

The Relationship Between Spirituality and Sustainability in Islam

Humans are not the only creatures that build. Many a creature that we classify low down the hierarchy of the animal kingdom, such as bees and ants, build elaborate structures. However, it has been suggested that it is awareness, thinking and imagination that single out humans as superior to other animals in architectural output.

While the rest of creation acts on the environment instinctively with no reasoning or training -- as preordained by God, the Creator of the universe -- humans do the same willingly and at their own discretion. Since their actions are preceded by thinking, rationalizing and beliefs, human beings clearly demonstrate through acts of building -- and every other engagement of theirs -- their philosophy of and outlook on, life and reality.

The relationship between the two, that is, people's outlook on life and the disposition of their actions, including building, is causal, the former always being the cause of the latter. No sooner does a paradigm shift occur in one's worldview, no matter how (in)significant, a corresponding change accordingly ensues in the very essence and character of one's performances. It reveals and immortalizes one's actual relationship with his own self, his peers, other creatures and, of course, with his Creator and Lord.

Based on his free will, awareness and imagination, man builds edifices in various shapes and sizes and with various function patterns in order to facilitate, nurture and motivate his copious life activities. The

existence of man cannot be imagined without the existence of a built environment. The relationship between the two is a fundamental and intimate one. Therefore, no phase of man's presence on earth could be imagined to be devoid of building activities, irrespective of their scale, simplicity and sophistication.

This principle applies to all including the very first man and prophet on earth, Adam, who is said to have built the first House of worship, that is, al-Masjid al-Haram or Baytullah (the House of God). Exactly forty years following the completion of al-Masjid al-Haram, either Adam himself or some of his descendants were instructed to proceed to a designated location (later Jerusalem or Bayt al-Maqdis) and build there al-Masjid al-Aqsa', the second mosque on earth. (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Ibn Khaldun rightly observed that building is a basis of civilization and is of the most indispensable crafts which man ought to gain knowledge of: "This (architecture) is the first and oldest craft of sedentary civilization. It is the knowledge of how to go about using houses and mansions for cover and shelter. This is because man has the natural disposition to reflect upon the outcome of things. Thus, it is unavoidable that he must reflect upon how to avert the harm arising from heat and cold by using houses which have walls and roofs to intervene between him and those things on all sides. This natural disposition to think, which is the real meaning of humanity, exists among (men) in different degrees..."

Le Corbusier also remarked: "Architecture is one of the most urgent needs of man, for the house has always been the indispensable and first tool that he has forged for himself. Man's stock of tools marks out the stages of civilization, the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age. Tools are the result of successive improvement; the effort of all generations is embodied in them. The tool is the direct and immediate expression of progress; it gives man essential assistance and essential freedom also..."

Koca Mimar Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age serving under three sultans and for many one of the greatest architects in Islamic civilization, said: "It is obvious and proven to men of intelligence and wisdom and persons of understanding and vision that building with water and clay being an auspicious art, the Children of Adam felt an aversion to mountains and caves and from the beginning were inclined to cities and villages. And because human beings are by nature civilized, they invented day-by-day many types of buildings, and refinement increased".

While erecting buildings for himself, God's vicegerent on earth in fact creates a wide range of facilities aimed at smoothing the progress of the realization of his heavenly purpose on earth. Buildings are thus subjected to serve together with their occupants an elevated order of things and meanings. They are the means and ground for worship, which is man's principal task.

Though serving him and his wants, God's vicegerent on earth always sees his buildings in an additional light, not seen by those who are bogged down with and blinded by fervently pursuing some lowly material gains. He sees them as an extension of the existing universal setting, God's physical realm, where all components, irrespective of their sizes, functions or positions, incessantly worship God. Buildings are thus seen as serving God rather than man. Their services to man even though genuine and real are rather relative.

This is so because the whole universe constitutes a mosque (masjid), so to speak, with everything in it, save a group of men and Jinns, voluntarily singing in unison God's praises and celebrating His glory with neither fatigue nor boredom ever befalling them, Islamic architecture aspires to add to this exhilarating set-up. It aspires to endorse the divine spiritual standards and expand them to the spheres of human influences, thus making them more easily approachable and perceptible by more people with different interests and aptitudes. Hence, Islamic architecture apart from facilitating

man's vicegerency mission also promotes as well as spawns people's interest in it.

