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P R O F I L E



# Karl Schlamminger

"There exists an unbreakable bond between the Word — specifically the words of the Arabic Qur'an — and the very form and structure of Islamic architecture", argues Karl Schlamminger whom the late Prof. Henry Corbin honoured by writing the introduction to the catalogue *Cryptomorphosis*. Karl Schlamminger, he noted, "has the impression that he is sculpting time and stabilising its progress by giving it a perceptible shape in simultaneity. Stabilised in this manner, time becomes space. Time is our enemy because it destroys and discards all forms in its progress. Space is our

friend because it enables us to assume all our visions and to have them simultaneously present. Karl Schlamminger leads us toward a perception of the world that anticipates the liberating dawn of days without dusk."

Born in West Germany in 1935, Karl studied at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, and in turn taught at the Fine Arts Academy in Istanbul and at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Tehran University. He has recently completed a different kind of an assignment, designing and decorating the Ismaili Centre in London. He firmly believes that cal-

ligraphy is the central artform in Islam. "If not calligraphy, then architecture. And Islamic architecture without calligraphy is virtually impossible." He is unhappy that Western historians of Islamic art have often considered calligraphy a minor art and when it appears on a building, it is usually called 'architectural detail' or 'ornamentation'. This error, he says, is due to a misunderstanding of Islamic cultural patterns and religious symbols "which are so deeply rooted that Muslims have rarely bothered to articulate them". He points out that the link between calligraphy and

architecture "may not yet have been forged in the time of the Prophet, because the presence of the Word in the Messenger himself was too immediate to require outward expression. But Islamic architecture has developed, like Islamic culture in general, under the sign of the omnipresence of God's Word."

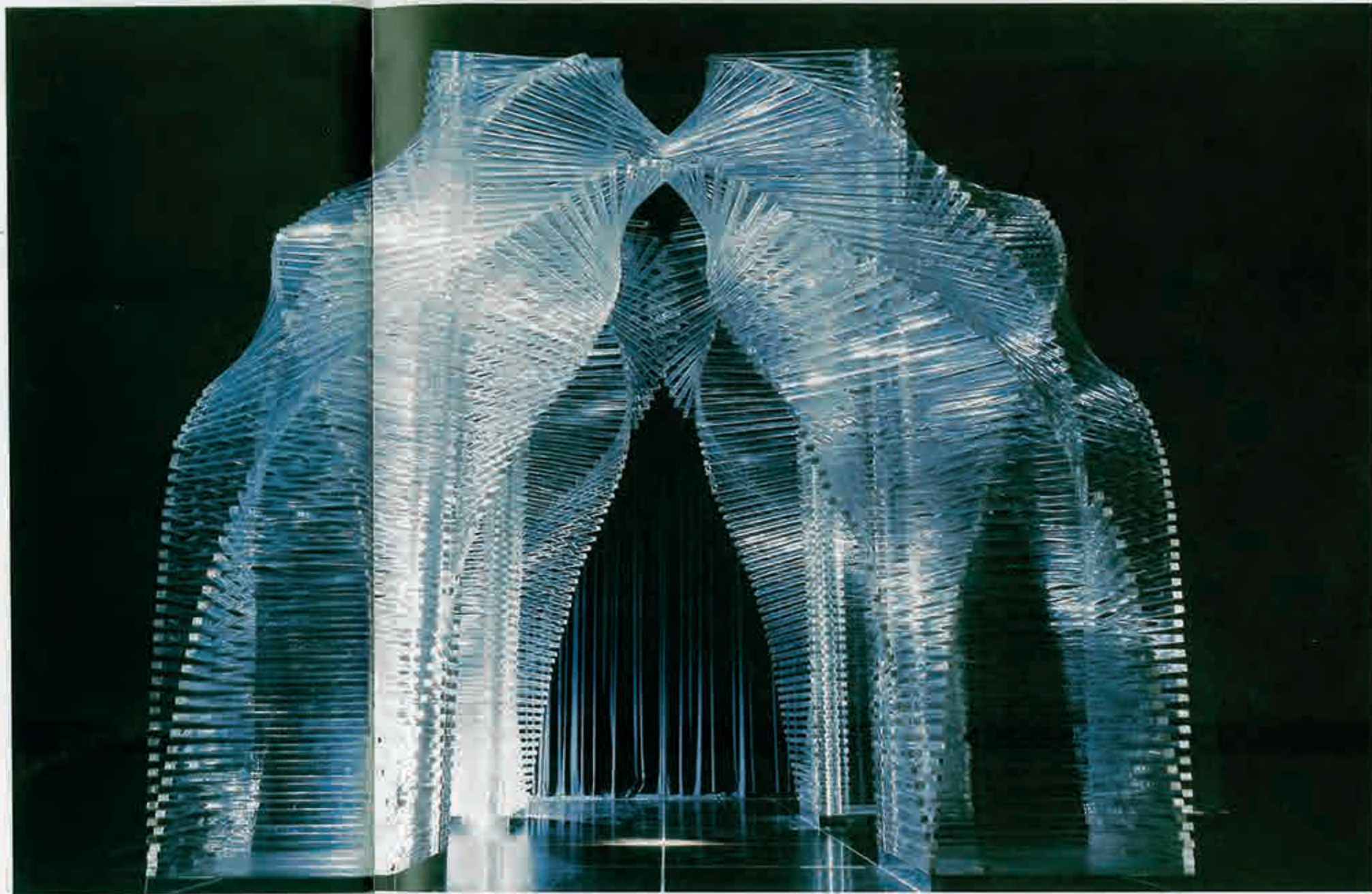
*Arts and the Islamic World* invited him to explain how can one meet the challenge of combining the aesthetics of traditional Islamic design with the contemporary architectural vocabulary of a building like the Ismaili Centre in London? His answer follows:

