

The Story of l'Universel in the Garden of Fazal Manzil

As told by Latifa Vallet to David Murray, with the kind assistance of Satya Poindron and Tajalli Annie La Cuisse



l'Universel 2022, photo by Martin van der Graaff.

l'Universel, also known as Le Mémorial de Noor, in the garden of Fazal Manzil, a pavilion dedicated to the memory of Inayat Khan's eldest daughter Noor, was constructed in 1990 and was commissioned by Pir Vilayat and designed by architect Hervé Baley. I have been writing articles for the Sufi Circle Canada newsletter on the architects and their designs for three buildings that were associated with the life and times of Hazrat Inayat Khan – the unbuilt 1929 l'Universel in Suresnes by architect Piet Kramer, the 1970 Dargah of Inayat Khan by architect Mau Khan in the Nizamuddin neighbourhood of New Delhi and the 1990 l'Universel in Suresnes.



Fazal Manzil 2025, photo by Sakya van Male.

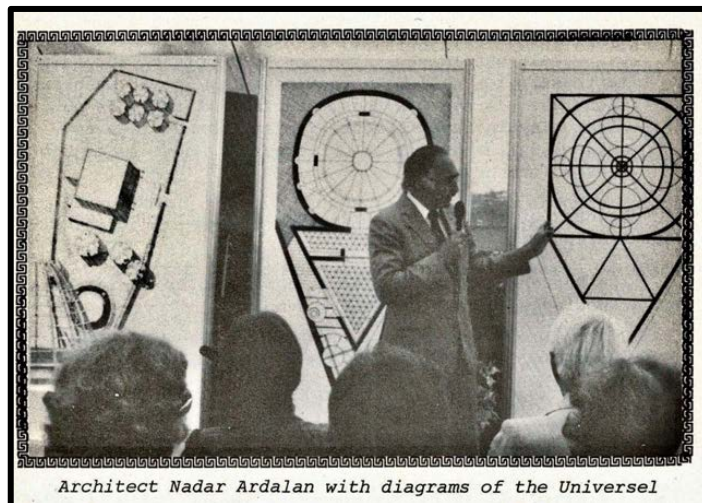
The designs for these buildings are all linked by an architectural philosophy of “organic” design originally espoused by the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, whose work in the United States was first published and spread world-wide in 1910-11. Hervé Baley was the architect for what was originally known in 1990 as Sanctuaire de l’Universel, Suresnes. It is now simply referred to as l’Universel. It is also known in the Ville de Suresnes as le Mémorial de Noor. Hervé Baley (1933-2010) was a professor at the Special School of Architecture (ESA) in Paris. At the start of the 1968 school year, Baley was recruited as workshop leader in this school, and would direct the Sens et Espace workshop for more than twenty years until 1990. In it, he strived to raise his students' awareness of the principles of organic architecture inherited from architect Frank Lloyd Wright.



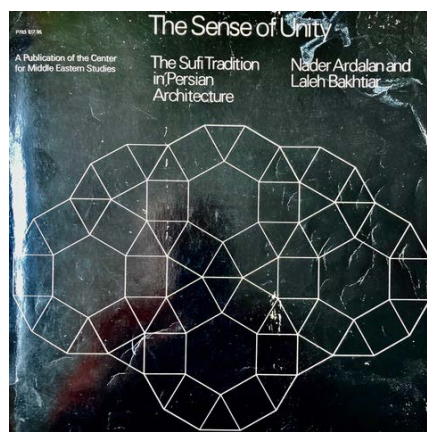
*Pir Vilayat examining Hervé Baley’s model for the 1990 Universel.
Photo from the Architectural Archives of Hervé Baley.*

1982

At the June 5, 1982 celebration at Fazal Manzil of the centenary of the birth of Inayat Khan in Baroda, India, Pir Vilayat made this announcement, "On this occasion we are very happy to be able to place the cornerstone or foundation stone of the Universel in the position where we are actually going to build it now, at last after all these years..." Hidayat then spoke, "The Universel which shall be built shall be one of the homes of the Message, but perhaps the dearest home because of its being built on the very premises where Hazrat Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan lived and gave his message. It is reported that "After lunch, Mr. Nadar Ardalan, an Iranian-born architect and author of a book on Sufi Architecture, *The Sense of Unity, the Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* 1973, came to present the plans and model of the Universel he has designed, working closely with Pir Vilayat. *The Message* hopes to carry soon an article outlining the extraordinary principles which underlie this simple but strikingly beautiful plan..."

