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# The Dome in Contemporary Monuments of the UAE between Tradition and Postmodernity

**Mohamed El Amrousi, Mohamed Elhakeem**

Abu Dhabi University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

mohamed.amrousi@adu.ac.ae

**Abstract.** Recently constructed cultural and religious complexes in Abu Dhabi display the clear references to Islamic ornament and the ‘dome’ as a symbolic element. Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque best manifests this through its cascade of domes and ornament. The Grand Mosque has become one of the most visited spaces in the city, which necessitated the creation of a processional underground route to organize its visitation process. Another example is Qasr Al Watan, which recently, in 2019, opened to the public, its white domes and Islamic ornament render it a popular site of visitation. The palatial complex has been equipped with a tourist center, gift shop and buses that transport its visitors. Qasr Al Watan’s domes, arches and ornaments are constructed with to reflect on known historical precedents. Taken together with Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and the Emirates Palace, they reflect a comeback of postmodernism in Abu Dhabi. This paper focuses on cultural/religious buildings that exhibit ‘Domes’ and Islamic ornament with clear references to the historical precedents.

## 1. Introduction

Abu Dhabi’s new cultural projects display diverse vocabularies of architectural motifs that range from regional precedents to ones taken from a broader spectrum of the Muslim world. These architectural elements vary in their application of postmodernism from exaggerated overblown ornaments to motifs that remain true to proportions and materials of their antecedents. The newly emerging cultural and religious centers in Abu Dhabi such as Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Qasr Al Watan and the Emirates Palace display a collage of domes, arches, mosaic panels and coffered ceilings that are indeed stylistically and temporally eclectic. The practice has its origins in 19th Century architecture when pre-fabrication of ornament became a trend following the Crystal Palace Exposition in 1851, World Fairs and Industrial Revolution. Owen Jones through his seminal work ‘The Grammar of Ornament’ (1856) facilitated the replication of ornament in time and space with detailed drawings on how arabesques, geometrical patterns and motifs can be constructed as ornaments to recreate sections of the ‘Orient’ [1]. A broad range of applications of postmodernism principles in constructing religious and palatial complexes in Abu Dhabi with reference to elite Muslim arts and crafts is best experienced in the Emirates Palace (2005), Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque (2007) and Qasr Al Watan (2017). The popularity of above mentioned buildings can be attributed to the fact that they reconstruct a past with richer materials rather than kitsch postmodern pastiches commonly seen in the downtown area in the form of residential towers covered in colored aluminum facades dating to the 1980-1990s. Additionally, only fragments of the traditional building stock in Abu Dhabi remain, not enough to understand the collective memory of buildings, or construct and develop locally growth architecture. Qasr Al Hosn located in one of the most prominent sites in the downtown area remains the most intact heritage building that



refers to a fortified palace. Recently Qasr Al Hosn and its landscape underwent restructuring, and in the process of restoration many architectural layers that the building had accumulated over time have been removed (Figure 1a & 1b.) The current Qasr Al Hosn in its post restoration phase reveals some of the construction methods, organization of rooms yet much of its collective memory and social history are no longer visible. The simplicity of its design, namely rooms allocated around a large courtyard reflects on the harsh conditions in Abu Dhabi in the pre-petroleum era [2]. Qasr Al Hosn is a devoid ornament with the exception of fragments of tilework adorning its entrance. Its walls and shaded corridors manifest what is known locally as a *liwan* a liminal space that acted as a social meeting space. With the exception of a small dome on one of its towers, no further domes, mosaics, or interlacing marble panels have been documented as being part of its history. When juxtaposed against Abu Dhabi's new Qasr Al-Watan and recently opened to the public, the Emirates Palace and Sheikh Zayed Grand mosque the shift in terms of ornament density and building scale is exceptional. These neo-Islamic monuments display a spectacular collage of forms and architectural vocabularies of the Muslim world with lavish interiors that emulate antecedents. As State sponsored monuments, it can be synthesized that designers opting for a safe postmodern neo-Islamic architectural style was a conscious choice that could be justified as reassuring of and Arab Muslim community of their sense of identity in a world dominated by globalization and imported forms [3].