It goes without saying that such a synthesis is desirable; what remains is the difficulty of avoiding pastiche, and of creating what may be called a valid and modern Islamic philosophy of design.

Starting with the outer entrance hall of the Center I developed a scheme of blue lines which repeats like a leitmotiv throughout the building, from the floor pattern to

the pool to the calligraphy and so on, and continues as a theme [Persian: *Mozou*] that unifies the building's interior. The carpets, the doors (which are in the form of lattices), the great chandelier, the curtains, the prayer-hall with its perforated plaster screen, the tile, the marble, the skylights, the doors to the prayer hall, all these elements are bound together into a unified design.

Each space and surface of the Center was pre-planned to fulfil a certain purpose. There is nothing hasty or haphazard in such planning, and the kind of detailed execution needed to meet these purposes





Previous page: Karl Schlamming, Dome structure, "Tchahar-Taq," plexiglass 360x360x360cm square as basic element, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York. Bottom: Symbols and Logotypes, designed by Karl Schlamming, from left to right, The Aga Khan award in Architecture; Aga Khan award alternative; National Gardens, Tehran; Pardi-san Gardens, Tehran; Bou-Ali Sina University, Hamadan; Avicenna Institute, Hamadan; Transplant; Iranian National Blood Transfusion Service.

Right: Stainless steel, brass, and plate glass, detail of handrail on the main stairs. Below right: Corner of the Ismaili centre. Below: View by night, highlighting the Islamic mood of the architecture. Middle right: The fountain pool in the Entrance Hall in white marble, brazilian blue granite and inlaid stainless steel. Middle right below: The tile designs and teak benches of the lift halls. Far right: Detail of the main stairway chandelier. Far right below: The geometry seen from below of the balconies of the two upper floors.



demands time and care. The designer's work is to react, or to answer these purposes.

By using the word answer I am employing the metaphor of language, and thereby implying that design, like language, demands a coherence and continuity of spoken word, syntax and semantics. One does not usually change languages in the middle of a sentence. But, there exist certain concepts which are expressed in their perfection only in certain languages. If you wanted to communicate such a concept you might use a word from Latin, or Greek, or English. But everyone must be able to understand this word, just as Persians - for example - use and understand words in Arabic when they wish to express a religious or mystical meaning. Language in effect filters meaning through one's subjectivity

into the world of objective discourse; and a foreign language does so in a very specific manner.

