الاعتبارات المحيطية كمصدر للإبداع
The Contextual as Source of Creativity

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تشهد المنطقة العربية وبالأخص منطقة الخليج صراع حول الهوية المعمارية في جدلية لا تنتهي. هل يجب أن نلهث خلف تشكيلات معاصرة هدفها الحداثة للحداثة آم هل علينا الألتصاق بماضي ذو أنماط ليست اليوم في واقعها إلا تراث؟ لذا وجب البحث عن مرجعية أصلية أكثر ثباتاً مثل الوظيفة وأعتبار الواقع المحيط والثقافي كأساس ملموس لأي أنطلاقة تصميمية.

السؤال الآن: إلى أي مدى يجب أن يتم أعتبار تلك الجدلية بمدارس ومعاهد العمارة بالمنطقة. لذلك تم تصميم ستوديو التصميم ٤ لطلاب السنة الثالثة بقسم العمارة بكلية تصاميم البيئة بجامعة الملك فهد للبترول والمعادن كمحاولة لتطبيق وأنتهاج أسلوب أكثر عقلانية يحترم اعتبارات محيطنا الجغرافي والثقافي والاجتماعي...الخ وهذا من خلال الاستعانة بجلسات المحاكاة والنقاش المفتوح والبحث كقاعدة انطلاق لتطوير مهارات الطلاب التصميمية والإبداعية وهو ما نتج عنه تصميمات متميزة تم عرض بعضها بهذا المقال. موضوعها مجمع مؤتمرات وفندق على ضفاف الخليج بمدينة الخبر بالمملكة العربية السعودية.

No doubt we are witnessing today a challenging era. Many debates about architectural design theory and its possible inspiring sources have become chronic subjects with the current growing pace of development in the Gulf Region. Should we go wild speeding in heights and develop beyond-imagination forms, or should we rather conventionalize our moves? Is it true that identity and creating a meaningful environment should always ape the past? Should the Arab, as they are always preoccupied in their poetry and other arts remained trapped in a golden age that once manifested their merits in arts and sciences centuries ago; yet it is nothing now but heritage. Moreover, identity and character cannot be imposed. They should come as a responsive expression about the actual needs and concepts of a certain community/ culture manifested through physical expressions, such as architecture. On the other hand total alienation of the above might sequence an out-of place ambiance.
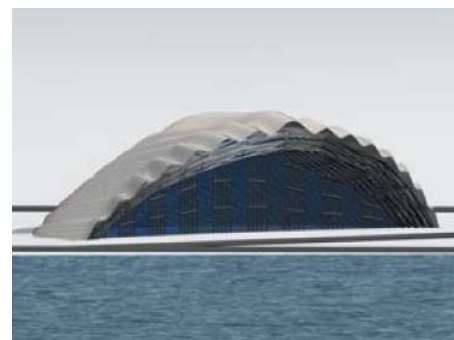

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Waves: Indicates to changing and different levels.

Whale: Indicates enormity vast and stateliness.

Oyster: Indicates to the center and distribute smooth branches.

Fin: It has horizontal surface and it is making protection.

Fig. 3

Such a debate is certainly endless and cannot be resolved just by determining or adopting any specific architectural style or character; otherwise we would be compromising the authenticity/ meaning of our built environment. Needless to say, the same sophisticated nature of debate would immerge when we discuss how to teach architectural design, how to run and design a design studio. There is certainly a need for some basic rules complementing an academy nature of delivering and running theoretical and conceptual debate to help design students articulating their own views. Chasing the different as a tool to stimulate their creativity and enhance their design skills is a must but also rationalizing such moves is also a need. Consequently, holding to context and its actual forces, e.g., geographical, cultural, economic etc. furnished as a rather more rational and balanced approach to architectural design than the currently more dominating retrogressive and nostalgic pedagogic paradigms or those after alienating forms: weird for weird.

The above served as a design rational for the third year architectural students at King Fahd University. Their studio (ARC 304) was designed in a rather unconventional approach, of an experimental nature seeking stimulating student's critical thinking. Given that ARC-304 as a junior-level studio is meant to introduce students to complexity and programming in design as well as develop their sense with technical and cultural considerations in design, there was a real challenge that really necessitated a shift from the 'conventional' paradigm. Basically, I avoided the established practice of architectural pedagogy envisaging architectural design as only an art, trapping which within an intuitive thinking process overlooking its practical and scientific aspects. 'Think wild but give a reason why' was the conceptual slogan frequently exercised during that studio.