**Figure 1a.** Qasr Al Hosn before restoration, **1b.** After restoration

## 2. Constructing Sites of Visitation—Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque

Sheikh Zayed Grand mosque was designed with creating an intentional monument in mind (Figure 2). A monument that would be grand enough to pay tribute to the founder of the Nation—Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. To give the mosque visibility and height, Mughal/Indian onion shaped domes were constructed on high drums. With the exception of prefabricated domes on neighborhood mosques, domes in this scale, number and richness in materials had not been seen in Abu Dhabi. The eighty-two domes of the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, its marble inlay columns, gold glass mosaics and massive Persian carpet manifest the pluralistic function of the monument as a mosque and museum/exhibition of Islamic ornament. A celebration of ornaments created through assemblies of local and transnational Arab/Islamic forms and fragments as if the works of Owen Jones, Prisse d'Avannes, David Roberts and other orientalist artists had come to life. There is also a curatorial process that was established shortly after the construction of the Grand Mosque, the shape and scale of the mosque attracted attention to it. In addition, in many ways, postmodernism through its interplay with ornament, and glitzy collages of arts and crafts of the Muslim world created a hybrid space (Mosque and Museum) that warranted organization of mass tourism during their visitation to a monument of commemoration and a mosque where prayers still take place. Herein rests the complexity of creating a modern monument, a problem that is not found in heritage buildings. The problem of overlapping religious and secular symbols or spaces is highlighted by Zeynep Celik in 'Displaying the Orient' where she

discusses the popularity of recreating Islamic monuments that were made to look ‘real/authentic’ in the Universal Expositions while their functions were altered [4]. Hence, the necessity of separation comes between the religious and the secular routes in Sheikh Zayed’s Grand Mosque. An underground processional route takes tourists from their busses to facilities, tourist centers, gift shops and brand name/franchise cafes (Figure 3a). Tourists emerge from the underground facilities of Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque to a recreation of Bruno Tauts prismatic glass dome structure from the Cologne 1914 Werkbund Exhibition (Figure 3b). The contemporary architecture here promotes its own domiciles as spaces of commemoration through the exhibition of the power of an oil rich State in multi-ethnic communities visiting a secular and religious space with different perceptions and experiences. Security personnel guiding visitors, moving sidewalks (conveyors), distribution centers for cloaks/Abayas and visitor information centers are all part of the 300 meter underground facilities path preceding entry to the Grand mosque (Figure 3a, 3b). After tourists emerge from the underground facilities, they face the Grand mosque’s domes, facades and arcades. They are then curated via carpeted paths, signs and personnel to where photos can be taken. These paths also assure separation of those visiting for prayer from tourists interested in the mosque complex and its display of ornaments such as its marble and mosaic floors, pietra dura inlay columns, Moorish arches, Persian carpet and bohemian crystal chandeliers. The curatorial process adopted on the mosque premises assures proper behavior associated with spaces of commemoration and veneration. This complex combination of socio-religious spatial reproduction also warrants distancing from shrine veneration and assuring of appropriate behavior, in a monument of commemoration that acts as a means of establishing and consolidating identity for multi-cultural societies [5].



**Figure 2.** Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque; domes, colonnade entrance from the courtyard





**Figure 3a.** Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque underground tourist facilities; **3b.** Escalators and prismatic glass dome

Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque is arguably one of the most important religious sites and most visited in Abu Dhabi it manifests the desire of the State to establish distinction for its capital city through architectural expression with an identity that refers to Abu Dhabi's conservative cultural background. Therefore re-constructing the past in a postmodern architectural style may have been an optimal solution to manifest Abu Dhabi's interest in emerging on the global city map as a capital that caters to history and culture within a contemporary context [6]. Whatever value postmodernism has for the reproduction of monumental architecture and its effect on transnational communities in the Gulf States cannot escape the realization that in an age of globalization many motifs, forms and fragments are used in different forms to claim a certain nation hood status and represent the identity of communities [7]. The notion of global competition and building forms based on precedents in the Muslim world via the recreation of conventional forms—domes, arches, mosaics is associated here with a desire to distinguish Abu Dhabi from other rapidly urbanizing Gulf cities even though architects may prefer abstracting or omitting these symbols of postmodernism [8]. Oleg Grabar highlights that the discomfort with such works (postmodern/neo Islamic) can be rooted in their particular sense of newness, which requires art and architectural historians to deal responsibly with a sense of both past and present at one time in a single work [9]. Many Architects criticize postmodernism for its direct mode of communication of concepts into architecture, they perceive mosques from a professional point of view that may lean towards the abstraction; Modernism/International Style, which may be too bland for popular/public opinion especially for monuments of large scale like that of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque [10]. The urban image of Abu Dhabi has changed and the city expanded along its shores and new urban Islands with an overwhelming vocabulary of international architectures that accompanied globalization of Gulf State cities in a relatively short time [11]. State sponsored complexes help build a new image of how the Capital of the United Arab Emirates and how it should be perceived [12].

