

In Conversation
with Yasmeen Lari

Scroope:

It's an honour to be sitting down in conversation with such an esteemed architect whose work is challenging how we think about and practise architecture that is culturally and environmentally sustainable, resilient, and responsive to the needs of local communities in the world today.

One place we can begin is with the decolonial idea of *disenclosure*, the theme of this issue of *Scroope*. Much of your recent work has been discussed in terms of its potential for decoloniality and democratisation in architecture. Would you be able to share how you've been thinking about some of these ideas about opening up architecture, both in terms of the field of architecture, and also the places that you're building for people to live in?

Yasmeen Lari (YL):

I think that because the world has changed now, the architectural profession has to refashion — if you like, reset — itself. I don't think we can carry on in the same way as we have been, or how we were trained to. Most of the time I think architects still feel that they have to join a big flourishing architectural practice to be able to design for the elite and the privileged. I think that time probably is no longer really relevant because the majority of the people in this world actually have nothing. As you know, there are disparities; there are rising poverty levels. Things are really bad for the majority of people. Why do we want architects not to be able to relate to those conditions where people want good design to be able to have a better life?

When we talk of decolonisation, I talk about three Ds — decarbonisation, decolonisation, and democratisation. All the three Ds are together. But also, I think what's important is that we also talk of three zeros — zero carbon, zero waste, and even zero charity. People can do things themselves and that leads to zero poverty, which as you know, is Sustainable Development Goal number one. If you empower people, then they're able to do

much more themselves. They just need guidance as to how they can do it.

Colonialism was all about control, and that's what we've been doing as architects all our lives. That is what I was doing for most of my life — and I think we cannot control, should not control things anymore. I think people have got to have a say in what is built for them, for their own built environment. They need to be part of it. You can't just tell them, 'We'll give you something.' Nobody really wants that anymore because people *do* have a lot of ideas and people *can* contribute a lot. I really feel that we need to start rethinking how we now take up design projects. And that also means you may have to give up your ego, because that's all about control; this is what architects are trained to do. Instead, you can be talking and working with people so that it's really co-design, co-creating, working together, rather than speaking to them from the top. By talking to them at their level, there's much we can learn from people. I've learned a lot in the last twenty years that I've been working with communities.

Scroope:

You've touched on this idea that pursuing justice goes beyond just how we think about design, architecture, and the role of architects, but also involves empowering people. It's not just how we give out our expertise, but how we work with people and value them and acknowledge their dignity and agency. Decarbonisation, decolonisation, and democratisation are all interconnected through spatial justice, and that's really apparent in your work.

YL:

There are so many aspects to spatial justice, which also incorporates the social and the economic and the cultural — they're all part of spatial justice. When you look at the way some of the writers talk about it and how geography is used, there's also got to be justice in the way we apportion areas for people

to live in. The poor always get the worst possible areas, areas that will have no value basically, and then they are marginalised and never given the services that they need. At least when I was practising as an architect, I never thought about their rights — the basic human rights that everybody needs to live. We talk about that for ourselves, but do we talk about others' rights?

Pakistan is among the ten most vulnerable states — we're a frontline state as far as the climate change battleground is concerned. That means that almost every year we can expect a disaster, and in 2022 we had the most devastating one where we had something like over three million people who had been displaced. But it was not the first time — we've been having them almost every second year; it's either an earthquake or a flood. Mostly, the flood is the one that's been the most devastating. Of course, earthquakes have been too, but floods are what we have to really brace ourselves for every year, and even today as I'm talking to you, there's a whole area that is submerged in floodwater, in the countryside. This is a reality for many countries, not only Pakistan. Are we prepared to deal with this? Do we have the tools to handle it?

I'm sure there will be a disaster that will be beyond our expectation — the intensity is increasing all the time. We know that every year it's worse. But these disasters are also something that we can expect and plan for so that people are prepared and don't get displaced, because that's the worst thing — when you have to leave your home and go somewhere. There are conflict-impelled migrants who are suffering around the world, including, as you know, in Gaza. And all over the world there are so many millions of people who are displaced, who need help, and architects are not there to help them. We don't think it's our responsibility. I mean, what about a sense of justice and thinking, 'What is it that we owe to humanity?' We also need to do something; the world needs us. It's not good enough anymore to do one-off designs for the refugees. It's not good enough anymore. All this must come into mainstream architecture.

