürich: gta Verlag, 2022, 120 pages, 55 illus. ISBN 978-3-85676-436-4. Gta Verlag's 2022 reissue of the 1982–83 Venice Biennale *Architecture in Islamic Countries* catalogue is a timely invitation to reevaluate its history. This review assesses both the new catalogue's original content and the newly commissioned essays, highlighting criticisms of Pier Paolo Porteghesi's curatorial approach, primarily driven by a postmodernist methodology rather than a decolonization commitment. Its significance notwithstanding, the new catalogue replicates some of the original's limitations in thoroughly engaging with the Islamic world's architectural cultures during the 1980s, reflecting ongoing challenges in integrating these histories into Western-dominated architectural discourse.

Keywords: International exhibitions; Islamic architecture; Venice Architecture Biennale; postmodernism





On November 20, 1982, the Second International Exhibition of Architecture, organized by the Biennale of Venice, welcomed its visitors. Although the art exhibitions have a history dating back to 1895, it was only in 1980 that a new section dedicated to architecture was added. Both the inaugural (1980) and second (1982–83) architecture exhibitions were overseen and curated by the renowned Italian architect and architectural theorist Paolo Portoghesi, a prominent figure in the postmodern movement in architecture.

Strada Novissima, located along the Corderie dell’Arsenale and featuring twenty facades designed by twenty different architects, stood as the centerpiece of the first Venice Architecture Biennale. This famed installation became emblematic of a field in transition, sparking an early international debate on postmodern approaches to architecture. The three-dimensional nature of the installation further blurred the boundaries between architecture and its representation, prompting a conversation about the role of architecture within exhibition culture, especially in the context of a Venice Architecture Biennale in its infancy.

In contrast to the widely recognized first architectural exhibition, the second one on the theme of architecture in Islamic countries has nearly faded into obscurity. *Architecture in Islamic Countries: Selections from the Catalogue for the Second International Exhibition of Architecture Venice 1982/83*, edited by Helen Thomas and published in 2022 by the Zurich-based gta Verlag offers a timely invitation to revisit its forgotten history. This publication marks the launch of the press’s “source material” series, highlighting rare, unpublished, or difficult-to-find content, offering translations of previously untranslated material and reissuing archival or out-of-print documents.

The book is more than a simple reproduction and translation of the Italian-language catalogue from the second biennale. It is a carefully curated catalogue that reflects the era of its original publication and engages with the preoccupations of our

present times, and that raises intriguing questions such as why the early 1980s saw a Venice-hosted biennale focusing on architecture in Islamic countries and what led to its subsequent lapse into obscurity. Reviving this exhibition's history and catalogue in today's context prompts us to contemplate their significance and relevance in our contemporary understanding of cross-cultural architectural exchange.

The original catalogue, spanning over three hundred pages, encompasses eleven essays by architects and architectural theorists. Additionally, it pays homage to four prominent architects, three of whom were Westerners, and their contribution to Islamic architecture—Hassan Fathy, Fernand Pouillon, Louis Kahn, and Le Corbusier—via dedicated sections corresponding to key installations at the exhibition. It also includes an extensive alphabetical list of architects, architectural projects, and student works. In contrast, the new book, condensed to 119 pages, incorporates only three translated essays from the original catalogue: the book's introduction by Portoghesi, an article titled "Islamic Cities: An Identity of the Past?" by Mehdi Kowsar, and another piece titled "Towards an Arab Identity: Contemporary Arab Architecture" by German art historian Udo Kultermann. Notably, the new book introduces three additional essays authored by Helen Thomas, Esra Akcan, and Asli Çiçek and Véronique Patteeuw.

In the introduction to the original catalogue, Portoghesi unequivocally presents the rationale behind his thematic choice: "In its second iteration, the Venice Biennale of Architecture has chosen 'Architecture in Islamic Countries' as its central theme to affirm the promise of dialogue and the imperative to, at least within the realm of culture, dismantle existing barriers and resolve conflicts" (24). Portoghesi emphasizes Venice's historic role as a mediator between Eastern and Western cultures, suggesting it as an ideal location for fostering cross-cultural exchanges. He argues that a dialogue among various civilizations and cultures is needed that does not appeal to hierarchies or false superiority, but that instead encourages an exchange of diverse perspectives and narratives to help participants understand and interpret common experiences. He calls for moving away from a Western-centric view of architectural culture and toward a more inclusive, polycentric one. He then raises an important question regarding whether this goal inadvertently leads us back to a form of colonialism, albeit in a more subtle and deceptive form.

Despite the ostensibly critical language in which Portoghesi expresses his vision for this 'East-West dialogue,' the original catalogue exposes significant problems with his approach, as did the exhibition itself, that the contributors to the reissued catalogue address. Akcan's thought-provoking essay titled "An Unlikely Colonizer," for example, delves into the inherent contradictions in Portoghesi's work. She points out that while

he called for decolonization and dialogue beyond the Western canon, he failed to engage with the actors involved in architectural production in formerly colonized places. Portoghesi, she notes, praised foreign architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius in Iraq while neglecting the work and vision of contemporary Iraqi architects. This disengagement, she convincingly suggests, reveals that despite his rhetoric, formal preferences rather than ethical-political solidarities guided his interest in architectural production in these locations. Portoghesi associated postcolonial liberty with a historicist architecture that reconnected to Islamic tradition regardless of the voices on the ground. His politically-oriented text appeared like an afterthought, a geopolitical justification for the postmodernism he champions.