### 3. Re-Constructing the Past - Qasr Al Watan & the Emirates Palace

Qasr Al Watan in Abu Dhabi was completed in 2017 and opened the public in 2019. The palatial structure in a prime location overlooking Abu Dhabi's Marina and waterfront, the new palace is in close proximity to the Emirates Palace that was completed in 2005 then converted into a Hotel. Similarities in form, landscape and urban setting manifest between the Emirates Palace and Qasr Al Watan, even the visual connectivity between them reflects on Abu Dhabi's notion to create contemporary monuments with strong reference to Islamic hybridized styles. Set within an extensive landscape both contemporary palaces are governed by geometry that gives reference to Mughal gardens and Andalusian palatial complexes. The concept of the paradisiacal garden *Chahar Bagh* or the four rivers is visible dividing the landscape of Qasr Al Watan into quadrilateral sections (Figure 4). This creates a synthesis of forms that manifest a mixture of individual Islamic elements supported by long traditions of cross-cultural interaction between East and West [13]. In the Emirates Palace, its domed façade

with chamfered corners is reached via a long series of steps with water cascading downwards in the center reaffirming traditional design principles such as symmetry, the relation of water and landscape to palatial complexes (Figure 5).



**Figure 4.** Qasr Al Watan and Emirates Palace top view and landscape [14]



**Figure 5.** Emirates Palace Entrance and landscape

In Both complexes, postmodernism is explored to its fullest extent in the form of gathering ornaments and architectural motifs from a wide range for vocabularies and cultural produce from Mughal India to North Africa and Spain. However, when comparing the Emirates Palace Qasr Al Watan, it is observed that in the latter, more elements from local Emirati architecture have been integrated with



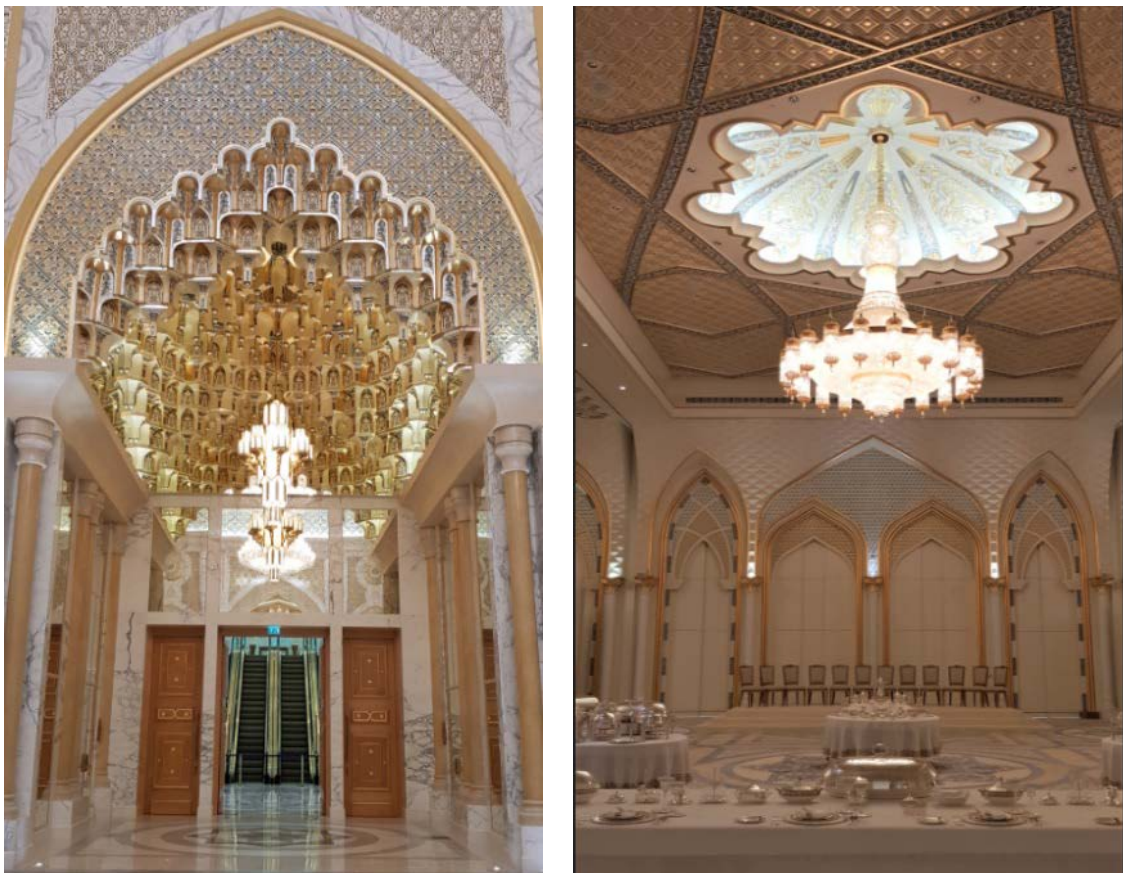
pan-Islamic ones (Figure 6). This is especially visible on the facades of Qasr Al Watan where series of arcades emulating the traditional *liwan*, small windows and niches in vertical compositions revive design elements in Qasr Al Hosn. The integration of local motifs and a pan-Islamic style reflects a conscious shift towards Universalism with a desire to retain identity by creating architecture that visually manifests more Islamic motifs under the penumbra of postmodernism [15]. To many, the current approach is acceptable as it is based on an image of the architecture that is familiar to visitors and expatriate communities living in Abu Dhabi. This also highlights a trend in mega State sponsored projects, such as Qasr Al Watan and Emirates Palace that architects revert to postmodernism because they refrain from taking risks to experiment with new forms especially those related to abstract Modernism that may not be as attractive to public taste. These new postmodern domed complexes create visible architectures on Abu Dhabi Corniche that revive neo-Islamic style as a form of manifestation of Arabian identity. Taken together this can be comprehended within the larger context of changes occurring in Abu Dhabi that include creating a new skyline, artificial Islands and social demographics. Opening Abu Dhabi's new palatial complexes to the public disseminates the message of 'luxury' in relation to Abu Dhabi, a message that is cemented by exhibitions such as 10,000 Years of Luxury hosted at the Abu Dhabi Louvre.