I cannot today attempt to design and re-create a sixteenth century mosque (like, say, the Ibn Tulun) in the middle of London. Such an imitation would paradoxically fail to attain even the status of a "real copy" (as the souvenir sellers so charmingly label their banal wares). The impulse to worship the architectural past must be transformed into a genuine and contemporary aesthetic impulse; so just as we use a single foreign word when we want to be exact, we must use a traditional design-vocabulary which has been filtered through contemporary modes of expression.

In order to do this, naturally one must know the aesthetic tradition of Islam, the whole cultural history of the inner life of the Islamic "house-



hold", life in general with all its social conditioning both sacred and profane. We cannot - or must not - deal with the reproduction of something we have already seen, but with the filtering of essential Gestalt-elements of Islamic culture and their transformation into technical, social and religious realities of the present.

The floor of the outer entrance hall, for instance, has an open-ended pattern in heptagonal form which rises at the focus of the room to create a fountain; such a pattern in such a space is of course a completely classical Islamic response - but I have never heard of a heptagonal pattern anywhere in Islamic architecture. The number seven of course symbolizes for Ismailis the values of its essential philosophy - but has never been used in an architectural context. Here the





sevenness of the design is no superficial effigy or naturalistic picture of an idea, but – as always in Islam – is expressed in geometry (literally: measurement of the earth).

The line pattern is rooted in tradition also through its colour, cobalt blue or lapis lazuli, which for Islamic alchemists and artists symbolized serenity and contemplation, the unclouded paradise of the heavenly sky. The blue motif is used in different ways throughout the building, and its repetition defines each wall and ceiling as an especially negotiated detail of the building – not merely an outline but a structuring element that interconnects the whole interior as a network.

On one wall of the entrance hall appears a "Bismillah" which represents – as in all Islamic lands – the word which has become image, which has created a unity of spirit and symbol, just as Qur'anic recitation creates a unity of sound and meaning. Rumi says: "Letter, sound and meaning I destroy and throw away, since I can speak to you without these things."

The Arabic language with its guttural and explosive sounds, is for me a strongly onomatopoeic language, using the whole spectrum of sound, primordial and intuitive; and the art of Arabic calligraphy continues this mysterious quality with its multiplicity, complexity and interpenetration, its interlacing warp and weft. What it "says" is not always obvious, since its ordering in space can create varying interpretations of its meaning (for example by breaking the line of words into an overlying and repetitive pattern, a statement



Top left: The bay windows that overhang the deeply recessed west entrance. Top and Top right: The roof garden showing the central fountain connected by radial channels to the four corner pools. Above: Panelling on the west window wall of the Prayer Hall, incorporating marble, tile and plaster lattice panels with vertical teak panels in rectangular calligraphy. The names Allah, Mohammad and Ali are to be read in the light space between the task members. Right: Figure of polished bronze, wood casing. (Hidden and released) height 50cm.



can suddenly be re-read as question).

Again, the patterns of the carpets represent a kind of geometry which rise out of Islamic tradition. The manifoldness or manyfoldedness of the pattern is rooted in one master-pattern which is varied by raising or emphasizing different parts of the pattern for different spaces. That is, it is always the same pattern, but now accentuated, now concealed, now open, now closed, and so on. Thus the pattern on the stairs and the patterns in the rooms share a common language in their basic structure but have different modes of expression in their different spaces.

This suggests an essential element of geometry which I like to call the endless well of creativity. Within its laws everything is concealed (verborgen). The creative act is the revealing (entbergen) – as Heidegger says – in order to make enclosedness (Geborgenheit); geometry is a dialectic of container and contained. The creative mind "steals" the pattern out of the geometrical universality; one fetches out the pattern, one grasps it or takes it – and the possibilities are endlessly manifold. The pattern is so spread out as to be invisible, yet simultaneously present: potential in the apparent chaos of formlessness.

