

Title of the Abstract:

"Phronesis" in Sustainable Architecture: A Non-Western Experience"

Khaled Asfour, Ph.D.
Professor of Architecture
MIU

"Although the young may be experts in geometry and mathematics and similar branches of knowledge [sophoi], we do not consider that a young man can have Prudence [phronimos]. The reason is that Prudence [phronesis] includes a knowledge of particular facts, and this is derived from experience, which a young man does not possess; for experience is the fruit of years." (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, section 8)

Phronesis or "practical wisdom", as coined by Aristotle, is an existential terminology for architecture to communicate well its good qualities to the public. Many architects prove they have knowledge in sustainable architecture that is capable of producing good environmental standards. But very few succeed in passing these ideals to the common practice and are able to show to the public its virtues.

While the Egyptian practice, during recent years, has finally re-engaged with its long standing traditions in sustainable design, yet the approach has very limited application. Probing into history, the closest to our memory is the medieval houses of Cairo that are characterized by courtyard design, thick masonry walls and permeable roofs for good indoor environmental quality. Few centuries later these good environmental qualities disappeared with the advent of Modern Movement that focused more on standard modernist image-making than real localized quality of living environments. Wind catchers that once dominated the roof tops are now replaced by satellite dishes.

The first person to note this disappearance was Hassan Fathy half a century ago. Through his writing and design practice he showed how to regain sustainable standards suitable to modern lifestyle by reusing traditional solutions and building material. Despite international applaud for his efforts he had no effect on prevailing local practice that continued senselessly adopting recycled modernist templates. In Aristotle term he had sophia but not phronesis.

Disciples of Hassan Fathy, few decades later sought, of tackling the lack of interest in green architecture in a different way. Mohamed Awad introduced in his design sustainable ideals inspired from traditional architecture rather than recycling directly historic forms and images. Despite success, this approach still did not go far enough to influence the prevailing practice, because it was a product of architectural education that produced raw facts but did not show how to engage the public with these facts.

Mario Cucinella and Norman Foster are architects who succeeded in engaging the public with their sustainable design. The paper will present this problem of reviving sustainable Architecture in a non-western world by analyzing the works of those architects. How this process can be accelerated in order to give stronger impact on current practice will be the main concern of the paper.