Moreover, when building an edifice, the Muslim architect, designer and structural engineer charged with the vicegerency spirit are first and foremost concerned about how the end result of their efforts will stand out when juxtaposed with the existing universal setting, a result of heavenly artistry. In terms of function and outward appearance: will it complement or contrast with it? Will it go well with it, or will it appear as if something of a misfit, an oddity, or even an offensiveness?

Concerning function, a Muslim architect always exerts himself to ensure that a new structure serves a noble purpose. It does not matter whether it is a mosque, school, dwelling, caravanserai, hospital, fountain and mausoleum. It is only God that is meant to be worshipped and adored.

In this way, every new structure even though man-made, signifies a conformation and even enhancement of the aura generated by the character and role of the natural world. Instead of standing alone amidst the marvels of God's creation, quite alien to them, a structure rather integrates itself with them as much as its plan, design and utility are able to suggest. It identifies its status vis-à-vis the otherworldliness with that of the natural sensations around it.

Building materials and substances used in building processes are normally taken or "borrowed" from nature. The same materials heretofore belonged to the flawlessly executed universal web singing God's praises and celebrating His glory. Although removed from their original contexts, the building materials from nature are still utilized for some other perfectly fitting goals related to man.

Hence, the intrinsic "holy pursuit" of the building materials remains unaffected or perturbed. As a result of the restricted and controlled intervention of Muslims in nature, the original condition and context

of natural building materials and substances change only, which is nevertheless expected, needed and in full accordance with God's infinite will and plan. The inherent functions of those building materials and substances remain the same.

Before they are used in buildings, building materials from nature in unison worship God with the rest of nature's components. It is thus only fair that they are used in those buildings where God is worshipped as well, so that their unremitting acts are still performed in peace and without interruption.

It sounds strange but it would be an act of injustice towards nature if some of its ingredients were used for erecting buildings wherein the authority of God will be disrespected and His words contravened. Besides, such a deed would also denote that a contribution towards upsetting the fine equilibrium in nature has been made.

When the Prophet (pbuh) declared that "there is neither harming nor reciprocating of harm" (Sunan Ibn Majah), he had in mind not only human beings but also the natural world with all its components. It is surely a form and degree of harm when the spiritual paradigms of nature are perturbed, just as it is harmful to abuse some of the physical aspects of any segment of nature's kingdom.

Thus, it stands to reason that as man is very much capable of perturbing the physical laws of nature by his actions, so is he in a position to get in the way of the covert aspects of nature's existence, as much as God allows it. Therefore, while creating buildings, that is to say, while creating frameworks and fields for their activities, God's vicegerents wish not to contravene any of the universe's spiritual laws and patterns. On the contrary, they wish to enhance them and remain forever on friendly terms with them. Certainly, a building can be either a "friend" or an "antagonist" to its animate and inanimate neighbours.

As regards the form of erected structures, the Muslim architect, designer and builder powered with the spirit of tawhid and a desire to fulfil the will of a higher order or cause, always try their best to make their edifices come into sight adhering to the existing spiritual paradigms of the natural environment.

Nature is the perceptible sign of the Creator's will and presence, which is as evident in the most trivial as in the most splendid. Thus, every new component of built environment ought to become, in a way, a "sign" itself, lest they become irreconcilable with both nature and the spiritual and psychological disposition of their users.

Islamic architecture is to be seen as a man-made "sign" amid the signs of God in nature. The two sets of signs coexist peacefully with one another, supporting each other's mission and purpose of existence.

Humans must live on friendly terms with nature, as much as such an arrangement is possible, beneficial and needed. Under no circumstances can man in any endeavour of his declare a war on the natural environment. This is because, on account of many a physical, mental and emotional weakness of his and his actual total dependence on the environment, man and nobody else is bound to emerge at all times as a dire loser.