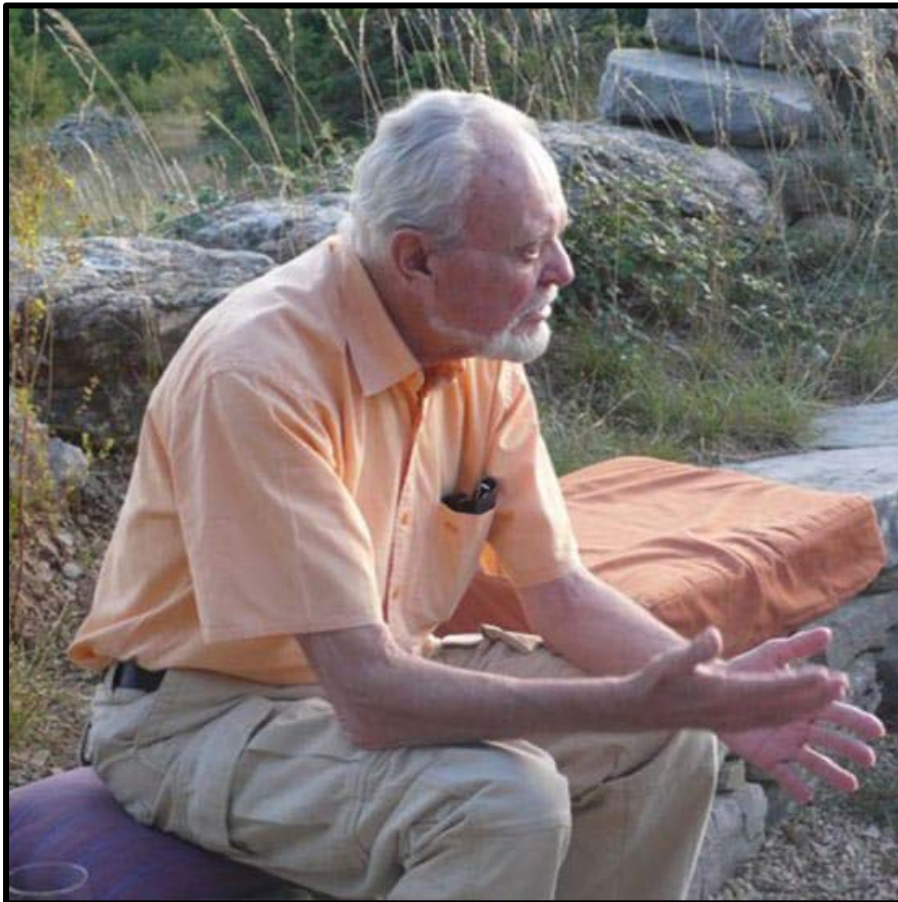


From *The Message*, Centenary Edition 1982



This design for the Universel was never carried out. We do not know what circumstances prevented it from moving forward. It was not until 1986 that Pir Vilayat met with and engaged French architect Hervé Baley to design the final version of the Universel.

Hervé Baley



Hervé Baley in the 2000s, from Cantercel Archives, Hervé Baley collection

Latifa Vallet was the person responsible for introducing Pir Vilayat to Hervé Baley. She was a student in the Special School of Architecture in Paris and studied under Hervé Baley in the “Sens et Espace” workshop in 1986. Latifa first met Pir Vilayat in 1983 at an inter-religious meeting in Paris. The Sufi Order at Fazal Manzil was very active at the time and there were meetings almost every day. The practice of zikr was held on Thursday evenings at the private flat of one of the sufi leaders. At the time, Latifa was living in the neighbourhood of Saint-Cloud which is very close to the Inayat Khan family home, Fazal Manzil, in neighbouring Suresnes. During these years she became friends with Pir Vilayat and especially his wife Mary.



