

# THE MOSQUES OF ABDEL WAHED EL-WAKIL

Mohammad Al-Asad examines the vocabularies and dialogue of the mosques designed by Abdel Wahed El-Wakil.

Few contemporary architects of the Islamic world have received the international acclaim and recognition enjoyed by the London-based Egyptian architect, Abdel Wahed El-Wakil. His work has been published in international architectural journals including *Architectural Design*, *Architectural Review*, and *MIMAR*.<sup>1</sup> Leon Krier, the renowned European architect, has referred to El-Wakil's work as the "light after a long, dark tunnel, the shining tip of an iceberg, the precious trickle of an underground stream which has at last broken to the surface."<sup>2</sup> In his *A Vision of Britain, A Personal View of Architecture*, Prince Charles describes El-Wakil as an architect of "considerable skills," and as one of Hassan Fathy's "most gifted students".<sup>3</sup> He has received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture twice: the first time in 1980 for the Halawa house in 'Agamy, Egypt, and the second in 1989 for the Corniche mosque in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Among El-Wakil's best-known structures is a group of 11 mosques designed for the Saudi Arabian cities of Jeddah and Medina. They are the small Corniche, Island, Ruwais, and Binladin mosques in Jeddah; the community mosques of Sulayman, Harity, 'Aziziyya, and Juffali, also in Jeddah; and the congregational mosques of King Saud in Jeddah, and of Quba' and Qiblatayn in Medina (figs. 1-12). The mosques were commissioned by both government and private-sector patrons. With the exception of the Sulayman mosque, which was completed in 1980, and the Ruwais mosque, which remains unfinished, they were completed between 1986 and 1989. In area, the mosques range from about 123 square metres for the small Binladin mosque to 13,730 square metres for the enormous Quba' mosque complex. The three congregational mosques are of special significance. The King Saud mosque is the largest and primary Friday mosque of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia's commercial centre; the mosque of Quba' marks the site of the first mosque in Islam; and tradition holds that while praying in the original mosque of Qiblatayn, the Prophet Muhammad received divine prescriptions to change the direction of prayers from Jerusalem to Mecca.



From the constructional point of view, the mosques show a serious exploration of the potential of traditional building methods and materials. There is a heavy reliance on brick, not only as a surface material, but also as a load-bearing one which is used for walls, vaults and domes. Some of the brick domes reach impressive dimensions as with the main dome of the King Saud mosque which rises to a height of 42 metres and spans a diameter of 20 metres. In contrast, the reliance on reinforced concrete is minimized, and usually limited to foundations and platforms.

The architecture of these mosques depends heavily for prototypes on the pre-modern architectural heritage of the Islamic world. Every one of El-Wakil's designs includes direct, and often literal, quotations from monuments belonging to the enormous corpus of Islamic architecture. Elements ranging from a full façade, to a *muqarnas* vault, to a column capital, are accurately reproduced. For example, the compositions of the portal and courtyard of the King Saud mosque show the influence of those of the fourteenth-century Cairene mosque of Sultan Hasan (fig. 13). Its plan arrangement and the interior articulation of its main domes are based on those of the Great Mosque of Isfahan (eighteenth-seventeenth centuries; fig. 14). Similarly, the Binladin mosque can be directly connected to Sinan's Sokullu Mehmet mosque in Istanbul (1561); and the Qiblatayn mosque to the Ashrafiyya mosque in the Yemeni city of Ta'iz (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), and to the vernacular architecture of the

Egyptian countryside.