The studio was launched through a competitive and a challenging atmosphere stimulating students' enthusiasm thanks to the course sponsorship program and the competition sponsored by RIKAZ Development Corporation. The students were requested to acknowledge the market and its
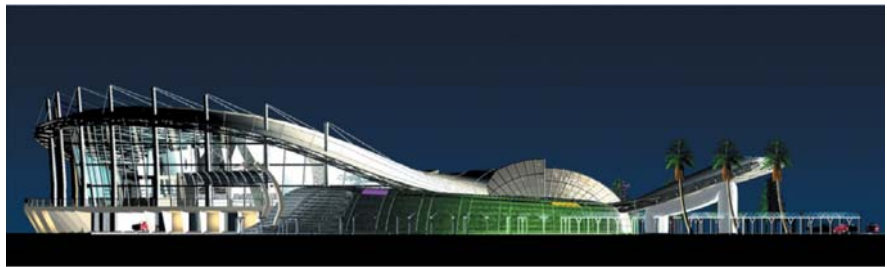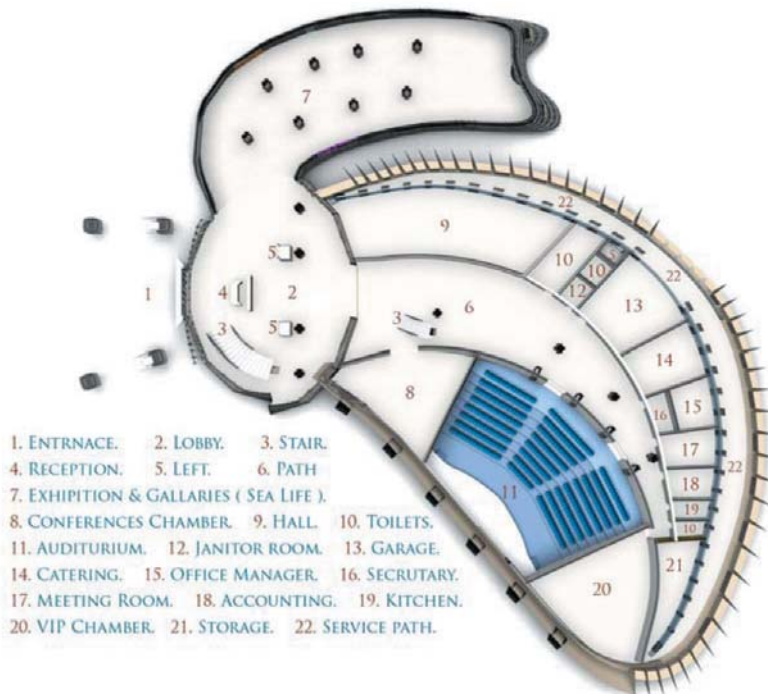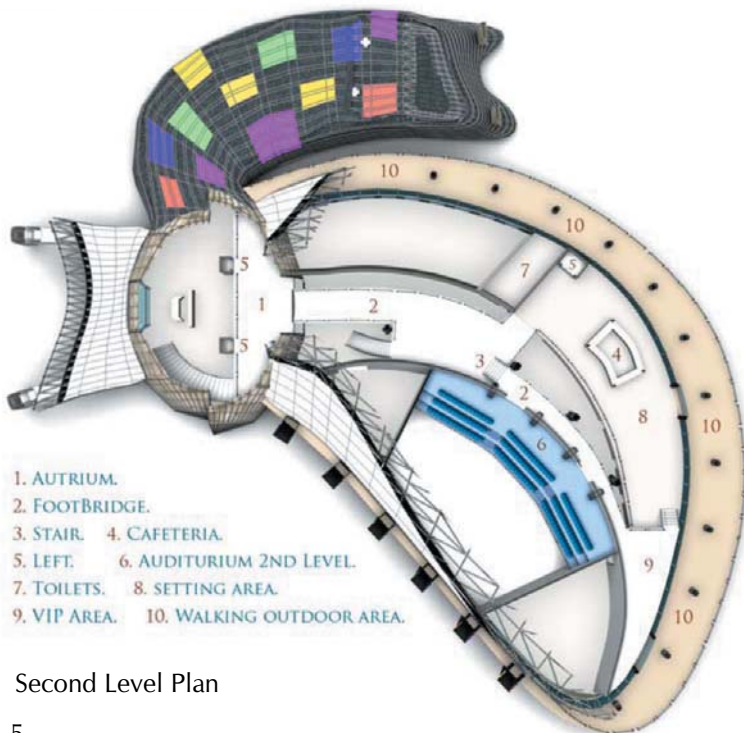

Fig. 4 (a): Northern Elevation by Night.