The natural environment is simultaneously an obstruction and help, and architects and planners seek both to invite its aid and to drive back its assaults. If rightly conceived and seriously pondered, the placement and form of edifices in relation to their sites with arrangement of their axes and spaces may well be turned into a device for controlling natural light, ventilation, heating, cooling, insulation and acoustics.

The same philosophy is to be attached -- perhaps in a more forceful and compelling mode -- to the spiritual dimension of the relationship between the built and natural environment, as it concerns one's well-being in both this world and in the Hereafter. Since it goes along with

the objectives of the Islamic Shari'ah (Law), peaceful, harmonious and sustainable coexistence with nature, in the spiritual sense of the term, lies, additionally, at the core of the Muslim religious existence.

It goes without saying, therefore, that people should be not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually connected to their buildings. Buildings help people to know their place in the world. The way they order their worldly existence is closely linked to the way they perceive and order their built environment. This ordering is not only spatial but also temporal.

The built environment is strongly related to the patterning of people's daily lives. When people lose their emotional and spiritual connection to the buildings they occupy, all architecture ends. And when architecture ends, all happiness and meaningful existence on earth end, too. It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to assert that sustainability in the built environment positively leads to sustainability in people's wellbeing and in the whole of their existence, and vice versa.

Furthermore, in view of the fact that the Islamic building enterprise bore a spiritual impression and is a means for espousing the cause of Islam, it did not matter in numerous instances who the builders, planners and developers of many a project were. What actually mattered was whether the ultimate role and utility of such projects justified the time, effort and capital spent and what their impact was on the existing state of the community and its future progress. Although architecture as a profession was extremely important and honoured, yet architects, most of the time, were not excessively venerated, neither by their patrons nor by the public.

Architecture was seen just as one of the many important professions needed for creating, sustaining and taking pleasure in civilization. Architects, just as many other professionals representing numerous specialist fields, were regarded as very important, yet crucial, protagonists in the ultimate scheme of things.

It was for this reason that on most Islamic buildings no names of the builders were inscribed. If there was anything imprinted on them then it was the date of their commencement or completion, or the name of the ruler or the patron. Except in cases of questionable undertakings, rarely were the architects, planners or developers concerned about promoting their name or status, position in history, or what some short-sighted people and members of the ruling elite would say and how they would react during and after construction.

This indicates that buildings in Islam are immensely charged with the spirituality of Islam. Everything else is inferior to this paradigm. Through various channels and means -- including the planning and organization of spaces in buildings, the handling of their forms, their envisioned functions and the methods and styles of ornamentation and beautification -- Muslim architects and structural engineers go all-out to put on view the signs of the Creator's greatness and presence as the infinite authority, on the one hand, and to display the signs of humankind's fragility, dependence and smallness, on the other.

This way, every building is transformed into a kind of house of God, baytullah, so to speak, translating into reality the implications of the Prophet's hadith (tradition) that the earth has been made pure and that it serves as a place of worship to the Prophet (pbuh) and his followers, that is, as a mosque (masjid). (Sahih al-Bukhari)

This way, additionally, the Muslim buildings in time become converted into instruments of worship, not only because of their dignified functions, but also because of their plans, organization of spaces, forms and decoration. By definition, Islamic architecture is in total harmony with its natural environment, social patterns, conditions, and, most importantly, the exigencies of its people. Its environmental, social and human dimensions are integral and interchangeable, interwoven with the threads of the Islamic worldview, belief system and Shari'ah (Law).

Indeed, sustainability in architecture is possible only when there is sustainability in values and philosophies that underpin the former, giving it its identity, vigour and direction. Moreover, sustainability in architecture is possible only when there is sustainability in people's intellectual, spiritual and moral predilections whereby the philosophy and values of a sustainable architecture are one and the same as those personified by people: the conceivers, patrons, creators and users of architecture.

It is for this reason that Koca Mimar Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, said that architecture is at once an estimable and the most difficult calling, and he who would practice it correctly and justly must, above all things, be pious.

