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## The Essence of Islamic Architecture of Mosques: a Reflection on the Spiritual Identity and Sacred Suppositions

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Received: 22.03.2015; Accepted: 29.05.2015

**Abstract.** Mosque is a sacred place for daily worship, a symbol of sacred and spiritual space. Architects throughout the history of Islam have always been trying in a variety of approaches to induce this concept i.e. sacredness to their audience and prayers.

Sacred art signifies the nature and realization of a sort of divine quality in the realm of art. Islamic art is realized and understood based on a profound understanding of sacred art as the center and heart of traditional arts. The architects of mosques, in the past and present have been trying to give spirit and sacredness to the physical structure of a mosque. Since there were religious constraints which limited the expression of its conceptual themes, Muslim architects made great efforts in transferring their intended concepts through simplified floral designs, calligraphy and color in their best possible forms while giving spiritual spirit to its physical space. In this study, the sacred art is analyzed through browsing the reference books and library documents using descriptive-analytical method and its status in the Shi'a mosques are studied. The existence of such a sacred architecture on earth indicates the transcendental meditation of past architects and the celestial links of architecture. The findings of this study believe that Islamic art is the manifest of the sacred in both form and content and the essential identity of anything. Spiritual identity is nothing other than the manifest of celestial belief which gives a divine form to the behavior and insight of humans. Hence, sacred architecture is a part of sacred art, image and reflection of the order and unity which is dominant in the world of being.

**Keywords:** identity, sacred architecture, spiritual identity, Islamic mosques, sacred suppositions

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture is the art of giving order to the space; sacred architecture-which exists upon the realm of meaning is doubtlessly a spiritual art. Research on Islamic-Iranian arts is stepping into an infinite world since, in our culture art is rooted in metaphor, symbol, sign, belief, mysticism, land, rituals and traditions, mathematics, geometry, and astronomy; any of which open the door of a new world in front of us. Iranian symbols had an important role in formation of decorations and their form, geometry, and proportions (the appearance) has been visualized in different forms based on the context of culture and transferring the message, but the concepts (the inside) has not gone under change and transformation. The origin of Iranian decorations and art should be sought in its ancient civilization.

Since early Islamic centuries, Islamic art has been inspired by the valuable learning and thoughts of Islam in different dimensions; both in the early works which represent the simplicity and unadorned forms, and the contemporary works which have a stronger multitude of decorations. However, among all of these works the integrity and the principle of unity are observed which represents itself as the spirit of art. The philosophers of Islamic period and some of the pre-Islamic era believed in the origin of being as the reason of unity among all of creatures and considered connection to this origin as the reason of eternity. In Islamic art this principle has served to its perfection and durability. Islamic architecture is a clear symbol of the sacred art and expression in the realm of Islamic architectural structures and physical elements that send in the human soul to celestial journeys more than any other physical element. Mosques are palpable distinguished examples of the sacred art. Mosques were naturally established after the rise of Islam and throughout its perfection or development in the history

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some ideas and theories were formed that explain different dimensions of it such the mosque's definition, criteria of construction and architecture, its space, the conditions for attending at the mosque, patterns, behavioral norms of mosque, designs and their functions, and also the status of mosque in Islam hinged upon the needs and condition of this time (Fazeli, 2008).

Sacred architecture is a clear extension of the spiritual thoughts in material world; it is best represented in the perceptual layers of Islamic art and architecture. The content richness of structural elements and decorations of mosques demonstrate the capabilities of this Islamic construct in the view of meaning-based analytics. The Muslim artist uses the visual dimensions as a mediator for transferring inspiration to the world of meaning and reality. Hence, Islamic architecture is a good subject for semantic analysis due to its content richness, spirituality, and mystic principles. Regarding these qualities, every appearance has an inner conscience and every manifest is a special meaning that one can find it through deep understanding and passing down the surface (Madadpoor, 2008).

### **2. IDENTITY**

Identity is an answer to the question of who or what is a human (Ghasemi Isfahani, 2004). In Persian dictionaries three definitions are provided for identity: 1. God, 2. Being, 3. something that identifies a person. Moeen Persian dictionary explains the verbal meaning of identity as "personality, nature, reality of something". In Laros dictionary, identity is defined as a collection of factors which proves the personality of someone. Britannica Encyclopedia writes: a state of thing that separates its continuity in different conditions, or the condition in one thing that separates it from other things, or the factors which determine who or what a person or thing is, is the identity of that person (Noghrekar, 2002). The definition of identity is based on compliance of objectivity and subjectivity. In any way that a person can create a sort of adjustment between objective fact and his mental image, as a result the identification and the following sense of belonging to a place is achieved, and in case of non-adjustment identity crisis will arise. The solution proposed for this is to create changes in spaces in order to give identity to them. By objectivity, it is meant that all information is from the category of reality which exit from potential state and turn to real state (Ghasemi Isfahani, 2004). Sadr al-Mota'alehin believes that the identity of any creature refers to its particular existence: "the identity of any creature indicates his especial being. In humans, identity is one. Human creatures have some characteristics which distinguishes them from each other, this unity of character exist in them throughout their whole life and is called identity (Eqbal, 1999).

