A DIALOGUE WITH CULTURE
Jaisalmer and Construct

by

MOHAMED JUFRI BIN MOHAMED YUSOFF
HD972025J

Submitted to School of Architecture
On 13 November 1998 in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Architecture

THE DIALOGUE

ABSTRACT

"Architecture is both background and foreground. We act out our lives against it and we live and
work in close proximity to its formal language. We inform architecture and it informs us. And this
exchange informs the lives that we live in and around buildings" ¹.

Architecture is indeed a manifestation of a complex social phenomenon, one that depends on
knowledge from a wide range of fields, for which no single explanation will suffice. The built
environment can be seen as information encoder while the user takes on as a decoder’s role. To
comprehend its construct, architecture must be read in relation to the entire gamut of activities having
to do with the comprehension and transformation of space and their interpretation within the society
in question. It must indeed be considered in relation to other kinds of activities like rituals and belief
and so forth. Nevertheless, a single theme – culture – I believe, will begin to trigger other variations of
explanation. With regards to this, the dissertation will explore how aspects of culture in the Indian
context, specifically in Jaisalmer, manifest notion of order and hierarchy, shaping the physical
characteristics of domestic spaces and its immediate community.

¹ Quoted from Kenneth Frampton, "The Double Cobblestone", in "The Language of Post-Modern Architecture" , pg 11.
This exploration itself seems to negotiate a very broad spectrum but there are a few ways of approaching this attempt: to look solely into the context, climate and resources; to delve into the morphological evolution of such spaces from a functionalist viewpoints based on technological revolution; or a totally western approach, that of historical insight and assimilation of the non-vernacular - not uncommon as India is well known for its succession of foreign invasion.

Since time immemorial, the house is more than just a mere shelter in the utilitarian sense. Its foundation was more often than not preceded by religious ceremonial especially in the Asian tradition. The dweller and the home, the religion and the rituals, all tangle up in a complex web, one not of muddled complexity but ordered reality. To the Durkheimian, “myth is an object of belief and it depicts a divine world or the sacred forces which manifest themselves in the world hence myth should be defined by their religious function - a part of religion. Furthermore, to say that myth is religious is also to ground myth in concrete social life - in specific societies and their actual practices... By connecting myth to society and religion in this way, they ipso facto associated myth with ritual... myths are social products; it is in the rituals that society is visible, present or necessarily involved.”

Taking up the Durkheimian stance, this dissertation will draw upon the religio-cultural approach of architectural anthropology, as this seems particularly appropriate in the largely tradition-bound society like the Indian.

Within this scope the central theme will be religion itself and how it relates to or influences architecture. To fully understand the metaphysical range of the Hindu man it is necessary to investigate the fundamental principle underlying Hinduism - the image of man as a fundamental paradigm for explaining all phenomena, macro and micro, hence the mandala - the cosmic idea.
From here we look at the mandala as a cognitive structure that informs spatial concept likewise how this is associated with social framework.

These will be viewed within a theoretical framework encompassing the following concepts:

1. Concept of classification as expounded by Durkheim and Mauss in their book ‘Primitive Classification’ – notion of categories and their formation and more fundamentally their relation.

2. Concept of boundaries as hypothesised by Edmund Leach – this notion together with that of categories distinguish one class of object and rituals from another and its symbolic transgression.

Dissertation Supervisor: Dr Pinna Indorf

Title: Senior Lecturer