Otherwise, it won't happen.

Scroope:

What you're speaking about and around is the idea of humanitarian architecture, which usually refers quite specifically to refugee camps and temporary settlements that are in response to emergencies and other specific forms of crisis. This is tied to the work of NGOs and international agencies such as the United Nations as well as governments — they are the people responsible for making the architecture, and the architects come in and enact the plan. It raises the question of how you approach the role of the architect, with our specific forms of knowledge in the context of emergency, and perhaps how you define humanitarian architecture too — because your practice is very different to what is often quite a top-down approach to dealing with emergency through the built form.

YL:

These agencies are there and they're the ones who normally spearhead all the emergency efforts. But if there were architects working in mainstream humanitarian architecture, you wouldn't be waiting for a commission or somebody to ask you. What I feel is that we should become activists now, we should become like entrepreneurs. We should say, 'Here is a problem,' whether it's an environmental problem, ecological problem, social problem, 'and we can go and help out there.' And you go and find a way to go and do that. Because it's not good enough anymore to just sometimes go and visit when a disaster happens.

My own mission is to help people learn to build in a manner where they will not be displaced when a disaster occurs. And that is, I think, the most important thing, because there's no need for us to scramble when we already know that a flood is going to happen. Why can't we prepare for it before? Except now the whole problem is becoming so huge that it's not possible, not that easy to do it. When you're working in these areas, there is a

massive number of people who have been displaced — or, they're no longer displaced and they've gone back to their villages, but they have nothing there. There's nothing but destitution there. But we are helping them to learn how to grow food, to become food-secure; how to start building from the debris and from other waste materials so they can have a climate-resilient structure; how to start mitigation measures, which has to do with plantation and digging aquifer wells, and so on. But it's not only humanitarian architecture I'm talking of. I'm talking of community development. I'm talking of eco-urbanism. This is all something that architects can do and must do.

Everywhere that I'm talking, I'm asking, 'Why aren't universities creating architectural incubators like the tech industry does?' Let's say two or three architects want to come together and take on work in, let's say, community development of an area that they live in, or bringing about eco-urbanism, looking at urban blight. Why is it that universities cannot support them? Why is it that architectural institutes can't assist universities to get funding from their building product manufacturers who are very, very rich? Why can't they support this kind of work? With two or three years, young architects like yourselves can have that support, and then just carry on and make it into mainstream work. Then you know what to do. You need some handholding, you need nurturing in the beginning, and that's what needs to be done if you want to expand the scope of architectural practice. Because once you join a flourishing architectural practice, you are lost. You will never be able to come back to something else. How will you get back to it? If the tech industry can nurture their young, why can't the architectural profession do the same, for our young people?

But the problem is also that you guys are not making a noise, you're not demanding it. You need to get out there and say, 'Look, this is what we want, why can't it be done?' It's not that there's not enough money. There's so much money everywhere. It's a matter of seeing where this funding should go and how it

should be used. So, I think if you want to do it, you should start a campaign and say, ‘This is what we want to do.’ What I feel is that architects have abrogated their own responsibilities. They’re not there where they’re needed because they’ve never been taught that they can do some good there.

When I first started, when the first earthquake happened, I just went there because everybody had to go, because it was something like 80,000 casualties that had happened. We had never had that kind of a disaster in the living memory of anybody, really. So I also went, like everybody. I had no idea what I could do. I’d never done that kind of work before. I’d never thought architects had to do this. I didn’t know how to design for an earthquake. And we architects never knew how to work with people. We only stood our high ground on the construction site and told the contractor what to do — or consultants, or others. So I was used to that kind of an attitude, and I went to the earthquake area and it was a totally different scene. I didn’t know what to do, how to do it, but I picked it up because I understood what was needed. And we just got down to work, you know, just used debris to start off with. And we got so many young volunteers from all over the world actually — young architecture students — who came to help. I think there is a huge desire among young architects and others who want to go and work in these areas, but they don’t get an opportunity to specialise in something like that. It took me a long time to understand what I needed to do and how to deal with things because I had no idea. But now we know what the tools are, how we can do it; they’re all there now. If you want to bring justice to society, you have to work hard at it.