### **3. THE IDENTITY OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE**

If we assume this saying as correct that architecture is the container of life and life is how one lives and communicates in the context of community; hence he has an identity which firstly demonstrates the dominant values of his society and second contains the values to which the society is inclined, and third indicates the cultural elements of its owner's identity (Tabassi, 2007). The culture of Islamic society is one of the most important sources of the principles and values which have been taken as the criteria of many human works of art including the Islamic cities. These principles and values in turn give identity to the society which believes in them. One of the important fields is the manifest and appearance of this principles and values in Islamic architecture and urban development where the identity and culture of Shi'a and the architecture and urbanism establish a mutual relationship.

Iranian Islamic architecture is a symbol of Iranian national identity; since before the constitutional revolution, this concept was restricted to two discourses of ancient Arianism and then Islamic culture and tradition which seem to be combined in a non-paradoxical way after the rise of Islam, with regard to its influence on the Iranian-Islamic identity (Ashrafi, 2010). Iranian-Islamic identity before the constitutional revolution can be regarded as a combination of Islamic and Iranian culture. Hence, the religious dimension and religious beliefs, rituals and thoughts are associated with the values and norms such as hospitality and chivalry, cultural legacies such as traditional arts, national mythical figures such as Rustam, national signs such as flag, and geographical features such as land as the elements of Iranian-Islamic identity.

For the cities of Islamic Iran, the best condition is achieved when the city is formed based on Islamic-Iranian principles and culture, which originate from the ideology of society in a way that the whole society is content and proud of having such an identity.

#### **4. SPIRITUAL AND SACRED ART**

Some scholars believe that the feeling of emptiness and simplicity of "God's spirit" in the mosque is realized partly from spiritual poverty and partly from sense of presence (Bemanian, 2012). The organic relationship between art and Islamic worship, between thinking and contemplation on God in a way that is advised in Quran, and the musing nature of this art between God's reminiscence which is the final goal of all religious deeds and devices in Islam, and the particular role of audiovisual arts in the life of any Muslim confirms the relationship between divine inspiration and Islamic art. If this art was not very closely linked to the form and meaning of Islam religion it could never be successful in doing this spiritual function (Bemanian, 2012).

In a study by Dr. Bemanian and his colleagues (Bemanian et al, 2010) on rereading the spiritual identity, it is stated that the most sensible manifestation of spirituality and transcendental identity of human can be sought in hidden layers of arts of mosques. They wrote: within this art is placed the heart, soul, belief and faith of human, which are searching to discover reality and creativity with his organs and body. The mysteries of Islamic art are within its spirituality, purity and mystical reality inside it which has reached intuition and manifestation. This art is born from the enthusiasm and hilarity derived from the tendency of man to God's vicinity and closeness. This art is the manifest of sacredness, clarity, and transcendence of being traversed to the celestial realms and world of meaning. In fact, this mosque relieves the unrested soul of human from the constraints of mundane world and moves him toward the absolute light. The committed artist who has realized spirituality as the one uniting element of human identity has been always trying to incarnate the sacred and spiritual in a physical form by using dynamic, balanced, harmonious, mysterious, and various elements in a transcendental discourse. This creates a distinct identity for human; an identity which is realized by his separation from the material constraints and inclination to eternity and heavens. In the ideas of Burckhardt, sacred art establishes a bilinear connection among material and immaterial worlds. The Muslim artist finds himself at an endless source by connecting to the other world; he drinks from this spring and shows what he observes in his works. He writes in his book the mirror of reason "the new science is neither beautiful nor searching for the beauty; it is merely an analytical knowledge that barely looks at things intuitively. In the view of Burckhardt the sacred art is based on knowledge and recognition of forms which are based on the encrypted order and associated with these forms. The final goal of sacred art is not to recall and remind the feelings or transferring the effects but it is encryption and hence it does not need but the simple and basic instruments it has. From one hand, since the patterns of sacred art are a reflection of the ultra-mundane world and the forms have a celestial origin, verbal language is incapable to describe it and it used the language of symbols. Burckhardt applies the sacred and religious features along with traditional features and considers the two words as completing each other; as we move from tradition toward religion and sacred affairs, the sacredness increases (Burckhardt, 1976, 1967). Sign is not only an arbitrary supposition, but based on rule of existence, it manifests its type (Burckhardt, 1968).