1. ENTRNACE.   2. LOBBY.   3. STAIR.
4. RECEPTION.   5. LEFT.   6. PATH
7. EXHIPITION & GALLARIES (SEA LIFE).
8. CONFERENCES CHAMBER.   9. HALL.   10. TOILETS.
11. AUDITURIUM.   12. JANITOR ROOM.   13. GARAGE.
14. CATERING.   15. OFFICE MANAGER.   16. SECRUTARY.
17. MEETING ROOM.   18. ACCOUNTING.   19. KITCHEN.
20. VIP CHAMBER.   21. STORAGE.   22. SERVICE PATH.

First Level Plan

1. AUTRIUM.
2. FOOTBRIDGE.
3. STAIR.   4. CAFETERIA.
5. LEFT.   6. AUDITURIUM 2ND LEVEL.
7. TOILETS.   8. SETTING AREA.
9. VIP AREA.   10. WALKING OUTDOOR AREA.

Second Level Plan

Fig. 5

Fig. 6: Bird eye view showing the conference center to the left and the hotel and its different facilities stretching along an artificial canal to extend the sea view for the different hotel units.

Fig. 7

economic forces, especially when their work was to be reviewed by the RIKAZ team in a separate jury. It was also designed to simulate a real-life problem. A design of a conference center that was meant to be a landmark for the city of Al-Khobar in the Eastern Province of KSA, a symbol of its city, to enable the city claiming its intellectual role. A waterfront location adjacent to Al-Khobar Causeway (Fig.1) was selected. A very tentative program was suggested in order to encourage them to debate and restructure it to promote for creative answers. The debate as a studio culture was rooted from a very initial phase starting with a field trip to select the most appropriate site based on criteria they developed themselves up to further phases of design through role-play and group discussion and evaluation sessions. This stimulated students' enthusiasm. A holistic perspective towards design was promoted through adopting a participatory approach to design thinking. Role-play sessions were thus suggested together with various group discussion and disk crit.

Accordingly, each student developed a considerable degree of sensitivity to the context. Each reflected that on the developed program and his design based on how he conceptualized his project, Al-Khobar City International Conference Center and its annexed hotel.

At the beginning students leaned towards an over simplistic interpretations abstracting their concepts. Al-Khobar as a pearl of the Gulf, as envisaged by one of the students, should reflect such a spirit where the main building, the conference center, should be represented as an oyster on the sand (fig.2). Nevertheless, such an outcome was rather naive. Yet this triggered series of conceptual discussions with the students about the level of meaning guiding them to more profound ways to abstract their notions. Function and location might also lead to distinguishable results if interpreted through meaningful forms. How to abstract your idea leading to a remarkable visual result without compromising the above quality of the building was certainly the design virtue students had to experience and exercise.

Such a debate encouraged the student (Ibrahim Wali) to back his vision, still tenacious to marine life as
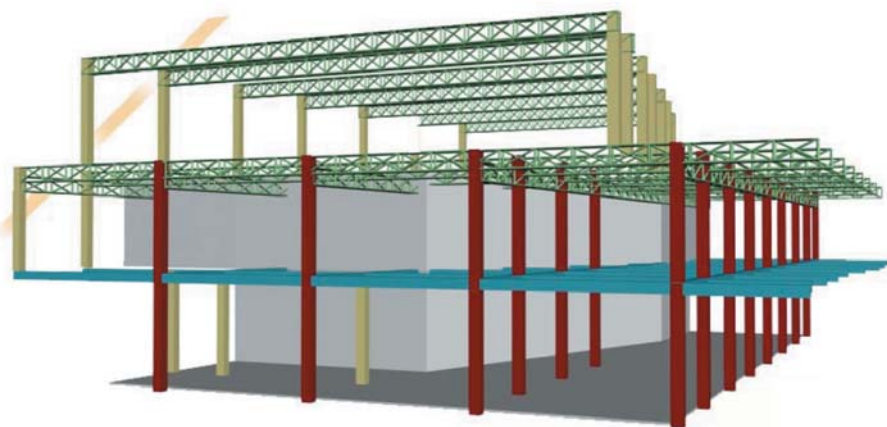

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

the inspiring source yet deployed in a more sophisticated architectural language (Fig.3). Ibrahim designed a form full of wavy lines, complementing marine life in various aspects. The sail columns of ships exist in the pillars holding the suspended cables, the structural system of the main auditorium and its oyster like roof (Fig.4). All are oriented toward the Gulf to provide a panoramic view for those using the upper level foyer and the other recreational outlets of the center (Fig.5). In general the center was decided by the students as a center that is not only to accommodate international and regional events but also to provide facilities, e.g. cafés & restaurants and exhibition halls of international quality, for the visitors and the people of Al-Khobar.

