Buildings that

Merge

Morocco is magic. The buildings in the countryside grow out of the earth, deeply rooted yet reaching skyward. The kasbahs of the Atlas mountains are molded from the indigenous earth and ornamented with geometric incisions and crenulations that bear the hand of their makers. These are buildings that, with equal power, merge and mark.

The buildings are composed of archetypal elements; towers, gates, portals, courtyards and streets that have the uncanny ability to be read as a harmonious whole growing with grandeur out of the land or to be experienced as ambiguous collages of form and light experienced in time and space. They fit to the majestic scale of the land and sky and, with equal richness, to the intimate scale of our bodies. This polyvalent nature is achieved with a modesty of means but is a paradigm for creating place and community in close dialogue with a potent natural setting.
Streets that Order and Dance
In Bali the temples, shrines and traditional villages create equally inspiring places with radically different means and materials. The shrines often merge by their use of simple materials, such as thatching, which recalls the vegetation of the adjacent hills. Structures are elaborately framed with wood, bamboo and palm fronds. Shrines are often placed in careful relationship to the views of distant sacred mountains. They merge by virtue of their materials and siting, yet they soar and mark with their vertical and horizontal repetition of the elemental roof forms. The multi-tiered roofs taper as they rise and reiterate, multiplying into the distance like some sacred forest. They merge and mark in a fashion that is consonant with their reverence for and awe of their natural and spiritual surroundings.

As exceptional as are the shrines of Bali, I was even more awed by the power of the traditional village. The sacred axis from mountain to sea becomes the spine of the village. The village comprises houses aligned along this street, terminated at the mountain and sea ends by appropriate shrines and marked in the middle by a communal meeting area. Each house has its own gateway as marker and each has an articulated set of pavilions that progress laterally from the street terminating in a garden of shrines to the ancestors. The street is the village and is the order and collective understanding of the community. It is the everyday and cosmic diagram.

In Morocco, the streets of the kasbahs and medinas literally dance. They are intimate, irregular, intriguing webs of experience, commerce and community. Their slight dimensions press us close to each other and to the earthy walls, but they also project us from the intense heat and sunlight. Latticed canopies, porches and impromptu canvas swags interact with strong desert light to create waves of brightness, shade and shadow to excite our senses and enhance the life of the streets.

One day in Essaouira, I was thrilled by a distant polyphony of drums and bells. The alluring sounds ricocheted off the close walls of the streets. To my delight the sounds came nearer, though I could still see no source. Suddenly three men in vivid garb turned the corner. They were dancing with drums in hand and bells wrapped around their ankles. The street echoed joyfully. The street was dancing.
With Tina Beebe’s ochre-toned walls and roof countered by Tina’s and Mario Viscidi’s lush Mediterranean gardens, the house has a strong duality, merging with the land and marking toward the sky. While clearly not inspired by Moroccan architecture, we discovered underlying commonalities that put this house in the same “memory chamber” as the villages of the Atlas mountains.

Halfway to Morocco from the Palisades we are constructing the new Maryland Center for the Performing Arts. The building is sited at the edge of the campus where three different geometries converge. Here much of the pleasure is in being able to build multiple performance venues in close proximity with new academic areas for music theater and dance.

The 350,000 square foot program presented a special challenge on a pastoral campus landscape. We endeavored to organize each department around a carefully scaled academic courtyard. Each, in turn, links to a spine of performance halls organized along a street. The tensions of three adjacent campus geometries are resolved in the social space of this street. This yields a street where town and gown, students and faculty, and various departments are drawn together. It is a street which by its geometry, location and adjacencies both orders and unites, dances and excites.

I am exhilarated by the wisdom embodied in the vernacular architecture of the Balinese and Moroccan cultures. I am reminded that merging and marking, ordering and dancing, are primal urges that awaken in us and enhance our efforts to make memorable places thousands of years and thousands of miles away.

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