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Multicultural modernism

architectural balance in a changing world

Steven Ehrlich

The beginning of the 21st century finds man facing critical issues which affect our continued coexistence on this planet. These include: meshing the colliding cultures of the global village created by jet travel and modern telecommunications; reconciling surging economic growth with the need to repair and sustain our already-damaged natural environment; aiding the “have-not” peoples and countries in an increasingly stratified world; and providing refuge from the stresses and clamor of the marketplace, the media and our increasingly urban lives.

All of these needs loom large for architects, of course, since our discipline addresses them in the built milieu of homes, offices, factories, schools, airports, and civic buildings. Multicultural modernism is what I like to call my approach to grappling with these challenges, a philosophy I have evolved over 30 years of practicing in Los Angeles and six years of living and working in Africa.

Upon graduation from Rensselaer Polytechnic University in 1969, I wanted to join the Peace Corps. I was fortunate that they started the first program that sent architects to Morocco. We were placed in the Moroccan government’s regional planning and architecture offices throughout the country’s largest cities. I was the first Peace Corps architect to work in the city of Marrakech. This two-year experience transformed into and inspired an added year of travel across the Sahara and then three additional years of teaching at the School of Architecture at Amadu

Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria.

The lessons learned from my time in Africa were profound. My six-year African journey taught me basic principals that I’ve instituted into my designs. These include the following:

- The sustainable wisdom of architecture without architects
- That culture grows out of architecture’s response to the environment
- The value of courtyards in desert climates
- The importance of chance encounters and how communities need gathering places
- The value of listening to the land
- The idea that generosity is not about money but spirit
- The value of learning how other people live differently than Westerners
- The communal spirit of sharing

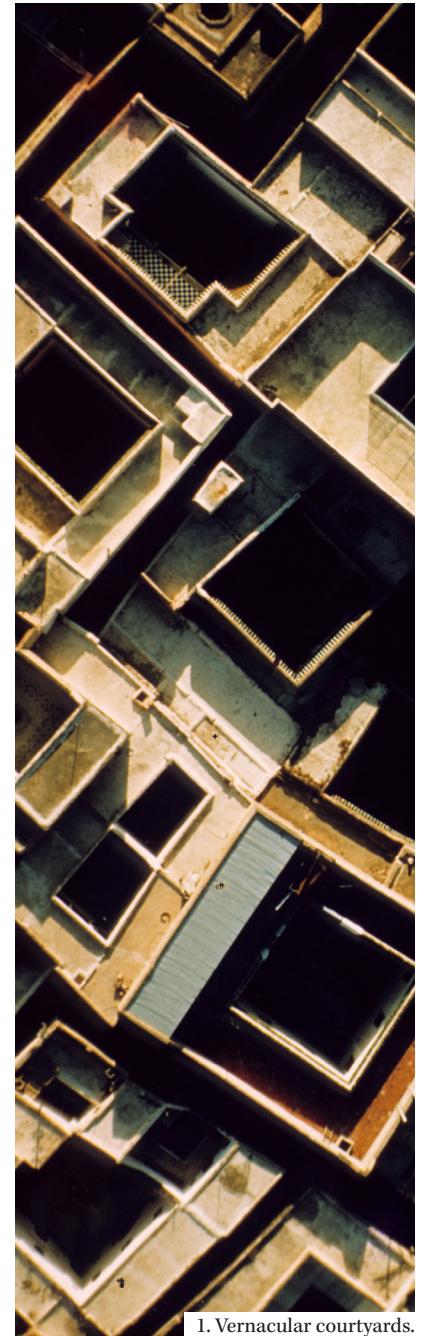
These fundamental observations and rich experiences have guided my practice and continue to influence my growth and present-day design.

My architectural education was in modernism, which taught that man would be improved by a rigorous ideal of pure design that could be applied in all places and circumstances. But my real-world experiences have taught me a more inclusive, responsive approach to building than the one I learned in school. Essentially, multicultural modernism is design that seeks the following: to acknowledge and balance the many cultural influences that jostle together in today’s urban centers, and to respect the verities of place so that a building is properly rooted in the specificity of its culture and site. At the same time I still subscribe to the modern tradition’s dictum that form

should follow function while lifting the spirit high, and that design should embrace advances in technology and materials.

Multicultural modernism has been shaped by certain key influences. One is the soothing and harmonizing effect of the interior courtyard, an architectural paradigm I first encountered in Morocco. While working in Marrakech from 1969 to 1971, I discovered that urban Moroccans enjoyed private, interior courtyards, with sunlight, fresh air, trees, fountains, and gardens [Figure 1](#). This astonished me, especially in Medina where the population density rivaled Manhattan’s. In my practice I’ve elaborated upon and refined the idea of the interior courtyard, developing variations such as courtyards in the sky and courtyards with vanishing walls.