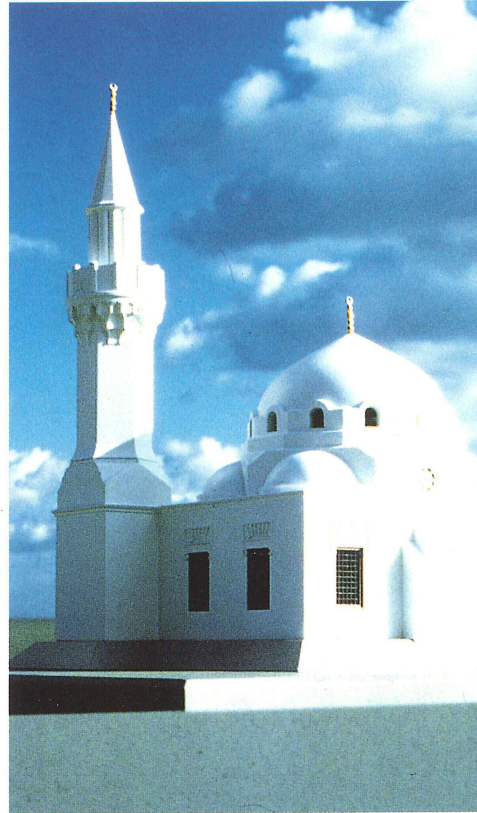
El-Wakil's use of architectural revivals is an eclectic one. In contrast to his mentor Hassan Fathy, who drew exclusively from the vernacular architecture of the Egyptian countryside, El-Wakil relies on a wide variety of traditions including those of Mamluk Egypt, Saljuq Iran, Ottoman Turkey, and Rasulid Yemen. Often, elements from these different vocabularies are combined in the same building. However, through a reliance on features ranging from the whitewashing of his structures to the simplification of borrowed forms, El-Wakil has managed to masterfully combine these diverse historical prototypes into a disciplined, aesthetically unified, and harmonious whole.

Regardless of the skill or mastery which an architect may express in his or her work, any replication of past prototypes will inevitably attract some controversy. Although El-Wakil's designs have been generally well-received, they have also been the target of criticism such as Bokhari's description of them as examples of "an extreme and blind adherence to traditional forms, a revivalism with little or no consideration of the concepts of fitness and propriety".<sup>4</sup> However, any assessment of architectural historicism should take into consideration the primary role of revivals in the development of Western architecture over the past 500 years. Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-classical architecture are all historicist in nature, and the dependence on past prototypes has not diminished the value of works by Michelangelo, Gianlorenzo Bemini, or John





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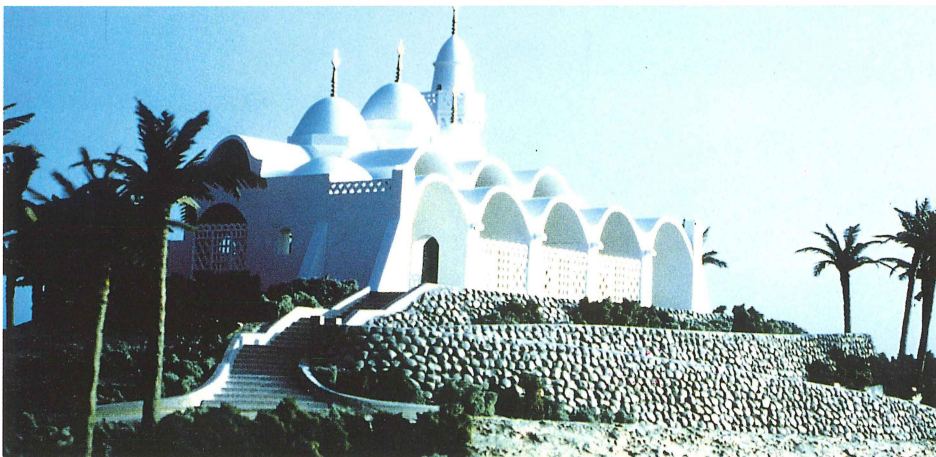


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Soane. The development of the representational vocabularies of post-modernism during the past three decades seems to indicate that the ahistoricism and abstraction of twentieth-century modernism has only interrupted, rather than ended, five centuries of revivals. As for El-Wakil, although he relies on a literal reproduction of past prototypes, the combining of these prototypes provides a unique and novel result. It can even be argued that his use of past forms is a source of strength since he has contributed to establishing a dialogue in the Islamic world with its architectural heritage, and has effectively and skilfully brought images of that heritage to our consciousness. Any extended debate of the acceptability of El-Wakil's reliance on historicism would be superfluous. There are other aspects of his work which deserve

extended discussion.