#### **5. SACRED ARCHITECTURE**

Iran has been the center of Islamic civilization especially the Islamic art. The fundamentals of Islamic sacred art can be looked for in its land. Iranian art is among the climaxes of Islamic art. In order to realize sacred art, the meaning of "sacred affair" and "art" should be understood first. At present, this art has been separated from the lives of us and isolated in the museums. Of course the origin of sacred affair is the spiritual world which is beyond the mundane world and it must not be mistaken. Dr. Rahbarnia in his article "the interface of sacred affair with technology" describes that the most extensive, general and generous sacred space is the nature world that God has created and represents the highest sacredness. Sacred place is where the connection between this world and the other world, the material world and heaven, the world of Gods and world of the dead becomes possible. From the beginning, the image of three cosmic points—generally sky, earth and, under-earth—has come to the

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minds of humankind, hence he has admitted that their connection is impossible because they are not connected to each other. In the view of sacred art ideology, a meaning is implicated in everything, and the complement of any external figure and form is an internal reality and nature which has a qualitative dimension (Ardalan and Bakhtiar, 2001). In Iranian Islamic architecture especially in Shi'a mosques, the beliefs and thoughts have guided the architecture which ultimately leads to sacred quality in the work of architect.

Sacred art takes human minds to an abstract and meaningful space to free them from multiplicity and diverse icons, to free their mind from the pressure of tensions, narcissism, and self-obsessions of "ego" and connects the individual to a vision of unity. However, sacred art in the mind of human is dependent on the reality. Hence, the intuitive experiences and inspirations and sacred perceptions are not formless and they are dependent to time and location of mind and its experimental perceptions.



**Figure 1.** Dome of Imam Mosque in Naqshe Jahan Sq., Isfahan, Iran.



In Islam architecture begins with mosque. The first mosques were splendid buildings, their construction was very expensive and traditional Iranian architecture has been used for their decorations. Hillenbrand defines mosque in his book *Islamic architecture* as the manifest of mysteries of Islamic Iranian architecture and the heart of it. He believes that "Muslims realized its symbolic role from the beginning and this important role was represented in creation of visual indicators of this building such as dome, minaret, and pulpit. The final goal of mosque architecture is to present the deepest type of unity of life; hence, its general concept is focused on it.

### 6. SIGNS AND SYMBOLS IN SHI'A MOSQUES




Through symbolism, human is able to give sublimity to his personal position and achieve a social goal-oriented life...every product of human can be seen as a sign and instrument which serves the purpose of order (giving meaning) to certain proportions between human and his surrounding environment and the nonverbal behavior is as dependent as verbal behavior to the systematic symbolic systems. The goal of symbolism is to remove the borders among the societies of dispersed humans and their world, and uniting him with the tempo of nature.

Religious art is the result of the committed artist's efforts to express the religious principles and concepts in the form of art, in a way that his work is separate from any personal and earthly perceptions. In

Islamic society, where the traditions of Islam are dominant, every section of life including art and architecture is related to spirituality and Islamic principles. Art is the most direct manifest of Islamic principles. Since the connection with cosmology is the common feature of all traditional architectural styles and since the art of architecture seeks to create the best possible space for human living, the conflux of human, cosmology and architecture in Islamic civilization is called "Masjed (mosque)" which means the place of Sijdah (to prostrate before god).

Concepts and symbols in Islamic mosques		
	Image	Symbol
<b>Dome</b>		The form of dome is a symbol of the universe, it existed thorough the history in different forms among nations and civilizations. From the frontal perspective, the conical form of dome reminds of divine insight that is always present and observant of all his creatures. From the inside perspective, it is embellished with designs and colors of Islamic architecture and associates movement toward center of the dome; this consistency of ideas are in line with the eternal principle of creation i.e. unity.
<b>Minbar (pulpit)</b>		Minbar is the utterer of the tradition of Prophet of Islam (Pbuh). A narrow step decorated by sculpted designs. Through the history its height has increased. It is a symbol of ladder, starting from the earth toward the skies.