In their contribution, Çiçek and Patteeuw offer a different reading of Portoghesi's efforts, concentrating on the broader format of the catalogue and the exhibition and not only on his introductory text. Like Akcan, they pointed to Portoghesi's fixation with what they called "form-search" following Gioia Seminario. They contend that his interest in projects characterized by variations in geometry or pattern exposes a fascination with formal aspects of architecture detached from specific contexts.

Interestingly, Çiçek and Patteeuw situate Portoghesi's ideas in the context of the broader debate on regionalism, especially in relation to Kenneth Frampton, who left his position in the exhibition committee two months before its inauguration due to its "anti-modern stance". They argue that while Portoghesi's pivot toward Islamic nations suggested he was embracing a balanced approach to architectural culture that navigated between a globalized postmodernism rooted in European traditions and a form of universal regionalism that applies globally, his portrayal of Islamic countries was simplified, lacking depth and thorough engagement.

These limitations in Portoghesi's perspective become distinctly apparent in Kultermann's contribution to the original catalogue, one of the three translated essays featured in the reissued book. Kultermann was critical of some of Portoghesi's projects in the Arab world, including his 1970s projects in Sudan, describing them as "alien elements in a context to which they do not relate," as Thomas notes in her introduction, elaborating that these works reflected "the Italian architect's personal style more clearly than the country's tradition."

At the time of his contribution to the catalogue, Kultermann was already well-versed in documenting architectural progress outside of the European context, having authored multiple books on new architectural directions in Asia and Africa.¹ His essay demonstrates a sensitivity to the internal dynamics and contributions of local actors within those countries. In stark contrast to Portoghesi, whose introductory text omits

mention of a single architect from the part of the world his exhibition is dedicated to, Kultermann offers a biographical and professional narrative on pioneering Arab architects such as Hasan Fathy, Mohamad Makiya, Rifat Chadirji, and Saba Shiber. While limited to the Arab world, Kultermann's contribution is crucial because it explains the broader political setting and the economic shifts that the region witnessed during those years, especially after gaining independence, such as those that followed the oil boom in the Arabian Gulf, which had an impact on architectural development.

Still, in both the original catalogue and the new book, the 'Islamic countries' architects are not allowed to speak for themselves. The only account in the original text from a 'non-Western architect' is Mehdi Kowsar's essay on so-called Islamic cities. The fact that the term 'identity' is used in the titles of both Kowsar's and Kultermann's contributions is telling, suggesting the perspective of one looking from the outside in rather than one looking outside from within. While Kowsar's contribution seems to have been translated precisely because of his status as the lone 'non-Western architect' included in the catalogue, his chapter offers very little new information regarding the nature of cities in the Islamic world and, in fact, repeats several misconceptions, overlooking the rich work of contemporaries like Janet Abu Lughod, Albert Hourani, and Andre Raymond, among others.

The original catalogue missed an opportunity by overlooking the contributions and writings of pioneering architectural figures from the Arab-Islamic world who had been actively developing and their critique of modernism, both before and contemporaneously with the 1982–83 Venice exhibition. Crucially, these architects were not solely involved in designing and building projects. They were also immersed in producing an architectural theory that took the architectural past and the present of their countries into account. They taught at architectural schools, published in architectural magazines, and spoke at regional and international congresses.

Glimpses of such endeavours are hinted at in the reissued catalogue through mentions of the 1970s architectural congresses in Iran. However, these regional efforts were more elaborate in nature and had a longer history that predates these 1970s efforts. As early as 1945, Arab architects initiated regional congresses, convening to discuss the future of the profession and the region. They were also integral to the global discourse through their engagement in education, work, and participation in the International Union of Architects congresses, of which Egypt was a founding member. A more serious engagement with the architecture of the Arab and Islamic regions would necessarily have to account for these systematic efforts at revisiting the past and present of Islamic architecture since the start of the twentieth century.

The Venice exhibition was held at a critical moment, as people in the Middle East were navigating the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the 1982 Israeli war on Lebanon. In this political atmosphere and in the face of rampant destruction, the region was dealing with its own sets of questions regarding its past and present. Local architects were mainly preoccupied with revising their own cultural heritage and identity. In a sense, they were formulating their own version of postmodernism, albeit with a twist, having to respond to the Orientalist and colonial framings of their history and culture. By mainly focusing on Portoghesi's vision, albeit through a critical lens, the reissued catalogue overlooks these multiple contexts of the 1982–83 exhibition in Venice. These interwoven yet nonsynchronous histories have yet to be written and reckoned with. Though we need not naively assume nonhierarchical dialogue is as easily accomplished as Portoghesi implied, juxtaposing these histories in conversation remains pertinent for comprehending both the selective history and historiography of these cross-cultural exchanges between the West and Arab-Islamic world in the context of colonialism and so-called "postcolonialism".

Note

¹ See, for instance, *Neues Bauen in Japan* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1960), *Neues Bauen in Afrika* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1963), and *Neues Bauen in der Welt* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1963).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