Latifa in 1992, from her collection

Latifa and Pir Vilayat shared a common bonding story. Her father had been in the French resistance, flying with the Royal Air Force during WW2 and receiving the Croix de Guerre. Pir Vilayat, living in England during WW2, similarly joined the Royal Air Force and later the Royal Navy as a mine-sweeping officer. Pir Vilayat’s sister, Noor, was recognized with the Croix de Guerre after the war. This same spirit was an important personal connection between Latifa and Pir Vilayat.

In 1986 Latifa knew that Pir Vilayat was planning to build a Universel at Fazal Manzil and contacted Mary to tell her that she has found an architect whom Pir Vilayat might consider as the designer for l’Universel. It was her teacher Hervé Baley. Pir Vilayat agreed to meet Hervé and it was exceptional that Pir would agree to meet him in his private home and studio, 40 rue Henri Barbusse, 5e. Hervé wanted Pir Vilayat to see his home and studio. When he entered the apartment, Pir Vilayat experienced the impressive hand-made arts and crafts of Hervé’s life and said “O, it is not bourgeois here!”. Later they shared a communal meal prepared by Hervé’s wife Françoise. When Latifa drove Pir Vilayat back to

Suresnes, in front of the gate at Fazal Manzil, he revealed that he was very happy to have met Hervé. Latifa reports that Pir Vilayat said it was like in Murshid's time, when Hervé invited Pir Vilayat to accompany them at his artisan dining table. They were joined by Hervé's architecture studio apprentices to all eat together. It was the atmosphere of the studio and the sufi-like companionship that so impressed Pir Vilayat.



*This atmospheric open room with fireplace is the location in which Pir Vilayat first met Hervé Baley, in 1986, and discussed the prospects of designing l'Universel.
Source: 1st DIBS Introspective Online Market Plac, photo by Patrice Goulet*

Hervé Baley and Sufism

Through his first associate and brother-in-law, Hervé became interested in mysticism and sufism. He traveled to Turkey over a number of years and developed a friendship with **Ulvi Erguner**, renown master of traditional Mevlevi Sufi music, the "ney flute". Ulvi's son **Kudsi** was sent by his father to study architecture in Paris under the tutelage of Hervé Baley at the Special School of Architecture, where he later received his diploma, like Latifa. Ultimately Kudsi famously chose music as his career rather than architecture. Latifa reports that there developed a deep connection between Pir Vilayat and Hervé Baley with a shared interest in mathematics. Latifa recalls that Hervé responded to Pir Vilayat's vision for the Universel with special curves in the building design that represented the music of Pir Vilayat's father, Hazrat Inayat Khan.



Hervé Baley in the 1960s, on a trip to Turkey shown with Ulvi Erguner, his son Kudsi and Hervé's wife Francoise in the crowd. Photo is from the collection of Kudsi Erguner.

The building permit for the Universel was issued on November 22, 1988 as reported by Satya Poindron from a document titled, *Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan – Technical presentation with Mr. Hervé Baley, January 1989*. The project took several years to complete and there were many challenges along the way – personality differences, agreements and disagreements, financing etc. But ultimately l'Universel was completed in 1990 and is now 34 years old. Every May 8, since the end of WW2, there has been a short ceremony happening in front of Fazal Manzil with the Mayor of Suresnes, flowers and military music where Noor/Madeleine's "plaque commémorative" is located at the gate. Latifa reports that at the last minute, to smooth the way for acceptance of the building permit, l'Universel was identified as a project dedicated to the memory of Noor Inayat Khan, which it was felt at the time would be a way to appeal to the community.