**Figure 6.** Qasr Al Watan entrance and domes

There is a certain sense of formality about Qasr Al Watan associated with palatial complexes such as the historical Topkapi Palace in Istanbul with its vast gardens and multi-layered styles accumulated overtime. In Qasr Al Watan layers of history have been compressed in time and space. This is supported by a museum like a curatorial process that commences at the visitor center where visitors are given leaflets about the building, taken by buses from the entrance to the main building and informed that they are not allowed to wander in the gardens of the palace grounds. The interior of Qasr Al Watan displays more intricate replications of the past, in comparison to the Emirates Palace where post-modernism manifest is an orientalist approach to the application of ornaments in combinations that indicate lesser attention to historical timeframes and homogeneity. Qasr al Watan's symmetrical Grand Hall exhibits glossy forms and fragments of Islamic ornament including pointed arches with

chevron design voussoirs, coffered ceilings circumambulating the main dome and interlacing marble inlay floors. The fact that a wide public embraces these neo Islamic Styled buildings suggests a new era in which it has become acceptable and effective to replicate architectural icons and figuratively transport them to new geographies and locales. A special emphasis on certain Islamic pasts such as Moorish Hispanic and Near Eastern Islamic Civilization lead to a better understanding of Muslim arts and crafts. For example, the stalactite *muqarnas* elements (Figure 7a) pay tribute to the Court of Lions in Alhambra-Spain are set in combination with slender columns and tile mosaic panels, i.e. matched with motifs from Andalusian Spain. The scalloped dome in the Western Meeting Hall (Figure 7b) manifests a clear reference to the dome in front of the prayer niche in the Great Mosque of Cordoba. Here Qasr Al Watan displays more significant efforts to duplicate ornaments of iconic historical reference in well-organized settings.



**Figure 7a.** Qasr Al Watan main hall interior and dome; **7b** Qasr Al Watan meeting hall scalped dome and chandelier

#### 4. Conclusion

Complexes such as Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Qasr Al Watan and Emirates Palace aim to play a prominent role in cementing the identity of multi-ethnic Muslim communities and the geographic role of Abu Dhabi as a hub for cultural crossroads between East and West. They are also a part of an extraordinary building program of mega projects that cement Abu Dhabi's international profile and locus of its cultural ambition. New cultural/religious complexes in Abu Dhabi consciously incorporate many different Islamic architectural elements in their designs, referring to them as universal forms of Islamic architecture to associate effectively the architectural identity of Abu Dhabi as a powerful and wealthy emirate with an interest to emerge as a cultural hub in the Gulf. In such contemporary monuments, we begin to recognize how this has reinforced the practice of reconstructing a past that is more monumental than the existing built heritage.



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