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<b>Minaret</b>		<p>The introduction of minaret to Islamic architecture illustrates the continuity and consistency of eternal concepts. It reminds of the figure of a human standing among other creatures, the only one such a creature.</p> <p>From the internal view, the spiral steps and restricted space of minaret is the symbol of enthusiasm and difficulties of ascending and return. From one hand, the appearance of minaret has a close relation with numbers and their implications: alone and one, akin to God, to <sup>۱</sup> (A, first letter of Persian alphabet) which points at the start of readership and the communication between God and human.</p>
<b>Iwan</b>		<p>Mosque as one of the most important buildings in the architecture of Islamic cities was always built in the downtown or populated parts such as bazars. This entrance is a distinct symbol of movement from multiplicity to unity.</p>
<b>Mihrab (altar)</b>		<p>The form of Mihrab or its arches remind of the sky and its dished floor is a symbol of cave of material world. Someone who stands in there, fills the space between earth and sky, he is the one who accepts to guide people toward Qibla and echoes his sound in the Mihrab and projects it to the ears of others.</p>

One of the wonderful beauties of Islamic architecture is its decorations which are used in different forms in various parts of Islamic buildings. This means that Islamic decorations have an important role in the beauty and ornament of building as well as in their strength and coloring. Hence a decorative art is told to that kind of art which is useful in terms of designs and coloring as well as specific features. By familiarity with the language of decorations, the human can read designs like poems, and forget the self by following the twists and turns of its subtle forms. The single decorative designs especially in great

mosques are beyond mere beautification. Maybe in a western eye, these designs seem mere decorations although it is decorative it is a display of traditional and visual symbols. This structural and decorative form has a celestial quality.

## 7. THE PRINCIPLES AND FUNDAMENTALS OF SACRED SUPPOSITIONS

### Unity:

Unification and the emanation of God's unity in the texture of physical body is one of the main factors which shape spiritual identity and sacred culture. This concept is founded on the principle of unity in the Islamic ideology and has generated the principle of movement from multiplicity to unity. The traditional city crystallizes "unity in multiplicity" in a deep sense. This principle is among the fundamental principles of Iranian architecture and urban planning is derived from the Islamic belief of "Tawhid" (oneness of God) and can be observed saliently in traditional cities (Razavipoor, 2012).

### Symbolism and encryption:

Different types of symbolism are grouped in the following categories:

- Conventional symbolism
- Simulative symbolism
- Formal and figurative symbolism
- Content and conceptual symbolism

In Islamic civilization conceptual symbolism is used. All natural elements are considered as the manifest, and emanation of God's names and attributes. Any rational and thoughtful observer sees a sign and attribute of a wise creator in every leaf. He uses nature in material forms, and also benefits from the splendid and spiritual thoughts of it in his mystical journey. The self-built and prominent architects reach high degrees of mysticism; even forms, figures, geometries, colors and images are inspired to them from the above world (Mahdinejad, Sadeghi Habib-abad, 2015).

In Islamic architecture, symbolism is applied in two ways. The first way is to make tangible the world of ideas. In this method, the quality which exists in the world of ideas is presented to the audience in a way that is sensible for the five senses. Using the images of gardens of heaven, mirror, light and shadows are instances of an earthly illustration of the idea of heaven. The other method which is more mysterious and transcendental is "ascension of thought to the world of ideas" or going beyond the sensible world, realized through contemplation. Logical thinking in this field refers to seeking the interrelations and mental connections of different architectural elements (cinema in the perspective of thought).

## 8. CONCLUSION

Regarding the statements of Dr. Nasr, traditional art and in particular Iranian sacred art has left a magical legacy behind. The Iranians have created an art with their great talent and pure intentions which is simultaneously spiritual and sensory, reminds of the transient and ephemeral nature of the world, betrays its beauty, symbolizes the divine emanation in the forms and designs, and reminds the superior and celestial nature of them. In the time when darkness and ugliness has dominated earth and threatens soul to death and mortality, this legacy is still an alive tangible reality for most of the Iranians, it has a global value and should be introduced to all others.

The architectural elements in mosques such as dome, altar and minaret, etc. provided the ground for symbolic expression of beliefs, rituals, and culture of Muslims. From one hand, they became the place for emanation of decorative geometrical designs to strengthen the basis of this holy place more and more. On the other hand, these decorations which are full of forms and colors give a special identity to religious sites such as mosques, tombs, shrines and schools in the Islamic lands. Investigating and knowing these designs make us familiar with the social and religious culture and traditions of the people of these lands and provides the ground for proper and continuous application of them in modern architecture.



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