Muhammad Iqbal while eulogizing the Mosque of Cordova in Spain in a masterpiece poem that carries the same name -- or Masjid-e Qurtaba in Urdu -- uses the beauty and glory of one of the most famous architectural masterpieces in Islamic history as a prism through which he analyses the nature and some of the most prominent traits of a true believer. At the end of his poem, after describing the main qualities of the Mosque and true believers, and the type of a spiritual affiliation that ought to exist between the two, Muhammad Iqbal calls for revolution and reform across the spectrum of the Muslim cultural and civilizational presence. The importance of reforming and sustaining individuals, traditions, systems and institutions, in the context of reminiscing the Mosque of Cordova and Islamic civilization's lost repute and luminosity, is readily apparent in the poem.

Muhammad Iqbal proclaims:

"Your beauty, your majesty, Personify the graces of the man of faith.

You are beautiful and majestic. He too is beautiful and majestic..."

"Your edifice unravels The mystery of the faithful;
The fire of his fervent days, The bliss of his tender nights.

Your grandeur calls to mind The loftiness of his station,
The sweep of his vision, His rapture, his ardour, his pride, his
humility.

The might of the man of faith is the might of the Almighty:
Dominant, creative, resourceful, consummate..."

"Your equal in beauty, If any under the skies,
Is the heart of the Muslim and no one else.

Ah, those men of truth, Those proud cavaliers of Arabia;
Endowed with a sublime character, Imbued with candour and
conviction.

Their reign gave the world an unfamiliar concept;
That the authority of the brave and spirited lay in modesty and
simplicity, rather than pomp and regality..."

Also, powered by the tawhidic mettle, Koca Mimar Sinan regarded his enormous talent as a gift from God. He strove to perfect it for no other reason except to serve God as the final end for all other ends, that is, the end at which all finalistic nexuses aim and come to rest.

Sinan erected many buildings of different types only that they be used for glorifying the Holy Being, and that they become a tangible proof of God's greatness, infinity and permanence, and of man's and built environment's inconsequentiality, impermanence and relativity. The latter can never assume the quality of bona fide sustainability. The relative and qualified attribute of sustainability that is normally affixed to the man-made built environment, rather allegorically, is possible only due to the infinite, omnipresent and everlasting nature of the purposes and goals it serves.

Sinan thus wrote: "Thanks be to God, to this humble servant it became an art to serve in so many a house of God... I looked upon all creation as a lesson, and completely understood it has no permanence. I laid the foundations of many buildings. (Doomed to) annihilation, man does not endure. The pavilion of my body began to crumble. I suffered pain in its fetters. The sorrows of fortune my beard turned gray. My body trembles from fear of God. Think not that my bended form is an arch. It is a bridge of passage to grief and sorrow. Brother, in order to pass to the next world, to this vault of fate's pavilion I bowed my head. Thanks be to God that I am a righteous man! In my art, I am upright and firm".

Sinan also wrote: "Boundless thanks to that Architect (God) of the palace of nine vaults, who, without measure or plumb line, without rule or compass, by His hand of creation, made firm its arched canopy. And endless thanks to that Master of the seven-storied workshop, who, with His hand of power, kneaded the clay of Adam and in him displayed His art and novelty. And endless blessings upon that Self-Existent One, whose munificence, like the waves of the sea, brought forth humankind into the plain of existence from the hidden world of nonbeing..."

It is on account of those truths that according to the Qur'anic discourse, Islamic buildings are erected and sustained only upon a foundation of piety to God and His good pleasure, because the lives of their benefactors too, are built and sustained on piety and hopes for God's pleasure. Whereas the buildings of those who turn away from God are erected upon a foundation of suspicion, faithlessness, false hopes and fears, just as their lives are built upon the like foundation.

While the lives and buildings of believers, in spiritual terms, are firm and sustainable for the obvious reasons, the lives and buildings of the wicked ones, for obvious reasons, too, are weak, insecure and shaky. God then asks: "Is he who founded his building upon duty to Allah and His good pleasure better; or he who founded his building on the brink of a crumbling, overhanging precipice so that it toppled with him into

the fire of hell? Allah guides not wrongdoing folk. The building which they built will never cease to be a misgiving in their hearts unless their hearts be torn to pieces. Allah is Knower, Wise". (al-Tawbah, 109- 110)

Since the Hereafter signifies an integral part of life's reality -- yet its climax -- sustainable life patterns are only those patterns as ensure success and happiness not only in this world, but also in the Hereafter. Correspondingly, truly sustainable architectural styles and systems are only those architectural systems and styles as typify, aid and promote life ideals and activities that are set to guarantee the true felicity of both worlds. There can be no rift, nor incongruity between this world and the Hereafter, and between people's innate penchants and actual preparations for getting the best of both.