Scroope:

Would you be able to talk a bit about this transition in your career, when you began working in response to earthquakes, for example? How did you begin to ask these sorts of questions about architecture — because you’re sometimes described as having had two careers, the first one as almost a starchitect and the

second one with the more socially minded practice that you now have.

Could you talk about how this change occurred? What were some of the challenges that you experienced as you were making this change and asking these sorts of questions about architecture? And are any of these challenges still present in your current practice now that you've been doing this for a number of years?

YL:

Well, actually, it's not true that I had two distinct careers. I had been interested in vernacular architecture. I'd written a book on windcatchers, and we'd been doing a lot of documentation of heritage, so I'd been very deeply involved in that. My husband, who became a writer, had been to Oxford and had read PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics). He was forced to run an insurance company, but that helped us a lot because we could get funding from it to do documentation of heritage. Before I went off to England to study, I had had a very secluded life in a sense, like all people of privilege in this country. I had no idea about my own culture. And it was right at the beginning of the time of independence of Pakistan. We'd just been decolonised, if you like — but not quite. I mean, the mindset was still the same, very much influenced by Western culture. My father had been trained by the British and so of course he was very Anglicised. I went off to England and I came back and didn't know anything about my own roots. So, it was a matter of learning everything — going into old towns, trying to see what was there and so on. That was my introduction to my own culture. And I also got to know people. I'd been trying to work with the slum dwellers, I'd done some social housing, I'd tried to understand what women's issues there were. And so I'd done all that.

But later in my life, of course, as you know, as you become more prominent, you get more commissions and then obviously they become bigger and bigger and you just carry on that way.

So I'd lost out on carrying on in that stream that I really was interested in. And a time came when I just thought what I was doing was not really satisfying. I mean, when you are a well-known architect you get full freedom to do what you want to do, so it wasn't that. I could design what I wanted, I could order any kind of material. But it was the same kind of briefs, the same kind of people — the corporate sector, a lot of money. And I also knew there was another reality in my country where people were not at all well off; they were really, really poor. And I thought, 'Well, why — why am I doing this? I can't go on like this, there must be something better to do in life than just pandering to the taste of the rich corporate sector.' And so I decided to call it a day. I thought, 'I'll write more books.' I had a lot of documentation done. My husband had been an amazing photographer and because he sold his companies, he'd retired and become a historian, and so I thought, 'Well, I'll be writing more books also.' Then of course, first, UNESCO had gotten hold of me as National Advisor and I was at the Lahore Fort where I learned the use of lime. So I feel that everything that I've done has prepared me to do the work that I do today. But I had to make the conscious decision at a certain point in my life that I didn't want to do what I had been doing. I wanted to do something else with my life, and then the earthquake happened. And then I found what I want to do, and that opened up another field for me entirely. It was amazing but it is also very rewarding. And I keep on saying this, especially to young people — when you are in the field you feel that you are never alone because there's so many people who want to help, who will come to help you. It's not money. I've never really asked for funding and now I've completely stopped raising any funding whatsoever. People will come and want to give you empathy, talk about things as to how they can be done, the expertise that's needed — and I think that's much more valuable. It's a different way of working altogether and I think I'm very happy with myself. I feel more satisfied. I feel that what I'm doing is making a difference with people's lives, you know? And all that I've learned in the humanitarian

field I'm applying to urban areas now.

I think what we need to be looking at is the context. How do we improve it? How do we see that people are able to have a better life? I mean, that's finally the bottom line. That's what I think our mission should be. Because if what we do doesn't help anybody, then it's pointless. If we do it for ourselves, it doesn't make sense anymore.