One important and often overlooked source of concern with El-Wakil's designs is their relation to the surrounding urban fabric. As one author has observed, El-Wakil's buildings, in contrast to the historical examples on which they are based, are mostly freestanding, and possess an expressive sculptural quality.<sup>5</sup> When placed within a setting defined by the uniform backdrops of sand, sea, and sky, as is the case with the Corniche, Island, and Ruwais mosques, the result is striking. However, when placed within a dense, contemporary urban setting, El-Wakil's mosques are less effective. They appear fragile and are overwhelmed by the brutality and chaos of the surrounding large building blocks. The meticulously worked out details of *muqamas* vaults, decorated surfaces and crenellations are



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1. Corniche Mosque, Jeddah.
2. Island Mosque, Jeddah.
3. Binladin Mosque, Jeddah.
4. Ruwais Mosque, Jeddah.



undermined by the expansive concrete surfaces of neighbouring structures.

Although El-Wakil seems to have carefully examined structures belonging to the Islamic architectural heritage, he does not give the same detailed attention to the relationship between these structures and their urban surroundings. His reliance on the work of the master builders of Mamluk Cairo does not extend to include the manner in which they adapted their structures to the surrounding networks of narrow and winding streets. In the design of a mosque for a city such as medieval Cairo, it was not the form, or even the façade, which were emphasized, but instead, specific elements such as the dome, minaret, and portal. These elements were distinguished from the rest of the structure



6 main façade, however, no such urban edge is provided. The front façade is not aligned with the adjacent street, but is set back from it, resulting in a sizeable plaza area between the two. The result is limited interaction between the front façade and the adjacent street. The relationship between the King Saud mosque and its surroundings bears no resemblance to the mosques of Isfahan and Sultan Hasan, but instead bears an unexpected similarity to a structure such as Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building in New York (1958; fig. 15). This modernist building is also pushed back from the bordering Park Avenue and is separated from it by a spacious plaza. This disregard for urban continuity and the treatment of the work of architecture as an object isolated in a landscape has been emphasized by post-modern architects such as Robert Venturi in their criticism of twentieth-century modernism.