I’ve also been strongly affected by living in southern California, an incubator of innovation in many areas ranging from Hollywood’s digital special effects to the “Green Urbanism” movement of sustainable buildings and landscaping. Like my predecessors Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, John Lautner, Ray Kappe, and Frank Gehry, I have found that Los Angeles’ combination of climate, absence of tradition, and openness to change inspires me to reach beyond the conventional bounds of the international school of modernism. I’ve benefited enormously from living and working in a creative petri dish that does not take itself too seriously, and encourages me to experiment with new materials and technologies and to incorporate influences from Asia,



1. Vernacular courtyards.

Africa, and Latin America.

During my travels to North and West African cities in the 1970s, I appreciated how vernacular “architecture without architects” achieved a graceful and functional balance with nature, using the materials and building methods at hand. In today’s vastly more complex, technology-driven urban societies from Shanghai to Sydney and Los Angeles to London, building appropriately for local climate and customs conserves energy and imparts meaning. It is possible for architects to meld cultural particularities, new materials, and sensitivity to environment into a flexible, dynamic, and organic modernism.

The four elements of multicultural modernism are: courtyards as an antidote to density stress; an openness to change and technical innovation as embodied by Los Angeles; sensitivity to people and place; and cross-cultural fusion that simultaneously embraces the global and local. Multicultural modernism is a vital and practical architectural methodology for creating dynamic design that works for the 21st century.

Sensing place, listening to people

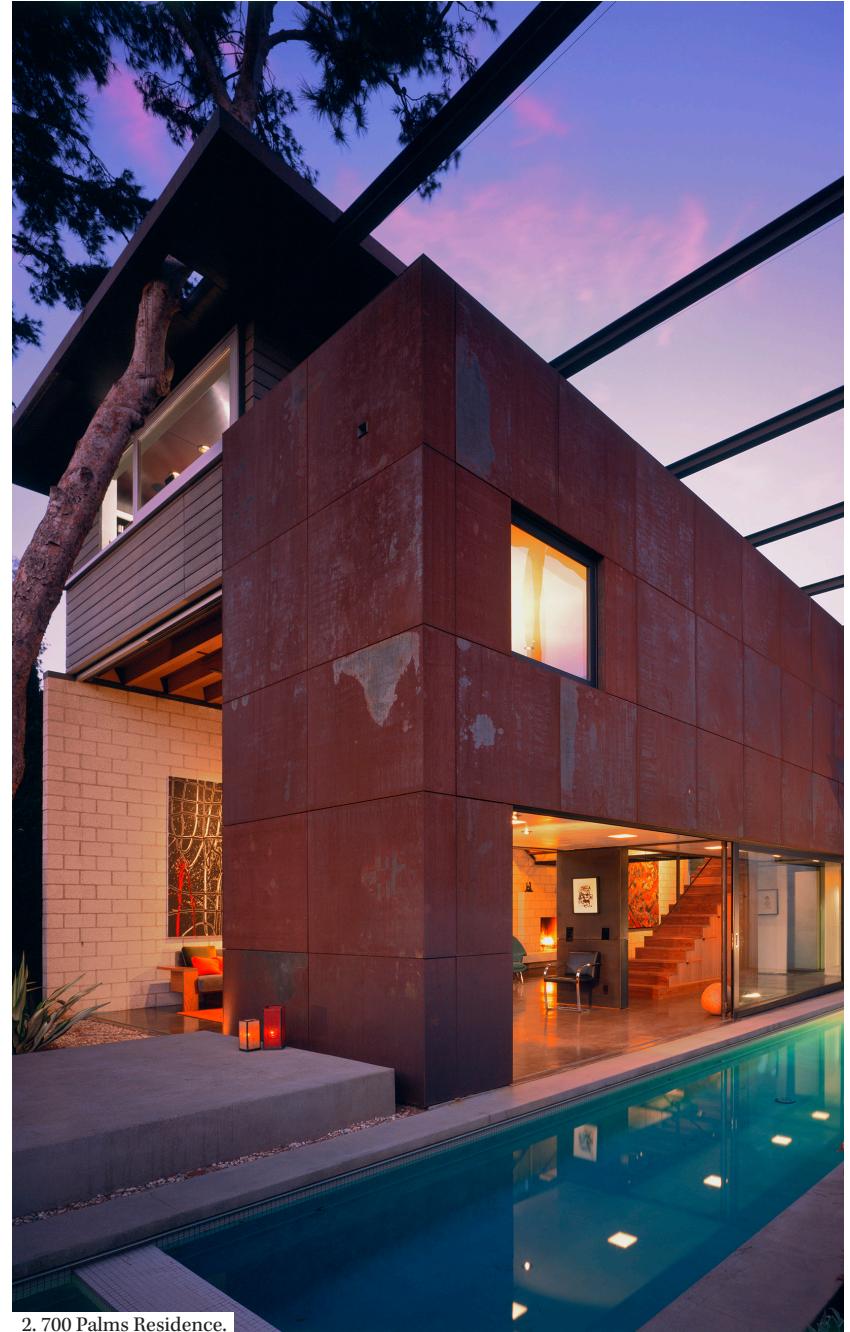
Multicultural modernism, like vernacular architecture, starts with the awareness that architecture is a culturally patterned response to particularities of climate and environment. Modern technologies—air conditioning being the prime example—often permit buildings to overcome some