In the prayer hall two of the materials used suggest the element of Fire: two "fired" materials, stone (marble) and ceramic tile. Stone is geomorphic fire; tiles are made by man-made fire. In alchemy fire is the element of transformation: earth becomes a substance of the utmost

density; minerals are melted on the tile to produce colour. Fire makes amorphous material noble in alchemical terms. All these processes are ordered within the principle of chaos, just as human perfection and imperfection are both essential aspects of creation.

The prayer hall has three entrances. This too is no random solution to a purely structural "problem" but rather stems from the traditional idea that the door or gate has a meaning, and that it is necessary to preserve this hierarchy of entrances in order to save those rituals of entering which suggest the relation between unconsciousness and consciousness. Hierarchy is not a matter of mere pomp and show, but a deeply useful concept; and so I believe we must pay special attention and give form to those doors and gateways beyond which one discovers a different world; to pass through them is tantamount to an initiation.

The glass-shaded lamps of the chandelier and those in the prayer hall needed special attention as well, because I came to understand – after extensive research – that light, in both the philosophical and practical sense, was for ancient man the result of burning that which most precious. Oil for lamps symbolized the self which is transformed through fire; one can discover traces of this idea in such disparate sources as the Qur'anic verses on the Niche for Lamps, and the Greek myth of Prometheus. In ancient mosques conical glass-lamps hung from the ceiling; the lower part of these glass reflectors ended in a glass sphere which I at first mistook for a purely decorative element. But after experimenting with these reflectors I came to understand their essential meaning. They magnified the light of the burning oil downwards, thus reversing the behaviour of fire in its natural state, which radiates upwards. Thus, on practical level the lamps caused the body of the oil to blossom downwards onto the pages of the worshippers Qur'an; while on the symbolic level they recapitulated the very origin of the Qur'an itself, a "downward radiation" of the Divine Word, the Divine Light.

Of course, oil lamps are simply not feasible in twentieth century London. Imagine the problems: raising and lowering the lamps to fill them and clean the soot; the oppres-





Left: *Revealing*, wood, 180cm, 1985.  
Below: *Helix*, plexiglass, 620cm  
1974. Right: *Incense burner*, bur-  
nished bronze, 270cm, Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Tehran. Below  
right: *The hidden and the revealed*,  
wood, height 180cm, 1984.



sive heat, the fire hazard! But not only would oil have been impractical, it would also have been banal, like the souvenir-sellers "real copies". Again, we kept the essence of the traditional lamps — but not the mechanism.

Another use of light which is "traditional" and yet not a reproduction of the past is the device by which direct daylight is softened and diffused into the prayer-hall through curtains and lattice-work, through a patterned calligraphy-perforated wall which veils the "real" structural wall. The screen thus serves as a sort of membrane between the outside and the inside; light enters, as it were, by the principle of osmosis. It reminds me of the *Hadith* which says that man and all

creation would be annihilated by direct exposure to the Divine Light; and so God in His mercy veils it with the 70,000 veils of Creation.

I cannot close this article without mentioning those who shared in an essential way in my work on the Ismaili Center: my partner Thomas Weil who was engaged in this project to the same extent as I was; Neville Conder was the senior architect, and although it is usually very difficult for a senior to accept a new person on a project already under weight, Neville showed not only a generous spirit but also a great integrity and deep understanding of the whole project. Finally there is the question of the client: it is very important to know who you are working for. If a client lacks understanding and sym-

pathy it can hold back or even destroy the creative task, but if the client is himself creative and understanding he can enhance the actual value of the finished work. The idea of the "patron" was understood in Renaissance Europe, but is now generally only a nostalgic dream in the life of an artist. In the Islamic world however some true understanding of the creative relation between client and artist still survives; and in the case of the Ismaili Center I was fortunate to work for a patron and a community who perhaps understand so prominent and powerful a mystery better than anyone else. This played no small part in what I consider to have been an essentially successful and innovative project: work which was also pleasure. ■

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