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Contemporary Mosque Architecture

HASAN-UDDIN KHAN

Architecture can be regarded as an expression of culture, giving clues as to who we are and embodying our concerns. For example, religious buildings may be seen as reflections of spiritual and social concerns and skyscrapers as symbols of corporate power. The mosque is Islam's most emblematic building. My focus here is on the architecture of the mosque expressing identity.¹

How identity is expressed in mosques in the different areas of the world depends not only on cultural factors but also on regional building mores and tradition of designs, architecture, and construction. A few examples illustrate this well.

A tendency in contemporary mosque design is historicism, that is refer-

Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca



PHOTO BY HOLLY HAYES / © SACRED-DESTINATIONS.COM, 2007



PHOTO BY AKEL ISMAIL KAHERA, 2002

Islamic Center, Washington DC

ring back to historically important models. An interesting example is the Washington, D.C. Islamic Center. It was commissioned in the 1950s with donations from different Islamic countries on the instigation of twelve Muslim ambassadors in the city who felt that Muslims did not have a place to pray collectively or perform the rituals for the dead. The question it raised then as it raises now was this: what should be the image for the building? It seems to come down to who funds and who designs it. In

The mosque is Islam's most emblematic building, as well as an expression of collective identity. By exploring the built form of mosques around the world and prevalent architectural trends in mosque building, this article considers what makes mosques identifiable to Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as the ways architecture represents the identity of a community and also shifts in accordance with changing social and cultural contexts.

this case, it was the architect Mario Rossi, an Italian who worked for the Ministry of Awqaf in Egypt, who used the precedent of Mameluk architecture with which he was familiar. An interesting aspect of the history of this mosque is that it became contested space in the 1980s when it turned into a centre for strife between the Shia and Sunni Muslims in Washington. Part of it was burned (and later restored) because Muslims themselves

disagreed as to who should control the mosque, how it was going to be used, and who was to be the imam. This took about two years to resolve. This history reveals that social politics play a part in the use of mosques.

Another major historicist mosque is the imposing Hassan II Mosque of 1993, in Casablanca. It uses the traditional vocabulary of twelfth century Moroccan architecture, thus visually tying the current regime back into the legitimacy of the past.

Symbolic shapes

Mosque design spans time, crosses boundaries, and expresses cultures. The Afro-Brazilian mosques in Western Africa illustrate this. They are known as such because of the slaves that were taken to Brazil and became the builders of churches there. In the late nineteenth century they became political troublemakers and were shipped back to Africa, where they produced buildings that one would not think are very mosque-like. Still, the locals regard them as very much part of their tradition of Islamic building.

Perhaps what is recognized as a mosque, and what is not, depends on who one is and where one has been—that is to say that it is a cultural manifestation as much as one based on a regional building tradition or a certain interpretation of religion.

The need to express such physical signs of religion is not new. Remember, for example, the insertion in the fifteenth century of a Catholic church into the Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain, expressing the domination of Christianity in a country which had been ruled peacefully for four centuries by Muslims. Physical forms seem to transmit symbolic messages.

The most recognizable of such forms are the minaret and the dome. The Ottoman influence of the tall pencil-thin minaret has been widely adopted because it actually fits well into modern construction technology and it is a pure modern geometric form, as can be seen in the Islamic Centre in Zagreb, which is one of the largest in Europe. The minaret relates to the past (because that part of the world was Ottoman at one point) and there was a desire to associate oneself with Islam within what was then socialist Yugoslavia. The central dome has a modernist image and reflects the aspirations of the inhabitants portraying themselves as "modern Muslims."

In much of the Islamic world, there was a break with the visual and symbolic past between the late 1940s and 1960s, when most countries in Asia and Africa gained independence. There appeared to be the need to establish a new state and a new look forward. Newly independent Muslim majority countries needed representative buildings that symbolized their states. For example parliament buildings expressed notions of democracy, and state mosques proclaimed the importance placed on religion, as in Islamabad, Pakistan, where the main mosque was conceived as the national mosque. It is now named the Shah Faisal Masjid or King Faisal Mosque, in recognition of Saudi Arabian funding. The Turkish architect Vedat Dalokay designed it in 1970, so it is not surprising that it uses the Ottoman model with its grand open central space and the tall thin minarets. The mosque breaks with the past in expressing a modernity and an identity that proclaims it to belong to the late twentieth century.

Fifty years after Turkey became a secular republic with a majority Muslim population, a mosque was built in Ankara, in 1989, within the Parlia-

ment buildings complex. The mosque fits unobtrusively into this landscape. It declares that there is a place for prayer within government, but does not proclaim Islam as the country's *raison d'être*.

The use of the mosque complex, especially in the West and in non-majority Islamic societies, is changing, which may in turn affect the design of mosques. The situation of women in relation to mosques is becoming of greater concern in some societies. Women in many countries go to the mosque to pray, and also for educational and social functions. In Europe and the United States women and children are increasingly frequenting mosques. Since 2003 some Muslim women in the United States have been vocal in their demand for equal treatment in the mosque. One may recall incidents in the past few years when women demanded to pray in the main hall rather than in a different space, and when in March 2005 a woman led mixed male-female Friday prayers in New York. This led to protests by community members, but also received support. Also, for the first time in the USA, women have risen to positions of prominence in Muslim organizations; for instance the President of the Islamic Society of North America is Ingrid Mattson.