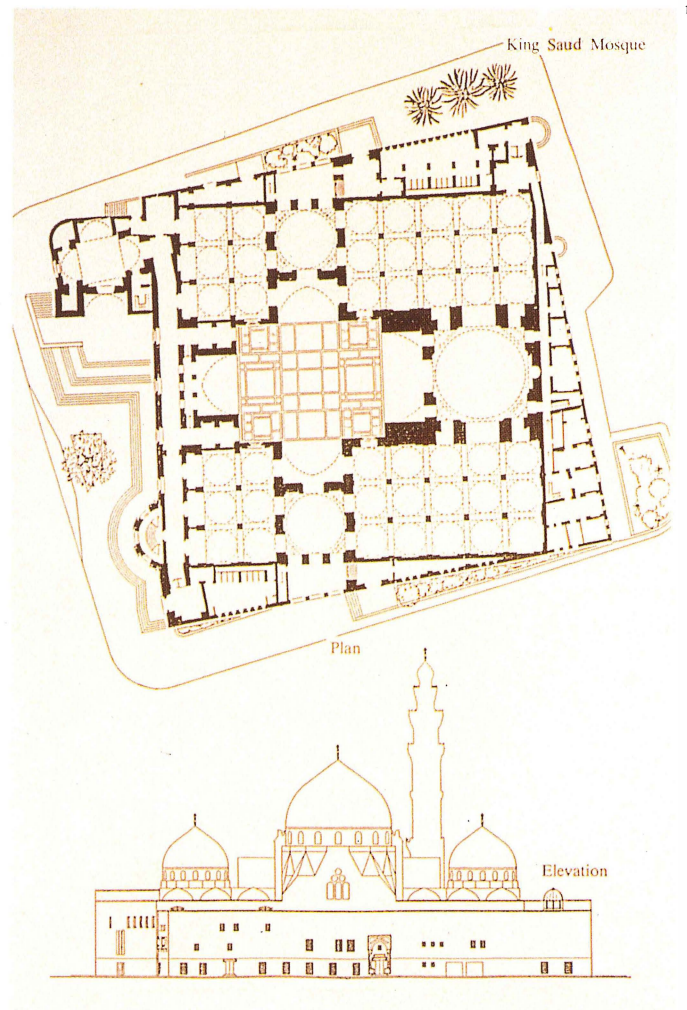
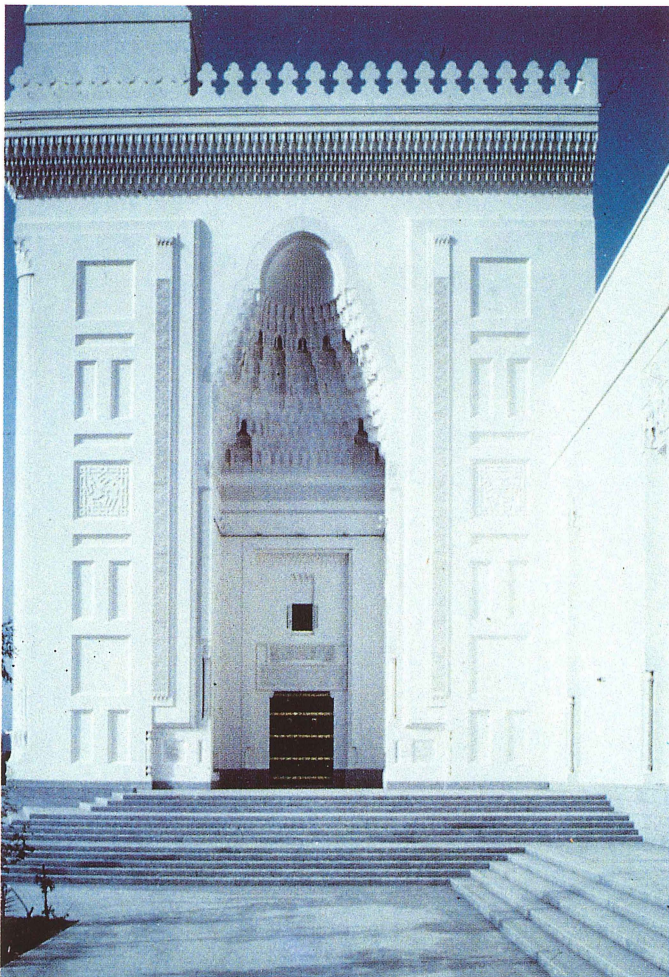
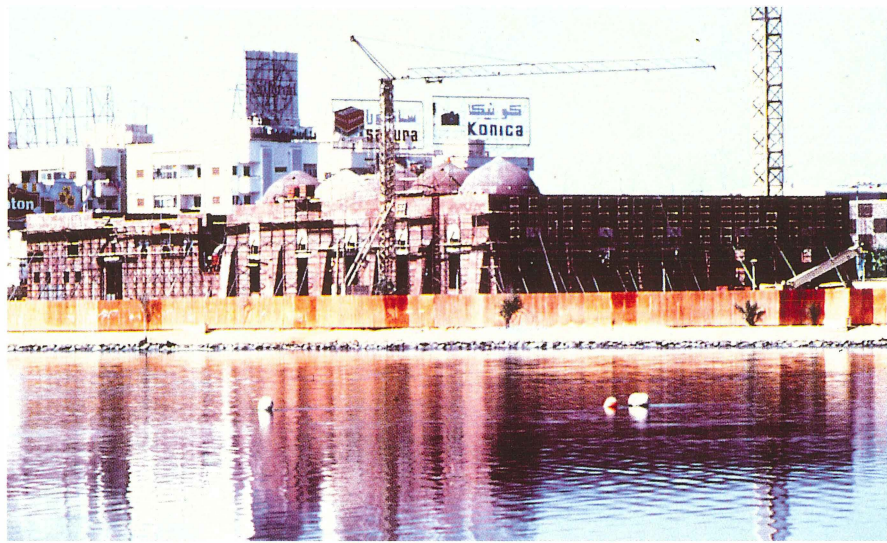
We should also consider the relationship of El-Wakil's designs to the idea of 'Islamic architecture'. His work has been presented as a major contribution to the formation and development of a 'contemporary Islamic'

