

GRUBE

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Architecture of the Islamic World

ITS HISTORY AND SOCIAL MEANING

*With a complete survey of key monuments
and 758 illustrations, 112 in colour*

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Introduction

AS THIS BOOK is about Islamic architecture, the first question we must ask ourselves is whether there is such a thing as 'Islamic Architecture'. Do we mean the architecture produced for and by Muslims to serve Islam as a religion, referring, consequently, only to that architecture which *did* serve a religious function – the mosque, the tomb, the *madrasa*? Or do we mean all the architecture produced in Muslim lands? And if this should be so, what does 'Islamic' mean in this context? If 'Islamic' is not an adjective defining a religious quality, should it be understood as a word that identifies a special kind of architecture, that of a civilization reflecting, or determined by, special qualities inherent in Islam as a cultural phenomenon? Does such an architecture exist? Is there an architecture that can be recognized as different from other architectures created outside Islam? If the answer to this question is in the affirmative – and there seems little question that it must be – we are faced with the need to define those qualities that set Islamic architecture apart from non-Islamic architecture.

The following attempt at defining some of those qualities is, by force of circumstances, generalized, and many exceptions to the general 'rules' may be quoted. Yet such exceptions are perhaps not as numerous as we might think, and they can often be 'explained', at least to a degree, by showing that they are 'removed' in one way or another, even 'divorced', from the experiences that created those architectural forms here identified as specifically 'Islamic'. In sum, an attempt will be made to discuss those elements in Islamic architecture that appear to be typical, and that have to be explained as expressions of a culture created by Islam, differing in fundamental attitudes from other, non-Islamic architectural creations. And a suggestion will also be made that wherever these elements are weak or absent, something has happened in Islamic culture in the particular region where such monuments were produced to indicate a general weakening of the 'Islamicness' of the specific architecture in question.

Concentration on the Interior

One of the most striking features of all Islamic architectural monuments is their focus on the enclosed

space, on the inside as opposed to the outside, the façade or the general exterior articulation of a building.

The most common and widely recognized expression of this attitude is, of course, the Muslim house; organized around an inner courtyard, it presents to the outside world high windowless walls interrupted only by a single low door. Often several houses are collected together into a larger walled complex accessible only through a single low doorway, which leads to an inner private passageway from which the individual dwellings can be reached. These houses, and in some cases even large building complexes, give the traditional Muslim city its peculiar unmistakable appearance, which still survives today in many examples of ancient town centres (the *qasbahs*, *medinas* and 'old cities' throughout the Islamic world).

This disregard for the outside appearance of a structure is often developed to the extreme whereby even a monumental structure, such as a congregational mosque, is completely hidden by being totally surrounded by secondary adjacent buildings (for instance a bazaar). This 'hiding' of major monuments goes hand in hand with a total lack of exterior indications of the shape, size, function or meaning of a building. Even if a structure has a visible façade or a portal, these features tell us little, if anything, about the building that lies behind it. In other words, rarely does a façade give any indication of the inner organization or purpose of the building in question, and it is rare that an Islamic building can be understood, or even its principal features identified, by its exterior.

To give but one example: a dome looms over the mass of a building, it is generally visible from afar but sinks into the maze of small cupolas and roofs of surrounding structures as we approach. The dome may indicate a mosque, a palace or a tomb; it may cover a prayer hall, a chamber at the end of a reception hall or a square, circular or octagonal tomb. It may be the principal feature of a structure designed around it; alternatively, it may be only a minor element in a vast structure that surrounds the domed area; it may also

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be only one of several domes hidden, or half hidden, by other structures – parapets or inner portal frames. Instead of defining a specific kind of architecture, or a special building with a particular function, the dome appears to be a general symbol, signifying power, the royal city, the focal point of assembly; it can therefore serve both religious and secular purposes. Its outward visible appearance does not truly help us to understand, interpret or identify any building.

At all times and in all regions of the Muslim world we can find 'hidden architecture' – that is, architecture that truly exists, not when seen as monument or symbol visible to all and from all sides, but only when entered, penetrated and experienced from within. Despite the fact that exceptions do, of course, exist – and we will speak of them presently – 'hidden architecture' may be considered the main and dominant form of truly Islamic architecture. The Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus is a typical example, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem a typical exception. The Great Mosque in Damascus follows an established type and helps to create a tradition; the Dome of the Rock, standing alone on its platform and visible from all sides, remains a unique building in Islamic culture, based entirely on pre-Islamic models, which were almost certainly taken over consciously. In the sense in which we would like the term to be understood, the Dome of the Rock is not a truly 'Islamic' building at all, in spite of the fact that it was built by Muslims (or at least at Muslim command) and served a function intimately connected with Islam's subjugation of its enemies: it is, in fact, a monument to this victory. Yet the formal architectural language of this monument is that of the vanquished, not that of the victors. What makes it an Islamic building is not its form but its intention, expressed, furthermore, not in an artistic language of its own, but by secondary, non-architectural means: Arabic inscriptions.