Scroope:

It's amazing to hear that your journey into this socially conscious architecture as a way of practising really began with a concern for and investment in heritage. It seems almost that there's an attitude of looking into the past to find innovations in the way we approach architecture. Of course, 'heritage' is also part of the name of your foundation. Is the use of heritage and conservation to promote a more just future through architecture something that you work with explicitly?

YL:

Yeah, very much. I base a lot of my work, especially now, on vernacular heritage because I find there's what we call 'ancient wisdom' in so many things that were done and what happened over time — they knew how to work with very limited resources, and that's what we need today, right? We went through the whole industrialisation process where we damaged the planet to no end with extraction. And when we talk of colonialism, in all these colonies, so much was extracted. We hurt the planet so much, and now we need to see how to heal the planet. Architects must now design in a sustainable manner where you are conscious of the materials that you're using. When you look at vernacular heritage, you find that they've used nothing but local materials and they've found ways to make them really, really strong and comfortable. The only issue now, of course, is that with climate change and every disaster becoming so much more aggressive and worse, these structures are not working as well as before. But

I think the principles are still very relevant.

For instance, I've designed this particular bamboo structural panel. It's a prefab panel and I've taken the idea of cross-bracing from one of the structures in an area which survived the earthquake — so that panel is so strong it's incredible. We are making almost everything that we are building. There's a structure for an exhibition going to Qatar — to Doha — which again uses the same panel, but it's got a twenty-eight-foot diameter dome on it, and it's being set up there with no foundations. That little prefab panel is the key to everything, and I adapted it from an old tradition. A lot of the time they use these conical roofs and then put thatch on it. The conical roof is from deserts in my country and it works very well with people because they just take the thatch — it's so inexpensive. I mean, the structure that we're doing for the flood area, I think the bamboo structure costs only 25,000 rupees (roughly 70 pounds sterling) and then they finish it off with natural materials. So it's all zero-carbon. We don't use any material that is expensive. We don't bring anything from outside. Everything is done by hand by very simple machines. So we don't need very sophisticated equipment to be able to get the things that we need.

We need to be looking now at not only areas where you get flooding, but also urban centres and how we've designed them — and how we can go back to, let's say, medieval towns in Europe. That could give us a lot of lessons. Karachi was a brainchild of a British conqueror, who came and annexed this area and created Karachi, so it's basically a British town. So all the streets were designed in a gridiron pattern wherever they could be. We have a very small area which has a different kind of morphology, which is the original one, but everywhere else it's a gridiron pattern, and there are too many streets. So I'm saying let's take on the streets. Make them into green streets with food forests and trees and plantation, and let that become a community place where children can play. And now, whichever street I'm working on, I'm putting a small street library there. Because why should we abdicate

this whole area to cars and to vehicles when cities are for people to live in, to have a comfortable life?

But my best thing right now is this program I started in April of last year, because the number of people who had been displaced was so huge. It is a zero-charity program, so no money — I raise no funds. I give no funds to people. And we have gotten about 800,000 families so far — that's six million people — who are now food-secure, and 40,000 houses have been built; 30,000 toilets have also been built, but we need more and I think we'll get them faster now. And also, they're now building schools themselves. I'm hoping that every village — that's 16,000 villages — will get a school, because there are no schools otherwise. And I did this all without money. I don't give any money to them and I don't raise any money. But what we've done is trained people of the same area, the same kind who've gone through the same kind of issues — they become the trainers. They have this knowledge-sharing and skill-training, and it's a peer-to-peer transfer of knowledge.

It's very different than any other kind of humanitarianism. Again, when we talk about justice, it's all about empathy, solidarity, generosity, benevolence — all these humanistic values that we would all care about. So that's also possible. And these are people who have suffered from all kinds of injustices, who are now standing up and doing everything themselves, they're learning to do it. And they pay a fee to the local training expert. They pay a fee for learning, but it's so small that it doesn't matter to them, but the whole number is so large that the ones who are my trainers, who I call my 'barefoot experts', are making a huge amount of money.