through their enlarged size and intensified decoration. The differing directions of the *qibla* and the surrounding streets were conciliated through the insertion of broken axis separating the street from the interior courtyard. As a result of such measures, existing urban constraints were effectively and efficiently dealt with, creating a highly integrated urban composition. Any thorough understanding of Mamluk architecture needs to consider this interaction between the individual structure and the city.

This sensitivity to the constraints of surrounding urban fabric is lacking in El-Wakil's work. The 'Aziziyya mosque opens onto a car park. The King Saud mosque, which occupies a whole city block, shows only a partial attempt at relating to the surrounding network of streets. On three sides, triangular sections containing service areas have been inserted to compensate for the difference between the directions of the *qibla* and the surrounding streets. On the fourth and







5. Sulayman Mosque, Jeddah.

6. Harity Mosque, Jeddah.

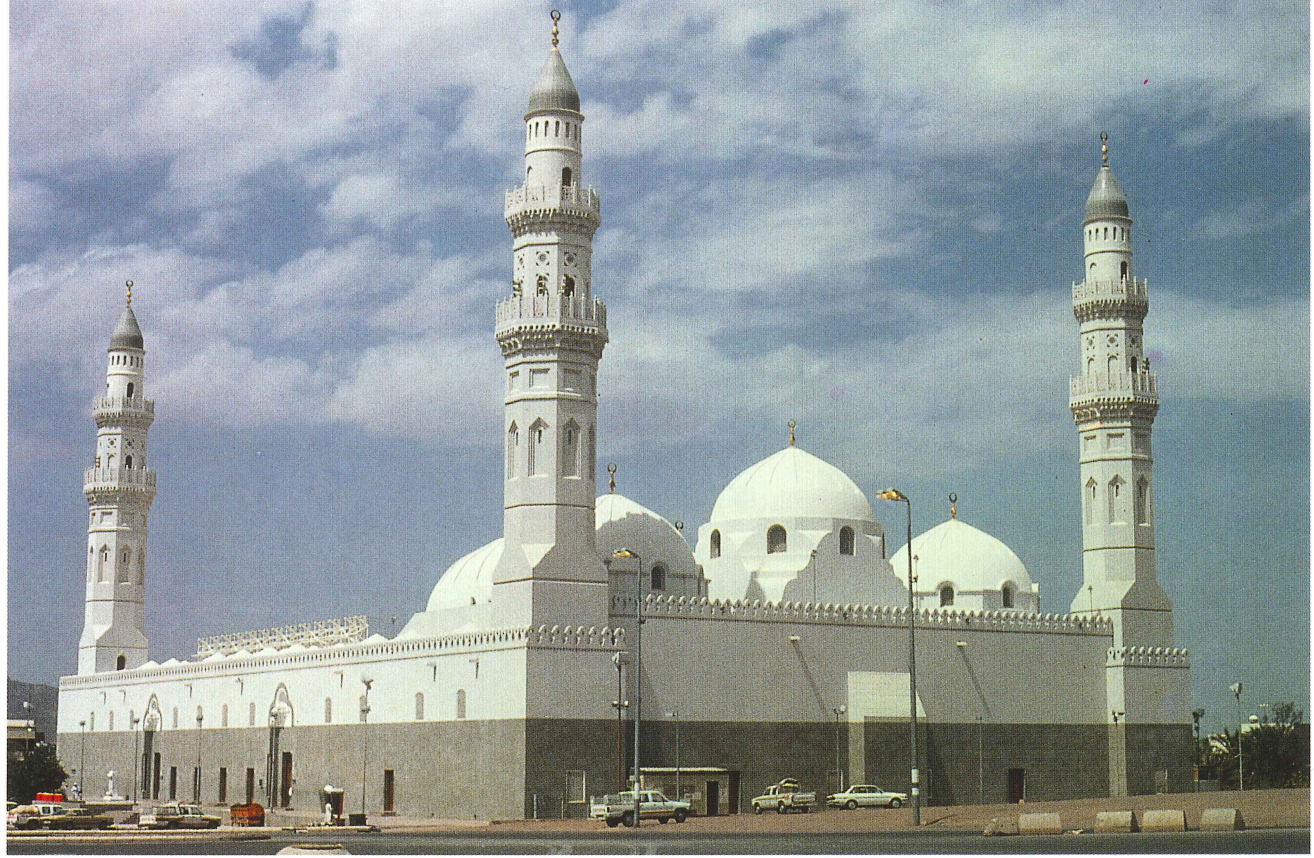
7. 'Aziziyya Mosque, Jeddah.