Of course, the architectural form of the Dome of the Rock, an isolated and clearly recognizable structure visible from all sides, is not without parallels in the later Islamic period. The tomb, especially the tomb tower and the free-standing Indian monumental tomb structure (culminating in the renowned Tāj Mahal),

may well be compared with the Dome of the Rock, at least from the purely formal point of view. The question might then be asked: are these buildings, though built for Muslims by Muslims and for Muslim purposes, truly Islamic buildings? Are they not atypical and, like the Dome of the Rock, really un-Islamic in their formal expression? If this is so, how can their existence be explained in a Muslim context?

Perhaps it is necessary at this point to interrupt our discussion to make a distinction between urban and non-urban Islamic architecture, because slightly different rules apply to these two different architectural expressions. Much Islamic architecture appears within the urban setting, though it must be added that a number of building-types were especially developed for the non-urban context, even if they frequently appear within the city as well. Most obvious is the caravanserai, which, in the majority of cases, appears in the open countryside along the principal travel routes. Next are the monumental tombs, which, almost without exception, appear as isolated monuments, whether in an urban situation or within a proper cemetery *extra muros* (most tomb towers, and types of funeral monuments such as the *iwān* of Pīr-i Bakrān). This is especially true when the monument commemorates an important personage; its very function as a commemorative structure makes 'visibility' and physical isolation imperative.

Other building-types that stand alone because of their specific function include fortified frontier structures (*ribāts* and *qasrs*), hunting lodges and utilitarian structures, such as bridges, watch-towers, gateways and fortifications, especially those of the major cities themselves. Even though most of the building-types just mentioned appear as isolated visible structures with clearly defined and undisguised exteriors, few 'break the rules'; that is, are developed into architectural forms that can be fully comprehended from the exterior. Few of these types, in fact, have truly developed exteriors and many, if not most, 'hide' behind high undecorated and unarticulated walls. Even where articulated exterior surfaces do appear, they have little, if any, relationship to the interior organization of the building. The

principle that a façade should be unrelated to the interior it fronts is quite common in Islamic architecture, and almost the general rule in buildings within the urban complex; the al-Aqmar Mosque in Cairo and the Mosque of 'Alā' ad-Dīn in Konya, are only two of the most striking examples.

Two conclusions may be drawn: first, that very few building-types in the Muslim world articulate the interior space on their exteriors; and second, that these buildings are either totally functional – bridges, watch-towers – or true exceptions to the rule. In the case of the tomb tower or, for that matter, the mausoleum, we are in the presence of exceptional monuments that intrinsically demand to be clearly visible and free-standing. Of course, it is also true that many Muslim tombs, although built in tower form, are incorporated into a larger architectural complex which totally absorbs them (Natanz, the tomb of Shaykh 'Abd al-Samad al-Isfahani).

Furthermore, although the origin of the tomb tower is still widely disputed, the suggestion that the royal tent provided at least a formal model and an initial stimulus to build in permanent materials is perhaps not to be discarded, especially as pre-Islamic burial rites in Asia often make use of the tent-cupola. In its pure form – a cylindrical body with a hemispherical or conical top – the tent always stands alone, especially the royal tent, monumental in size and thus symbolizing the power of the ruler. If the notion of the tomb tower should ultimately prove to have been derived from the tent, its unusual design (apart from its significance as a commemorative monument) would thus easily be explained. But whatever the derivation of the tomb tower, it would seem that its singular significance within the iconography of Islamic architecture necessitated its physical expression in an exceptional form.

To a large extent the same is true for the tomb mausoleum, usually a square or octagonal domed structure. To take the great Mughal monumental tomb as just one example, it might be said that its form, as that of its immediate predecessors (the Shīsh Gunbad in Delhi, the mausoleum of Shīr Shāh Sūr at Sasaram), derives directly from early Muslim and even pre-Muslim Indian buildings, which, though fused with imported ideas from Central Asia, were never entirely assimilated into a truly Islamic concept. Certainly these Indian mausolea have elements that are clearly Islamic, especially in their use of materials and decoration, but on the whole they are more closely tied to non-Muslim Indian traditions, just as the Dome of the Rock is tied to pre-Muslim Classical traditions. Neither tradition was ever entirely transformed; they continue to survive with only minor and superficial alterations provided by the Islamic approach to design. The architectural

form as such remains, in cultural terms, a foreign element within Islamic architecture.

