Introduction to Yasmeen Lari
(28 June 1942 - )
Helen Thomas

Yasmeen Lari was one of the first architects, and the first woman architect, to practice in the Republic of Pakistan. Her career has several facets to it, reflecting an increasing concern with the architectural challenges internal to Pakistan.

Trained as an architect in the UK, studying at Oxford Polytechnic, Dip. Arch. 1964 (now Oxford Brookes University School of Architecture), she worked in Britain and Germany before returning to Pakistan in 1965 to set up her own practice in Karachi. Her first commissions came from family and connections, and were examples of the diasporic interpretation of Brutalism that spread across Latin America, South Central Asia and other parts of the world. Of her early houses, her own (1973) and one for Commodore Haz (1967) and Naser ud-deen Khan (1969) combined “the simplicity of vernacular dry-climate houses with a sophisticated interpretation of European modernism” illustrating two key qualities of Lari’s architecture: “the development of an appropriate modern style and a major interest in the socio-cultural aspects of housing, using appropriate technologies and self-help methods.”

Alongside a growing concern during the 1970s and 80s for the housing of the urban, and then rural poor, as evident in the Anguri Bagh Housing in Lahore (1979), which was built largely by unskilled labour, Lari also ran a thriving architectural practice – Lari Associates – serving the corporate, state and military sector. Her most well-known buildings of this period are the Taj Mahal Hotel (1981), the Finance and Trade Centre Building (1989), and the headquarters of the Pakistan State Oil Company (1991), all in Karachi, and the Al Shifa Eye Hospital (1990) in Rawalpindi.

Between 1980 - 1983, she was President of Institute of Architects of Pakistan. She also helped found the Pakistan Council of Architects and Town Planners, acting as its first Chairperson between 1983 - 6. During this period, she organised the first Conference of architects and town planners of Islamic countries in Karachi, in 1985 (where only 26 out of 350 of the delegates were women).

In 1980, Lari set up the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan with her husband Suhail Zaheer Lari, with the intention of documenting, and safeguarding, Pakistan’s 8,000 year old architectural culture, dating

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1 The Grove Encyclopaedia of Islamic Art and Architecture, 2009, ed Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, entry on Yasmeen Lari p. 417
from the Harappa period (c6,000BC). As Lari herself puts it, this was part of her personal and professional development: “Having been trained as an architect in the West, for me there was a period of unlearning as I tried to relate to the reality of the country, and roamed our amazing historic towns for inspiration.”

In essence, Lari, through the work of the Heritage Foundation and her associated research and writing, began to define the nature of Pakistan's architectural history within the complex cultural identity that this relatively new country, always in flux, was constructing for itself. This was both informed by and belonging to the world view that framed the questions raised at the 1985 Islamic countries Conference. As Lari pointed out in her welcome address, the communal aim was to “strive for the creation of a built environment which is representative of our cultural and ideological roots and the nation's aspirations.” Various other essential issues were raised (in 1985) - specifically a general resentment of conspicuous consumption and a preference for austerity and simplicity, combined with an ambivalence to the positivist technological and material development of the West.

In 2000, Lari mobilised students to start cleaning, and therefore caring for, old buildings. This became a formalised initiative sponsored by Nokia and Nokia Siemens Network, called KaravanPakistan, whose stated claim is to involve communities and youth in heritage safeguarding activities. Highlighting the fact that the Islamic world, while understanding itself as different to its other - the West, was also part of a global system, Lari was a UNESCO National Advisor between 2003 – 5, working on the 16th century Lahore Fort World Heritage Site.

In his concluding address to the 1985 Conference, Mabbub ul Haq defined another essential role for architecture in the Islamic world - to respond to “the felt needs of the poor people who are the overwhelming reality in the Muslim world.” Lari took this up as the third of her concerns, horrified by the outcome of the earthquake Hazara and Kashmir regions of Pakistan in 2005. KaravanPakistan extended its remit to include the Karavan Program for Indigenous Technology, which is concerned with a revival of indigenous technologies and available materials to rebuild dwellings, working especially with women. Now retired from Lari Associates, she spends her time initiating local self-help community projects designed to enable the people affected to restore and take control of their own living conditions, and to make their own histories. Its progress can be followed @ylari.

2 Dwell Magazine, interview with Yasmeen Lari, July 17 2012
3 Challenges of Transformation: Built Environment in Islamic Countries, p.22
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