8. Juffali Mosque, Jeddah.

9. King Saud Mosque, Jeddah.

10. Plan, King Saud Mosque, Jeddah.





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11. Quba' Mosque, Medina.

12. Qiblatayn Mosque, Medina.

13. Entry portal, Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo. (Photo: Mohammad Al-Asad.)



architectural vocabulary. This vocabulary is emphasized as the result of an autonomous development which originates in the Islamic world, and which can be readily differentiated from Western architectural practices.<sup>6</sup> As an advocate of the development of a unique, contemporary Islamic architectural vocabulary, El-Wakil is strongly critical of twentieth-century architectural modernism which he regards as confusing, alienating, and of no use to the societies of the Islamic world. He also distances himself from the revivals of Islamic architecture which originated in Europe and subsequently spread to the Islamic world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To him, these were superficial revivals in which architects would take an "Italian palace as a model and instead of putting the Renaissance details, ornaments and columns, they would fill it with Islamic columns, Islamic stalactites and Islamic ornaments".<sup>7</sup>

El-Wakil is correct in observing that Islamic revival structures are essentially Western in their planning and spatial organizations, but were considered to be adequately 'Islamized' through the application of a layer of Islamic ornamental details. In his own work, he surpasses the superficiality of such designs and shows a more rigorous examination of the historical prototype. Still, his approach remains firmly anchored in the traditions of architectural revival as they have evolved in the West over the past five centu-

ries. However, rather than resembling the playful and exotic nineteenth-century Western revivals of Islamic architecture, his work can be better compared to the more serious classical and Gothic revivals of that period.

El-Wakil's approach of accurately reproducing past forms also provides methodological links with the group of contemporary Western architects identified by Robert Stern as "Canonical Classicists".<sup>8</sup> These architects, who include Allan Greenberg of the United States and Quinlan Terry of Britain, have expressed an almost archaeological approach in their interpretation of classical prototypes. El-Wakil's work shows the same attitude, except that classical prototypes are replaced by a combination of Islamic ones. The methodological links existing between these architects and El-Wakil are stronger than those between El-Wakil and most of the architects of the Islamic world. His connections to Western architectural traditions should not be underestimated, for as Leon Krier states, El-Wakil's "buildings speak to a European in a direct way".<sup>9</sup>