A detailed analysis of the other building-types listed above would, I believe, lead to similar conclusions. Always and everywhere in the Muslim world, forms of architecture were built that remained basically unaffected by the process of Islamicization of pre-Islamic or non-Islamic cultures; unabsorbed by Islamic art, these forms were consequently not an expression of Islamic culture but of the cultures from which they were originally derived. There may be exceptions to this general rule; that is, there may be cases in which the 'foreign' form may have been used consciously by the Muslim artist or patron to make a very specific point (the Dome of the Rock may well be such a building). But only an analysis of each individual case would make it possible to distinguish between the conscious use of a basically non-Islamic element in Islamic architecture, and the general use of unassimilated forms resulting from dominant cultural trends that have kept uninterrupted links with pre- or non-Islamic civilizations.

Form and Function

Closely related to the concept of a 'hidden architecture' is the striking and almost total absence of a specific architectural form for a specific function. There are very few forms in Islamic architecture that cannot be adapted for a variety of purposes; conversely, a Muslim building serving a specific function can assume a variety of forms.

The paramount example of this phenomenon is the four-*iwān* courtyard structure of Central Asia and Iran, which is also found in other parts of the Muslim world. These structures function equally well as palace, mosque, *madrasa*, caravanserai, bath or private dwelling; at different times and in different places, in fact, they were built to serve all of these functions. In other words, an Islamic building does not automatically reveal, by its form, the function it serves. It need not be designed to serve a particular purpose, but is, in most cases, an abstract and 'perfect' scheme that can be used for a great variety of functions without any difficulties. The strength of this preconceived 'absolute' scheme can best be demonstrated by the almost absurd insistence upon the monumental four-*iwān* plan for the mosque-madrasa of Sultan Hasan in Cairo, fitted into an irregular site that is singularly unsuited for it. Far from planning a building to fit the given space, the architects have here clung to a preconceived design, squeezing it awkwardly into the space available.

Generally, Islamic architecture is given to hiding its principal features behind an unrevealing exterior; it is an architecture that does not change its forms easily, if

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at all, according to functional demands, but rather tends to adapt functions to preconceived forms, which are basically the contained internal spaces. An analysis of the manner in which these internal spaces are defined and articulated should provide us with additional information concerning the specific quality of this architecture.

With the exception of the tomb, the mausoleum and other similar domed structures, Islamic buildings rarely display an inherent directional or axial quality. On the contrary, the actual physical direction of a building, if it has any at all, is often different from its functional direction. The visitor who enters a mosque, especially the courtyard of a mosque, is generally drawn alongside the prayer hall, down the width of the courtyard. This is often at right angles to the true metaphysical 'direction' as indicated by the *qibla* and, in turn, by the *mihrab*, the absence of which would in many cases leave the visitor unsure of his orientation – something that would never happen in a basilica or a Classical temple.

If we try to account for this curious feature in Islamic design, we may recall the scheme of the Temple of Baal at Palmyra in Syria, a temple entirely built – apparently – in the language of Antiquity. Its cella is provided with the obligatory colonnade on all sides, heavy architraves and tympana on the narrow ends; the entrance, however, is not at one of the narrow ends but in the centre of one of the long sides, forcing the visitor, who thus finds himself confronted with a blank wall after crossing the threshold, to turn ninety degrees to either right or left in order to approach the two altars. Erected in the 4th century in a Hellenized Arab milieu, this temple serves well to indicate that the curious change of orientation (which represents a total contradiction of the logical sense of direction expressed in European architecture) is an ancient pre-Islamic concept, which appears to have survived, unaltered, into the architecture of the Islamic phase of Arab culture.

This lack of indication of a direction or focus in Islamic architectural design appears at all times and in all parts of the Muslim world; it is also clearly expressed in the lack of balance between the various parts of a building complex. European architecture is generally designed as a complete balanced plan; Islamic architecture usually shows no such basic structure, and additions to an original plan are, consequently, never hampered by an inherent principle governing the whole and conditioning all parts in an equal manner. It is true that balanced schemes do exist in Islamic architecture, the four-*iwān* plan being a case in point; but, firstly, that may be explained as being a pre-Islamic, Central Asian or Iranian concept adopted by Islam; and, secondly, it hardly ever

survives in its pure state for long in the Muslim world. (The distortion of the plan in the mosque-madrasa of Sultan Hasan in Cairo has already been mentioned.) But much more important is the dissolution of this balanced plan within the totality of an Islamic architectural complex, its absorption into a maze of additional structure which, like accretions comparable to the natural growth of coral reefs or cell-structures of irregular form, accumulate around the nucleus of the original design, eventually engulfing it completely. The Friday Mosque of Isfahan, with its long and complex building history spanning almost a millennium, is a perfect example of this principle of organic growth.