Scroope:

It raises the question of the boundaries of architectural knowledge. Usually, architects are considered the keepers of architectural knowledge and expertise — we go through many years of education to do this. But it seems you are really

advocating for a very different definition of what it means to practise as an architect. Within that, there's a different definition of where expertise comes from, which then begs the question of, 'Do we need architects at all in this or do we just need people who care about making nice spaces?'

YL:

I think the training of an architect is very essential for us to be able to put things together. When I was practising, there were lots of skills which I had learned. I was trained to understand the context, understand about who your clients are. In our case, the clients are these poor people, not the rich. This is what I tell my teams — we have to treat them just as well as we treat our rich clients. They are no different. We're working for them now, right? They may not have the money, but it doesn't matter. How do we do what is best for them, and to understand their requirements? I mean, this is what we do with most clients. We don't do what they tell us, but we understand what they're saying and we see that, whatever their needs are, those are met. That's what we need to do. I think we have another ability, when we have consultants, to bring about a consensus about how things are to be done. If you have your design, you have the vision, everybody has to plug into it; they can't veer off into another direction. The same is true here as well. I think the greatest ability one has is to design something that really serves a purpose well and is good design. As I keep saying, it's a fallacy to think that only the rich need good design; the poor need as much excellence in design as the rich to, because design is what makes up their lives.

My most famous product today is what is called the Pakistan Chulah, which is a stove for cooking that is made out of earth. Something like 800,000 of those have been built by rural women, by themselves. And the whole thing is that it's spread through word of mouth and peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing, and it's just taken off. And then people ask me, 'What is my favorite project?' Of course I have done these monster buildings as well.

But, you know, when I compare one of them, where maybe it's got 750,000 square feet in area, maybe it accommodates 2500 people, maybe another 5000 or 10,000 pass by it every day. And then you see 800,000 of these stoves and you multiply by seven or eight in each family. You see the difference? How many people are my mundane earthen stoves serving? That is bringing dignity to women. Plus, it brings respect for them. It frees them of many diseases. There are a lot of other values in that. And they don't get flooded.

So we have to look at things now in a different manner. I'm not proud of this monster of a building that was the largest one I designed in the early 80s. But I'm very proud of this one, which is a co-design. I can't even call it my own. Women build them, they modify them, they make them beautiful, they decorate them. It's incredible what they do. Every one of them becomes a work of art, you know. This is what it's all about. This is where architecture is giving agency to those who have no voice otherwise. No longer do you have to have iconic buildings to really make an impact. It's not necessary anymore. There are so many other ways of making an impact which can be very low-key — and does it matter? That's why we have to have a change in mindset as to what we believe an architect is, or could be, or should be.

Scroope:

On the idea of impact — and you've been asked this many times in your different interviews over the last few years — what are some of the pieces of wisdom that you'd like to pass on to the next generation of young architects, scholars, and architecture students who are thinking about what kind of impact they'd like to have?

YL:

Well, I think that architects should no longer wait for commissions, first of all. Why do you have to wait for someone

to tell you that they want something done, and then you go ahead and do it? We have to find a way where architects are entrepreneurs. In a lot of my projects, nobody has asked me to do them. I've just gone ahead and done them because I felt that it was something that I needed to do. And I have never had problem in people joining hands and doing it. So I think if you become entrepreneurs and say, 'OK, there's a deficit here', whatever kind of deficit or injustice, or you want to right the wrong, this is the way to do it. I mean, you have the vision, right? Architects have the vision as to what can be done, and you work out a way by which you can muster support from around and get it done. So that's what my job is. So I think the more we become entrepreneurs, the better it will be for us. And then you can take on projects that you feel are really needed by society.

Secondly, you must remember — whatever you do, whether you take on the humanitarian course or eco-urbanism or not, please do not use high-carbon materials. You must give them up — you must remember that 40% of all emissions are because of the way we build. So, look for alternative materials. Don't wait for somebody to tell you how to do it. This is your responsibility now, you owe it to the planet. You need it for your future generations that you must reduce emissions as much as possible.

And beyond that, follow your dream — whatever you want to do, carry on.