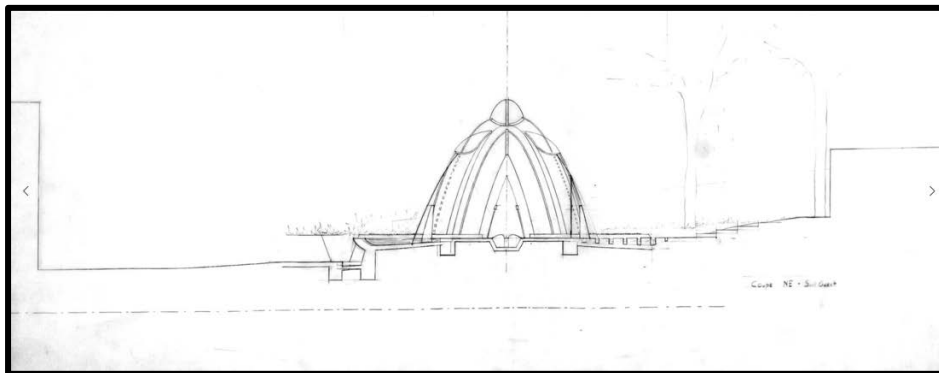
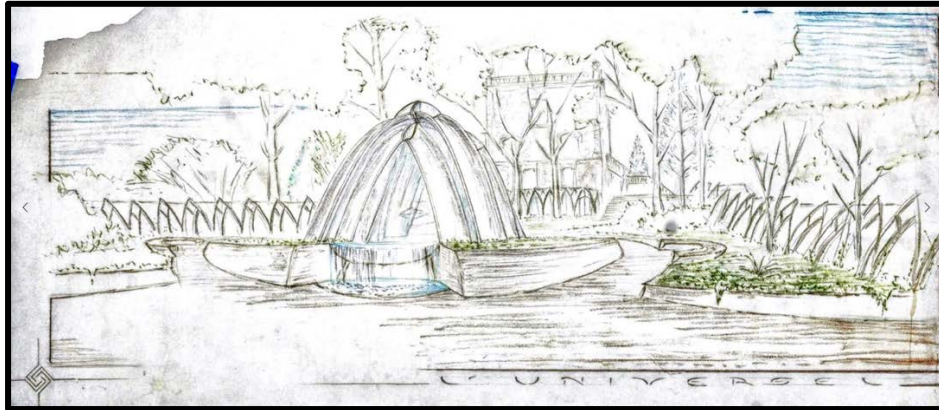
At the 1990 inauguration ceremony of l'Universel, Pir Vilayat came over to Latifa and told her that "You are the link. Without the link, it (construction of l'Universel) would not have been possible."



2019 from Satya Poindron, "Transparency and reflections of light"

“Architecture is incantation and evocation,
its essence is analogy,
its research is knowledge of life,
its expression is poetry,
its verb is timeless.”

Hervé Baley.



*Hervé Baly's drawings of the Universel
from Cantercel Archives, Hervé Baley collection*

Over the years l'Universel is reported to have weathered badly in some respects. It is important to the sufi community as a commemoration to Noorunissa and representing, with its musically-inspired lines, the universal sufi message of Inayat Khan. Its association with the legacy of Pir Vilayat and French architect Hervé Baley also adds to its significance. Le Sanctuaire de l'Universel à Suresnes is recognized by *Service Patrimoines et Inventaire de la Région Ile-de-France* as a significant regional historic resource. We can only hope that the will and the resources will be found to pursue the conservation of this important historical resource. As with many modern buildings that use contemporary materials and construction methodologies, restoration can be quite challenging. My pursuit of this research is intended to confirm the importance of recognizing, remembering and conserving l'Universel as a version of Inayat Khan's vision for a Sufi Temple in Suresnes and as a commemoration to Noorunisa Inayat Khan, honoured recipient of the French Croix de Guerre for her heroic sacrifices during WW2.

Thank You

I extend my gratitude to Latifa Vallet for her extensive WhatsApp audio reports, which are rich in detail of the times leading up to the inception and design of l'Universel in Suresnes. Also to Satya Poindron and Tajalli Annie La Cuisine in Paris for their important research contributions.

In addition, I would like to thank Qahira Anne-Louise Wirgman at the Nektakht Foundation who continues to provide invaluable assistance in my research.

David Murray



*Pir Vilayat examining Hervé Baley's model of l'Universel.
Photo from the Architectural Archives of Hervé Baley.*