El-Wakil's reproduction of past prototypes can be viewed as a reaction against twentieth-century architectural modernism. However, relationships between his work and this phase of architectural evolution do exist. The similarity between the siting of his King Saud mosque and a modernist structure such as the Seagram building, and his treatment of the work of architecture as an object isolated in a landscape already have been discussed. In addition, his enthusiasm for the use of whitewashing reveals an unexpected affinity to Le Corbusier, to whom El-Wakil refers as the

"Hitler of architecture".<sup>10</sup> Le Corbusier was very fond of whitewashing. He expressed this sentiment in his designs and in the accounts of his travels to the Balkans and Turkey in 1911 where he was impressed by the whitewashing of structures ranging from modest village houses to monumental mosques.<sup>11</sup> In this particular preference for whitewashing the two architects cross paths.

El-Wakil has skilfully used features from different vocabularies of the Islamic world's architectural past; he has reproduced complex forms, and has impressively explored the structural potential of traditional brick construction. In spite of his inquisitive exploration of the Islamic world's architectural heritage, however, his approach remains deeply rooted in Western methodologies of architectural design. His work can be described as a highly refined, but complex and eclectic architecture which relies on a set of different and sometimes contradictory approaches, including historicism, modernism, and post-modernism. It is these characteristics, however, which place his designs among the more interesting works of architecture produced in the Islamic world during the past decade.

#### NOTES

1. See 'Profile: Abdel Wahed El-Wakil', *MIMAR, Architecture in Development*, No.1, 1980, pp. 46-61; 'El-Wakil Associates: The Island Mosque, Corniche, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia 1983-4', *Architectural Design*, No. 54, 1984, pp. 94-96; and Abel, Chris, 'Work of El-Wakil', *Architectural Review*, No. 180, November 1986, pp. 52-60.

2. Krier, Leon, 'Houses Palaces Mosques', *Albanaa*, 6, April-May 1987, p. 14.

3. Charles, Prince of Wales, *A Vision of Britain, A Personal View of Architecture*, Doubleday, London and New York, 1989, p. 11.

4. See Abdullah Y. Bokhari's comments on El-Wakil's Datsun Complex in Jeddah in 'Datsun Complex, Jeddah', *MIMAR*, No. 1, 1981, p. 57.

5. Abel, Chris, 'Work of El-Wakil', op. cit., p. 56.

6. See Shahed, Saleem, 'Profile: Abdel Wahed El-Wakil', *Arts and the Islamic World*, 1, Winter 1983/1984, pp. 58-59.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59 for El-Wakil's comments on modernism and Islamic revivals.

8. See Stern, Robert A. M., *Modern Classicism*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1988.

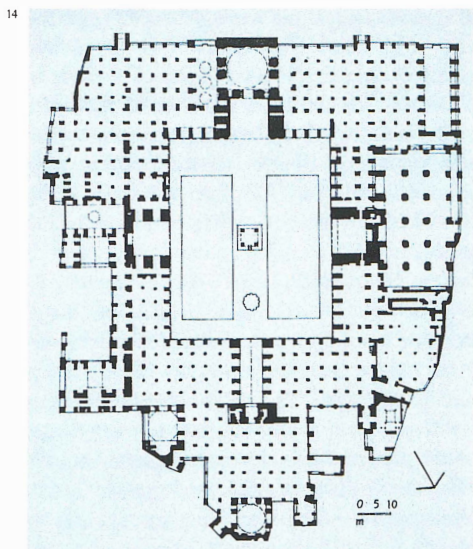
9. Krier, Leon, 'Houses Palaces Mosques', op. cit., p. 14

10. Shahed, Saleem, 'Profile: Abdel Wahed El-Wakil', op. cit., p. 58

11. See Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*, translated, edited, and annotated by Ivan Zaknic, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987.

Photographs courtesy of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, unless otherwise stated.

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14. Plan, Great Mosque of Isfahan, Isfahan. (From George Michell, ed., *Architecture of the Islamic World*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1978.)

15. Seagram Building, New York. (From *Architecture Since 1945, Sources and Directions*, Jürgen Joedicke, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1969.)