This is a powerful message of recurring Qur'anic accounts concerning the terrestrial aspirations and eventual ends of many individuals and nations, such as Pharaohs, Qarun and the 'Ad and Thamud peoples. They all failed miserably in their enterprises and were duly punished. Fundamental to their ultimate failures were the mentioned spiritual as well as psychological rift and incongruity. However, it is not by chance that the Qur'an in those narratives draws attention to certain aspects of the people's built environments which denote at once a ground and sign of their failures. Their built environments are occasionally employed as a means and instrument for carrying out the agonizing downfalls and punishments. Their built environments were their necropolises.

The Qur'an as though intends to communicate that just as there was nothing sustainable in those people's life paradigms, when juxtaposed with the actual purpose and scale of the totality of existence, likewise there was nothing sustainable in their built environments, notwithstanding the class and sway of their physical and artistic dimensions. Their built environment expressions were as hollow and transient as their ontological appreciations and wisdom.

Says the Qur'an, for example: "So how many a town did We destroy while it was unjust, so it was fallen down upon its roofs, and (how many a) deserted well and palace raised high. Have they not travelled in the land so that they should have hearts with which to understand, or ears with which to hear? For surely it is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts which are in the breasts". (al-Hajj, 45-46)

"And how many towns We destroyed, which exulted in their life (of ease and plenty)! Now those habitations of theirs, after them, are deserted -- all but a (miserable) few! And We are their heirs". (al-Qasas, 58)

"(Remember also) the 'Ad and the Thamud (people): clearly will appear to you from (the traces) of their buildings (their fate): Satan made their deeds alluring to them, and kept them back from the Path, though they were keen-sighted". (al-'Ankabut, 38)

"Those before them did also plot (against Allah's Way): but Allah took their structures from their foundations, and the roof fell down on them from above; and the Wrath seized them from directions they did not perceive". (al-Nahl, 26)

Furthermore, when God instructed Prophet Ibrahim and his son Isma'il, also a prophet, to build the Ka'bah or al-Masjid al-Haram, He commanded them to "...sanctify (purify) My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer)." (al-Baqarah, 125); or to "...associate not anything (in worship) with Me; and sanctify (purify) My House for those who compass it round, or stand up, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer)". (al-Hajj, 26)

Ibn Kathir reckons in his exegesis or tafsir of the two verses that the main message contained therein revolves around the purity, sincerity and sanctity of the motives and goals of Prophets Ibrahim and Isma'il in their capacities as the Ka'bah or al-Masjid al-Haram builders, as well as around the integrity and sanctity of the edifice's

civilizational standing, goals and function. Indeed, the essence of the whole enterprises of building and architecture, and their own integrity and propriety, are implied in those succinct Qur'anic accounts. As they are sandwiched between, and greatly influenced by, designers' and architects' intellectual and spiritual dispositions, and by buildings' ultimate performances - something that is clearly alluded to in the stated Qur'anic verses - the actual designing and building processes are thus implicitly connoted as well.

This is so by reason of the verity that genuine building and architecture undertakings are complex, demanding and rather integrated and organic processes. No phase or phases could be identified, separated and regarded in isolation as more important than others. From the initial phases of making intentions and generating conceptions and ideas, to the final phases of using, interacting with and developing emotional relationships with buildings, no stage or aspect of the architecture process is to be handled or attended to at the expense of others.

Owing to this profound spiritual importance of sustainability in architecture in the context of the Islamic spirituality and worldview, Prophets Ibrahim and Isma'il, while building the Ka'bah, besought God for foremost life blessings and boons which, in fact, represented and by definition were inseparable neither from the purpose and mission of their honourable lives, nor from the purpose and mission of the groundbreaking phenomenon of the Ka'bah or al-Masjid al-Haram in its role as a blessed place and guidance for all kinds of beings.