natural conditions. Yet the ideal in multicultural modernism is to follow, as much as possible, the adaptation-to-local-environment roots of vernacular architecture. In densely crowded urban sites a residential design with an interior courtyard reinterprets the pre-industrial African tradition of inviting cool breezes in a hot climate [Figure 2](#).

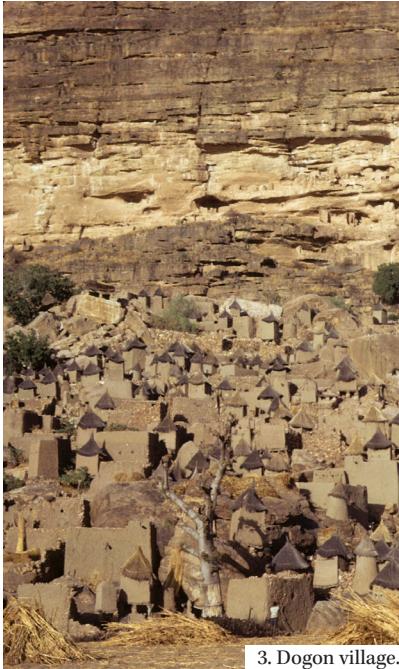
By embracing time-tested strategies and materials for mitigating local climate effects, sustainability emerges not as an added component but rather as an integral, functional, and cost-effective outgrowth of the design. In the 30-year life cycle cost of a building, only five percent represents the construction—the balance would be for the energy to sustain and maintain it. Good sense is good for dollars and cents.

At an even more basic level, multicultural modernism begins with a sensitivity to place, relying on sight, sound, and touch for inspiration. Listening to the breeze, observing the sunlight as it filters through leaves or blazes at noon, feeling the cool of canyon ferns—these experiences affect the choice of materials that complement the site. The palette of colors and textures is drawn from the surrounding trees and landscape, articulating the design into a harmonious conjunction with nature. The architect uses himself as a tuning fork to strike the proper tone for the building.

As important as sensing place is listening to the clients. The matter is simple for the vernacular “architects” of cultures such as the Dogon people of



2. 700 Palms Residence.



3. Dogon village.



4. Los Angeles.

West Africa, who build for themselves and their neighbors, guided by tradition and a limited range of local materials. But for the architect practicing in an urban context, it is a more complex matter to balance sense, sensibility, and finance [Figure 3](#).

The clients' dreams as well as their practical requirements become a guiding force in the design process. Multicultural Modernism is an open process of design that expresses the clients' personalities.

Los Angeles: incubator of change

Place an aerial photo of Los Angeles' vast street grid next to a microscopic picture of a computer chip showing its tiny electrical lines and transistors [Figure 4](#). The two look strikingly alike, and in fact they are. Millions of cars in motion, with drivers connected by cell phones and radios to millions of other points within the LA grid, resemble the internet's data packets—information flowing and being switched along almost infinite combinations of pathways. The information network is dynamic and constantly evolving as connections form, break, and reconfigure.

Los Angeles has always been a sprawling mecca for adventurous people who arrive here, buy a car and set about reinventing themselves, unencumbered by Eurocentric tradition. This desert city by the sea with its exuberant car culture is a giant mixing bowl of Latino, Euro-American, Asian, African-American and Native American peoples. The LA Unified School District has students who speak

more than 80 different languages; LA's Koreatown is home to the largest concentration of Koreans outside of Seoul. Southern California's industries cross-pollinate, too: Hollywood with high-tech, aerospace with Pacific Rim trade.

No wonder then, that LA gives birth daily to thousands of new connections and fresh ideas. Even the natural environment is shifting and kinetic, constantly reminding us that everything changes: earthquakes and winter mudslides resculpt the topography overnight; huge brushfires devastate housing tracts and millionaires' mansions alike; temblors beneath the ocean hundreds of miles away could send a tsunami straight toward Venice Beach. In perhaps no other major city does one sense such a palpable connection to nature's latent forces.

The playfulness of my designs spring directly from the try-anything spirit of Los Angeles and its kinetic energy. Multicultural Modernism is about understanding where you are—and allowing design to frankly emanate from technological solutions.