One of the interesting issues and design features in contemporary mosques is the space of prayer for women. Typically around 15 percent of the prayer space is given over to women who are usually housed in a balcony above or to the sides, separated from the men. I know of only one contemporary mosque that places women in a central location: it is in Kingston, Ontario Canada. Perhaps this is due to the fact that women were on the mosque building committee—itsself a rare occurrence—and that it serves a mainly university, that is liberal, population. Before its construction, the physical position for women in a mosque was debated with some hundred letters written to imams all over the world to solicit their opinion. There was no consensus and the community had to make its own decision.

Familiar forms

This brings us back to the question of identity, and its pluralistic expressions. As noted, mosques are a reflection of who we are and how we represent ourselves, not only to ourselves but to society at large. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) Center in Plainfield, Indiana, by the Canadian-Pakistani architect Gulzar Haider speaks of a contemporary Islamic architecture without obvious and explicit traditional ele-



Domed mosque, Shanghai



Community mosque, Aborney, Benin

ments. Is it apparent as a mosque? For some it is not. Some fifteen years after its completion the architect met with the clients and users of the project who said that they wished the mosque had had a minaret and dome so that it could be “perceived” to be a mosque.

Here is an architectural question: Can one recognize a building as a mosque without domes or without minarets? The easy use of the familiar—the domes and the minarets—is more usual, as it is in many mosques the world over, from Indonesia to North America. This notion also applies as to how one recognizes other religious buildings, be they churches, synagogues, or temples.

Indeed the dome of a mosque built in the year 2000 in Shanghai, China, is used as a sign of the presence of Islam. It has no relationship whatsoever to the buildings’ interior spaces or structure—it merely sits atop the flat roof. The community was conscious that it needed to proclaim the presence of Islam in a recently more tolerant atmosphere.

In Indonesia, ready-made tin domes sold along the sides of roads are now replacing the indigenous pyramidal roof. Because there is a normative aspect in Islam, that everyone belongs to the ummah, and that everyone is equal in the eyes of Allah, one attitude is that all Muslims should come back to some expression of unity. And it is the dome and the minaret, which in this case do not belong to the culture and which have little to do with the building traditions of the place or the climate, that have become the desirable symbols for the mosque.

Largely due to the current influence of the Arab Middle East, especially of Saudi Arabia and of Iran, such elements become the “legitimate” expression of an Islam that tries to be universal. It can also be interpreted that those whose architecture expressed their own regional identities and their beliefs are not quite sure as to their place in the new globalized world.

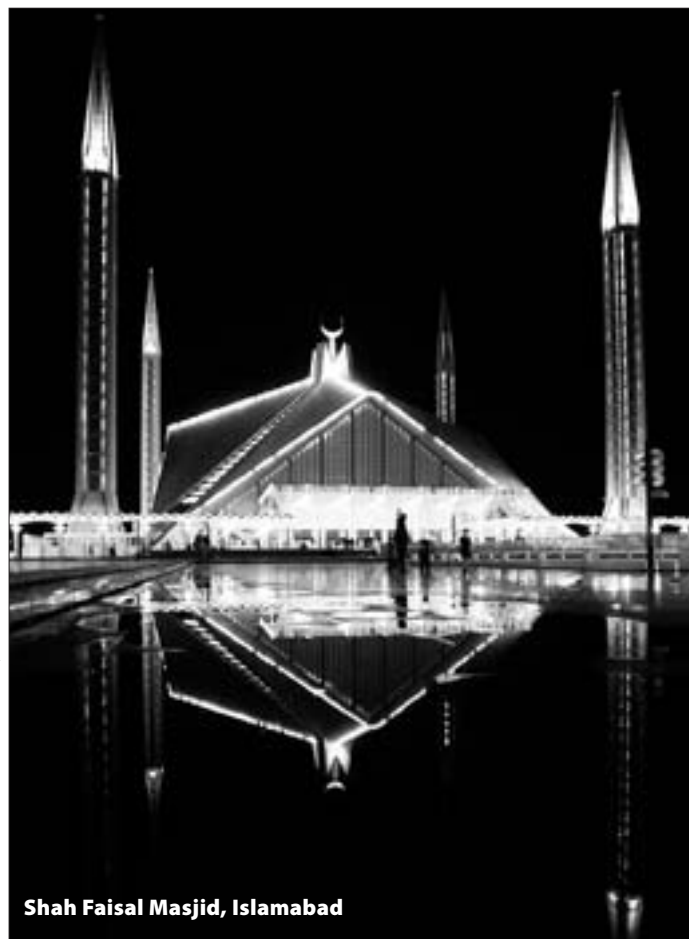
In conclusion, I would stress that the importance of the architecture of the mosque lies not only in the forms or architectural language but also in the collective meanings it transmits to us over time—from its humble beginnings as the house of the Prophet to the pluralistic manifestations we find the world over. It is its symbolism that conveys what the mosque is about, and it expresses who we are to ourselves and to the community at large.

To understand the mosque is to understand the architecture of the region and place, and even more significantly, the sociology and the culture to which it belongs. For in the end, architecture is not about buildings, it is about people.

Note

1. Suggested reading: Renata Holod and Hasan-Uddin Khan, *The Mosque and the Modern World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

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Shah Faisal Masjid, Islamabad

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