They among other things supplicated: "Our Lord, accept (this service) from us. Indeed You are the Hearing, the Knowing. Our Lord, and make us Muslims (in submission) to You and from our descendants a Muslim nation (in submission) to You. And show us our rites and accept our repentance. Indeed, You are the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, and send among them a messenger from themselves who will recite to them Your verses and teach them the

Book and wisdom and purify them. Indeed, You are the Exalted in Might, the Wise". (al-Baqarah, 127-129)

Correspondingly, about building, using and maintaining mosques, God says in the Qur'an: "The mosques of Allah shall be visited and maintained (ya'muru) by such as believe in Allah and the Last Day, establish regular prayers, and practice regular charity, and fear none (at all) except Allah. It is they who are expected to be on true guidance". (al-Tawbah, 18)

Apart from scientific and professional knowledge and skills, faith, integrity and good deeds are also needed for rising to the challenge. As a matter of fact, the latter is more consequential and is a prerequisite of the former. The key word in this verse is 'amara, ya'muru which, according to Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1989), if applied to the theme of the mosque, implies the following: 1) to build or repair; 2) to maintain in fitting dignity; 3) to visit for purposes of devotion; and 4) to fill with light, life and activity.

Due to this remarkable spiritual significance of sustainable architecture in Islam and its unbreakable relationship with people's everyday life, the Qur'an affirms that buildings can be founded on God-consciousness (taqwa) and His good pleasure (ridwan), or on an undermined sand-cliff ready to crumble to pieces with its occupants into the fire of Hell. (al-Tawbah, 109)

Mosques can be built for causing harm and disbelief and division among the believers and as a station for whoever wars against God and His Messenger, that is, out of sheer hypocrisy. (al-Tawbah, 107)

Buildings can be a cause of pretence and doubt in people's hearts. (al-Tawbah, 110)

It is not for such as join gods with Allah to erect, visit or maintain mosques while they witness against their own souls to infidelity,

because their works bear no fruit in the spiritual kingdom. (al-Tawbah, 17)

The giving of drink to pilgrims only, or the physical maintenance of al-Masjid al-Haram, as a form of deadening formalism and blinding symbolism, is not equal to the pious services of those who believe in God and the Last Day and strive hard in Allah's way. (al-Tawbah, 19)

Nobody is more unjust than he who forbids that God's name is glorified and mentioned much in His mosques and strives for their ruin. (al-Baqarah, 114)

The Ka'bah has been erected in order to function as a place of assembly for men and a place of total safety. (al-Baqarah, 125)

Buildings can be built as landmarks for vain delight. (al-Shu'ara', 128)

Finally, "righteousness is not that you turn your faces towards the east or the west, but (true) righteousness is (in) one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveller, those who ask (for help), and for freeing slaves; (and who) establishes prayer and gives zakah; (those who) fulfil their promise when they promise; and (those who) are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous". (al-Baqarah, 177)

On the whole, the Islamic idea of sustainable architecture is to create awareness and an utmost sense of responsibility in people, which will inevitably stir up spontaneous and sincere sustainability actions. By people we mean not only architects, designers, planners, engineers and patrons, but also everyone in the society's subtle hierarchy of ranks, stations and responsibilities.

This is so by reason of architecture being people's art and at once their collective right and responsibility. In this manner, a healthy

environment of mutual giving and taking, as well as of mutual demand and supply, will be created and upheld. People will thus perceive the prospect of contributing to sustainability pursuit as their moral, spiritual and contractual obligation. In it, they will see themselves, their future and mission. Most importantly, they will see in it an evidence of their impending success, wellbeing and the interests of both worlds.

Such an ubiquitous mood and vibes will be felt everywhere and by everyone, owing to the universality and comprehensiveness of the sustainability concept and undertaking. It will signify honourable people's emphatic response to God's command: "...And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression..." (al-Ma'idah, 2)

On the same note, believers are depicted as having faith, doing righteous deeds, and joining together in the mutual teaching of truth, patience and constancy. (al-'Asr, 3) It stands to reason that if this philosophy of sustainability and sustainable architecture takes root, then the concerns and snags of double standards, inconsistencies, lethargic and solely profit-driven implementation moves, inadequate educational strategies and policies, lack of political will, lack of transparency and scepticism, which constantly plague today's sustainability development efforts worldwide, could be successfully purged.