The hotel design was integrated with the building. Both the conference center and the hotel buildings form a complex of landscape integrated within a canal along which the aisles of the hotel complex are aligned (Figs. 6, 7 and 8). The main building is located to the south where the lobby and other hotel facilities and services are accommodated. It is integrated with ribbon like forms that stretches along the canal to link the hotel main building with the hotel suites fashioned also in a ribbon like form that end with a tent like restaurants and cafés.

Other students like Abdulaziz Al-Sharif and Eyad Moghazel stressed on the fact that they are not just designing a conference center but rather they are contributing to Al-Khobar waterfront. To them the building should be fashioned as the city's symbol, distinguished landmark. With such a motivation Abdulaziz accommodated his two auditoria and other facilities distinguishing his international conference center in a folded form. It is oriented toward the Gulf with distinguished sharp edges and angles that challenge gravity as expressed by the student (Fig.9). Abdulaziz however had to furnish a structural viability for his daring composition as well as to prove the functionality of his spaces, a task which he managed skillfully as illustrated in Figs 10 and 11.

Another attempt to design predominantly a city landmark was that of Eyad. His exceptionally daring composition was based on his notion of towering rather than stacking the
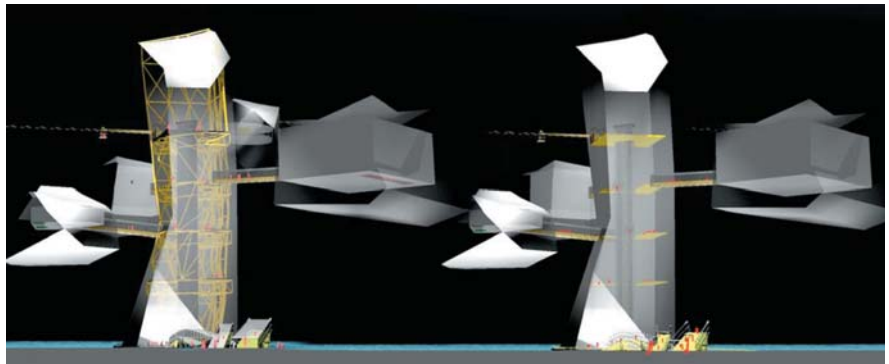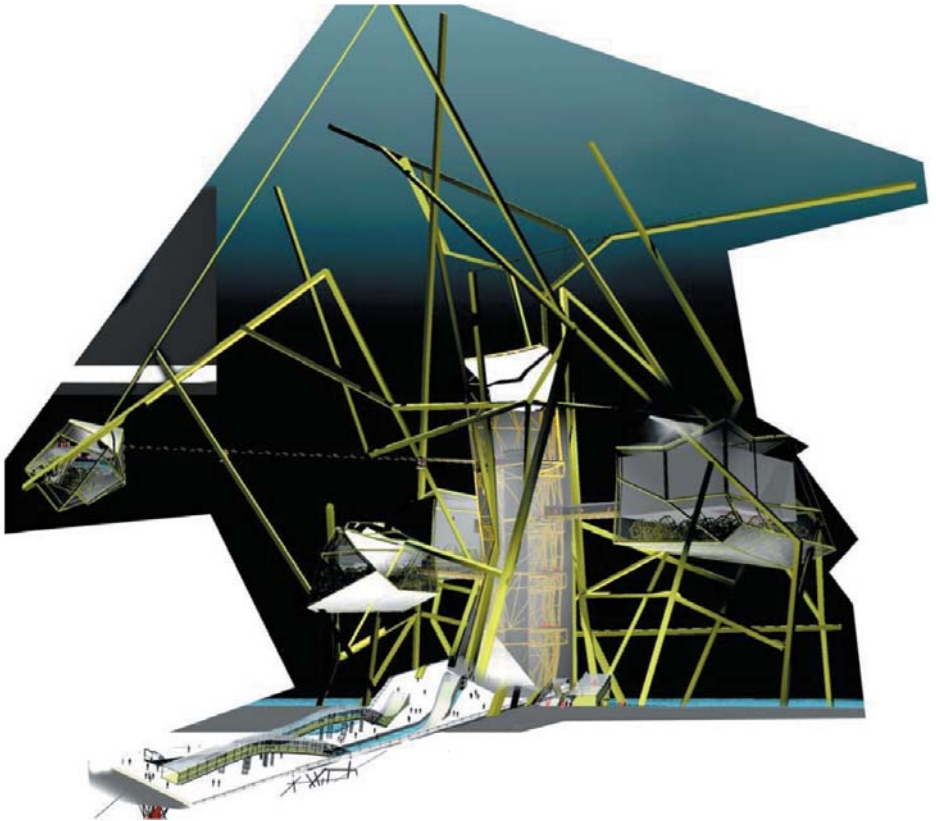

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

design program within a compact building. To Eyad, the conference center as a city landmark should be also sculpturally fashioned dismantling the program into its different components that are branched from the main trunk, the vertical connector. The two main auditoria and the other facilities and outlets are branched and suspended in different levels and directions (Fig.12).