It may then be said that Islamic architecture, with the exception of the four-*iwān* courtyard plan, is rarely, if ever, designed as a single balanced unit; where such a design was originally adapted, or even conceived, it soon disappears to become part of a greater complex. The very possibility of enlarging a given structure in almost any direction by adding units of almost every conceivable shape and size to the original scheme, totally disregarding the form of the original structure, is a characteristic that Islamic architecture shares with that of no other major culture. Its most impressive manifestation occurs in Muslim palaces, a context where financial, legal or other material considerations cannot ever have been the cause for the incredible 'irregularity' of planning (e.g. the Topkapi palace, Istanbul, or Fatehpur Sikri, India).

Interior Space

Enclosed space, defined by walls, arcades and vaults, is the most important element of Islamic architecture. This is emphasized not only by the phenomenon that little attention is paid to outside appearance or even visibility of any structure, but especially by the fact that most decoration (with the notable exception of the dome and the entrance portal) is reserved for the articulation and embellishment of the interior.

Decoration in Islamic architecture serves several functions, but its main effect – and very likely its main purpose – appears to be the creation of non-tectonic values, the dissolution of all those elements that in other architectural traditions emphasize the structure, the balance and counter-balance of loads and stresses – the actual mechanics of a building. Islamic architecture at its best, and at its most 'Islamic', is truly a negation of architecture as conceived in Europe, that is, of structure; it aims at a visual negation of the reality of weight and the necessity of support. The various means by which the effect of weightlessness is created, the effect of unlimited space, of non-substantiality of walls, pillars, and vaults are all well known. They range from the use of mosaic and painted decoration to

tiles – especially lustre and painted polychrome – and from moulded and deeply cut stone or plaster to actual openwork and pierced walls, vaults and even supporting pillars. The multitude of decorative treatments of surfaces in Islamic architecture, the use of almost every conceivable technique and the development of a rich repertory of designs – from geometric abstract shapes to full-scale floral patterns, from minutely executed inscriptions in a full variety of calligraphic styles to the monumental single words that serve as both religious images and decoration – is without parallel in the architecture of the non-Muslim world. Its effect is extraordinary and its function quite unmistakable. It goes hand in hand with the non-directional plan, the tendency to an infinite repetition of individual units (bays, arches, columns, passages, courtyards, doorways, cupolas) and the continuous merging of spaces without any specific direction or any specific centre or focus. And if a definite spatial limit is reached, such as a terminal wall, the surface that should stop the progress of anyone moving through the building will be decorated with patterns that repeat themselves, leading on visually beyond the given limit of the wall surface, vault or dome.

The epitome of this concept of architecture is reached in the Alhambra, at Granada. Though a royal palace, it is not given a centre or focus to emphasize power. Instead, it is a maze of rooms and courtyards, of passages and corridors, of water basins and canals that link the open and covered spaces, of fountains and of decorations that are undoubtedly among the most extraordinarily complex and technically accomplished in all Islamic architectural design. Looking up into the suspended *muqarnas* canopy that forms the great dome of the Hall of the Two Sisters, we are truly aware of being in the presence of an architecture that is distinctly and unmistakably different from any other ever created by man. Its spirit is clearly 'readable'; in fact, in this example it is actually explained – at least in

part – by inscriptions that run around the base of the dome. It is that of a metaphysical concept of the world, rooted in the religion that created it – Islam.

If Islamic architecture is distinctly different from non-Islamic architecture, and must be interpreted as one of the many emanations of the spirit of Islam, the adjective 'Islamic' is fully justified. The interpretation of it as a whole as well as the understanding of its specific parts can only be successful and meaningful if seen against the background of Islam as a cultural, religious and political phenomenon, and only in the precise relation to the specific circumstances that led to its creation. It is certainly impossible to present in this brief introductory note anything approaching an interpretation of those characteristics that we have tried to identify as being essential to Islamic architecture.

In fact, such an attempt would be premature, apart from the fact that it would be far beyond the capacities of a single scholar. It will still take many years of research, hardly in its infancy at the present time, satisfactorily to 'explain' the phenomenon of Islamic architecture, that is to say, to correlate the physical appearance of Islamic architecture in the various parts of the Muslim world with the 'spirit' of Islam as it prevailed in any given region and period. Such an interpretation must eventually be attempted if we ever want to go beyond the mere cataloguing and describing of the surviving monuments, although such precise cataloguing must, of course, form its basis. Much groundwork is still to be accomplished before we may safely venture forward, and only a true collaboration between the political, religious, economic and literary historians on the one hand and the art historians on the other may bring us nearer the desired goal of a more complete and accurate understanding of Islamic architecture.

This book is intended to serve as a first step in this new direction.