Indeed, it is nigh on impossible to establish and implement sustainability in an environment of mutual mistrust, impiety, omnivorous greed and self-indulgence, doubt, uncertainty, lack of proper understanding and orientation. No wonder, then, that decades of talking and campaigning for sustainability yielded a little of positive outcome. Most people simply do not care and cannot even grasp the point of the whole enterprise. The rise of an out-and-out eco-awareness simply failed to take off. Positively, sustainability blueprints and efforts must be rendered genuinely meaningful and sustainable first, before any rays of hope for a genuine sustainability

and sustainable architecture could be emitted into the hearts and minds of people.

There is more to sustainable architecture than haranguing on and selectively and relatively applying such sustainability principles as using alternative energy sources, energy conservation, reuse of materials and reducing waste, pollution and environmental degradation, albeit on some vague, questionable, inequitable and deficient premises. Sustainable architecture is to morph into a total responsible lifestyle and culture. It is to penetrate every level of people's lives and consciousness. It is to influence, and be influenced by, the rest of life ambits.

Generally speaking, this inimitable and all-embracing Islamic sustainability exemplar is perfectly recapped in the words of the Qur'an: "And the heaven He has raised high, and He has set up the Balance; in order that you may not transgress (due) balance. And observe the weight with equity and do not make the balance deficient". (al-Rahman, 7-9)

In the preceding verses, God speaks about three entwined degrees or levels of harmony, equilibrium and justice on the strength of which life was created and was set to operate, and which man in his capacity as the vicegerent on earth must respect and strive to sustain at all times.

The first and grandest level is the one relating to creating, raising and imposing balance and harmony on the heaven with everything qualitative and quantitative in it.

The second level applies directly to man, the trustee to whom and whose magnificent life mission and purpose everything in the heavens and on the earth has been subjected, whereby he is expected to uphold and not transgress the balance and harmony divinely instituted in life as a whole.

The third is the one that regulates dealings and relationships between people in their daily routines where the weight is to be observed with equity and the sense of balance as a rule of life not to be made deficient. Every person's rights will be respected and abilities as well as potentials nurtured and put to good use. This applies not only to human mutual relationships, but also to their relationships with the rest of God's creations.

In other words, as Ibn Kathir in his exegesis or tafsir of the Qur'an remarked, God created the heavens and the earth with truth and justice so that everything else could exist on the basis of the same foundations. The medium or agent for attaining such a target is nobody else but man. One of the objectives of God's revealed Word to man, it follows, was to make man firmly establish his feet at his own most immediate level and to thus confidently start rising through the intellectual and spiritual ranks of existence aiming at the highest stations where the highest and grandest level of harmony, equilibrium and justice resides.

Unmistakably, human cultural and civilizational legacies, entailing architecture too, are testimonies to how far in those sustainability matters humankind has gone and risen, or how low it has regressed and fallen.

In the context of his commentary on the above-mentioned sustainability verses, Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains: "In the great astronomical universe there are exact mathematical laws, which bear witness to Allah's wisdom and also to His favours to His creatures; for we all profit by the heat and light, the seasons, and the numerous changes in the tides and the atmosphere, on which the constitution of our globe and the maintenance of life depend." The word "balance" repeated in each of the three verses in question means that men need to "act justly to each other and observe due balance in all their actions, following the golden mean and not transgressing due bounds in anything."

Speaking both literally and figuratively, "a man should be honest and straight in every daily matter, such as weighing out things which he is selling, and he should be straight, just and honest in all the highest dealings, not only with other people, but with himself and in his obedience to Allah's Law. Not many do either the one or the other when they have an opportunity of deceit. Justice is the central virtue, and the avoidance of both excess and defect in conduct keeps the human world balanced just as the heavenly world is kept balanced by mathematical order."