Courtyards: paradigms for living and gathering

Over centuries people in the crowded Islamic cities of North Africa have refined the interior courtyard as an elegant solution for bringing nature into the house. This tranquil place, where the home encloses a secluded garden, reverses the American suburban model of a house surrounded by a yard. I believe it

provides a model for architects as we move toward greater density in our cities.

Ironically, the very success of the suburban "house on a lot" has turned the American Dream into a nightmare, resulting in huge tracts of separated homes, requiring residents to commute by car to work and, in fact, to drive nearly everywhere—to shop, to soccer matches, to school functions. Meanwhile, traffic on car-choked streets and freeways frequently moves at a crawl as gas prices soar.

Energy shortages and dwindling open space are fueling a growing pressure for urban "infill," with planners encouraging the development of vacant areas and mixed commercial-residential use projects. When supported by good public transportation, dense new neighborhoods have the potential both to revitalize American cities and to counter suburban sprawl. Density does not have to mean deprivation, since stores, restaurants, and other necessary services are all located nearby.

Still, consequences of density include smaller lots for houses and multifamily buildings, closer proximity to neighbors and higher real-estate prices. The interior courtyard can ameliorate these features. Dwellings that wrap around a courtyard not only shield residents from surrounding streets and neighbors, but also provide a cool, green refuge for repose. And the concept is scalable: mini-courts (ex.: balconies extending into verdant side gardens) can be incorporated into compact, multifamily housing.



5. Zeidler Residence.

The courtyard paradigm has benefited from high technology: large, slide-away or electrically powered roll-up doors serve as “removable walls,” capable of vanishing to transform an exterior courtyard into a garden extension of a room [Figure 5](#).

Courtyards adapt equally well to non-residential architecture. Lushly planted and waterscaped courtyards, allees and cafes, floating canopies, and pedestrian bridges and walkways can be used to encourage impromptu social gatherings.

The 675 West Kendall Street Biotechnology Laboratory building in Cambridge, Massachusetts reveals another variation on the courtyard [Figure 6](#). Scientists working in the building spend hours of highly focused work

at computers or in the laboratory. To counter their isolation, foster relaxation, and increase opportunities for casual meetings and conversation, the building’s stairways—many suspended in a 35-meter-high atrium—contain extended landings that serve as “living rooms in the sky.”

At the grandest level, courtyards take the form of plazas or public squares that serve an entire city, as with Siena’s Piazza del Campo or the Place Jemel-Fnah in Marrakech, which form wonderful open-air venues for civic pomp, commerce, and socializing.

Courtyards, then, offer a flexible new template for today’s architecture. In both domestic and public buildings, they provide myriad ways of connecting interior space with the natural environment.

As populations rise and open space

dwindles, they perform the essential functions of maximizing privacy while reinforcing communities. They are a key to densification with civility, and as such are a vital aspect of Multicultural Modernism.

Cross-cultural fusion

The world is now officially a global village, and there is no turning back. In its zeal for universality, International modernism failed to respect local customs, climate, and culture. In contrast, multicultural modernism believes that there is no single approach to building that works everywhere. It celebrates the unique qualities of people and place, while exploiting technology for maximum freedom of expression and functionality.

How does architecture go global and remain local? Cross-cultural fusion is key to multicultural modernism, which finds creative inspiration in various ideals and idiomatic design languages, without resorting to nostalgia. It is the antidote to gated communities and shopping malls.

The Helal (“New Moon”) residence in the United Arab Emirates balances two highly distinct idioms—Islamic and western Modern—for a client who desired a home that would express his identity as both an Arab and a worldly businessman. Here the dualities are bold. The profile of the dramatic aluminum-clad roof—the size of a football field and poised on giant, stone-clad heat-dispersion columns—scribes a crescent moon, the very symbol of Islam and of new beginnings, against the skyline. Self-





7. Halal (New Moon) Residence.

supporting glass walls provide dramatic glimpses of the roofline even from the interior of the house. Yet the sheltering overhang, in vernacular style, shields the inhabitants from the direct sun like a Bedouin tent [Figure 7](#). The blending and artistic reinterpretation of Islamic-patterned elements is continued in smaller details as well, such as the moucharabie, or Arab sunscreen, that discreetly interprets ancient Islamic patterns in cast aluminum. A veil casts silhouettes on stone or glass—the moucharabie dissipates the brutal energy of the southern sun.

Educated in the often dogmatic tenets of modern architecture, I now espouse a more inclusive ideal of what modern architecture can be. Tempered by its four elements - courtyards as an antidote to density stress, an openness to change and technical innovation, sensitivity to people and place, and cross-cultural fusion - multicultural modernism becomes a path towards an architecture that can respond sensibly, flexibly and with great exuberance to our increasingly urbanized, polyglot world.