Such an exploded form represented a structural challenge which was successfully confronted by Eyad. His creative answer came in a randomly but structurally justified outer structural system (Fig.13) generated through using Inductive Design Software. The different components of the projects are floating on air; still connected via tilted, suspended elevator system, which granted the building a unique and dynamic image.

The previous two projects however lost the ground providing viable hotel as part of the complex. The industry (RIKAZ representatives), reviewing the project, reflected much concerns about the economic aspects of such projects; yet they expressed much interest in their creativity and distinguished forms.

Another project attempted to reach a compromise. Ziad Ashour's concept for the conference center was a form of free composition, emphasized with edges, a form that is conflicting/challenging with surrounding massive walls. The building challenged the walls with punched openings to permit clear visibility through them but still providing a visual enclosure effect for the main conference building. The walls have also an ecological function, especially those facing the directions of undesirable winds and heat. The building itself (Fig. 14) enjoyed the Gulf vista with a yacht marina in front with a floating main restaurant enjoying the marina and Gulf site connected with the conference center designed for the holidaymakers and yacht-sport lovers as a Gulf center for such a port and regional events.

The Hotel and the landscape came very integrated with the conference center. It was designed along a canal similar to Ibrahim's (Fig. 15) where the main hotel building (Fig.16) is located to the south overlooking the lagoon terminating the canal. On the other hand the hotel units were
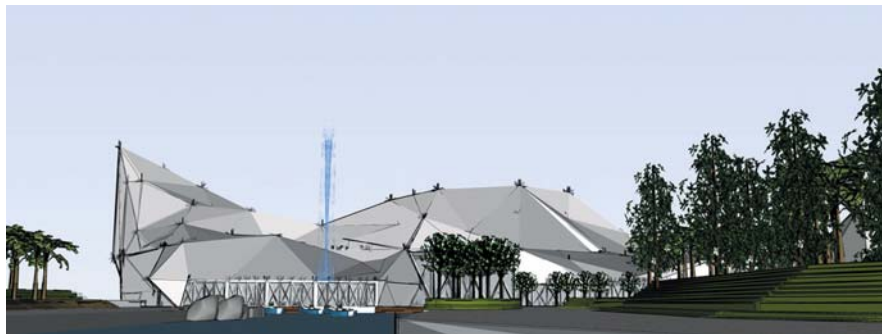

Fig. 15

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

Typical Floor Plan

Ground Floor Plan

3rd Floor Plan

4th Floor Plan

Fig. 18

unique in being stationed in floating units accessible through a landscaped site and mainly through the canal. Each group of rooms is combined in a small hotel unit of different levels (Fig. 17). The design of each unit reflects well understanding to the nature of the Gulfian holidaymakers, granting them the opportunity to rent a range of single room to an adjustable extended suites, hotel apartment on the upper levels (Fig. 18). This granted the users much privacy sanctioned by the prospective users/ guests while still providing the communal hotel services provided through a common lobby and a breakfast restaurant at the ground level and an atrium in each unit (Fig. 19). The design was meant to be integrated with and to complement that of the conference center with a special focus on the significant unique Venice-like ambiance extending the water view and enriching the site, as well as providing an interesting view for each room in all the hotel units (Fig. 20).

In general, ARC-304 studio was designed to bridge the gaps characterizing the conventional design studio in the region. The gap

between the theoretical courses and the design studio was confronted through focused handouts and presentations to introduce the students to the architecture theory in practice to familiarize them with the approaches to creative thinking as an inspiring tool to conceptualize their design tendencies and processes launching their design ventures from contextual basis. Furthermore, the discussion and debate-oriented nature of the studio made the studio not the domain of the instructor to give much room for students' free architectural expressions.

The adopted holistic approach, of a multidisciplinary nature, to design was adopted addressing real-life considerations: political, social, economic etc. through group activities. This was made possible through introducing experimental models to teach design studio that were selected based on the students emerging needs and the variations of their design skills and knowledge. The above are the outcomes of a studio that is designed and run as a pedagogic experiment, which is part of a collaborative research project on effective architectural design pedagogy coordinated by the author.

Fig. 19

Fig. 20