

Lagos Central Mosque

Archives of African Architectures Project

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Aerial View of the Lagos Central Mosque, by Abolaji Razaq, 2019 ^[1]

Amidst a busy and chaotic urbanscape lies a most unlikely building typology that stands out and blends simultaneously with its environment. In the middle of one of the most visited commercial centres in West Africa is the site of one of the iconic mosques on Lagos Island. In a city such as Lagos with a vast collection of religious buildings- churches and mosques alike, this one stands out in its sheer grandiosity and overall symbolism. The view of its minarets and golden plated dome rising up to the sky can be seen as far away as the Third Mainland Bridge, one of the major accesses to the island. It has become a landmark of this commercial centre.

The present day Lagos Central Mosque holds an interesting architectural history. Its current site on the former Victoria Street (now Nnamdi Azikiwe Street) has witnessed multiple rebuilding and expansion since it was acquired in 1864.^[2] Its first structure built in the same year was constructed with mud and bamboo - common

building materials of the time. It was rebuilt a decade after and displayed a significant advancement in its building materials of burnt brick and corrugated iron sheets for roofing.^[3]

The need for a bigger mosque to house the growing Muslim population in Lagos gave rise to the proposal of a new mosque in 1905. It took more than 10 years to complete and was finally opened in 1913.^[4] The Baroque style building designed by Joao Baptist da Costa was said to be an outstanding architectural feat during its days.^[5] However, more than half a century after, the demand for a new edifice emerged.



Old Lagos Central Mosque from 1913 to 1983 Photo: John Picton, 1983^[5]

The present day Lagos central mosque officially opened on May 28, 1988.[4] The new mosque was to serve as a bigger edifice befitting of its status as the central mosque for a growing Muslim population and a rapidly urbanizing city. The construction which lasted for about fifteen years resulted in the expansion of the old site to what we see today.[4]

This structure along the Nnamdi Azikiwe Street encompasses an area of about 1 acre. Its exterior features include four ottoman style minarets arranged symmetrically- two above the entrance area and two recessed to the east and west sides of the building.[6] Although its historical purpose may have become obsolete, these features give this building its identity as they soar through the sky and can be seen miles away.



Lagos Central Mosque Minarets Photo: Chukwuka Tolulope Obu, 2016^[7]

As one enters the premises, an array of steps meets the eyes. This experience is not much a confrontation as it is a warm invitation. Rising up these welcoming features creates a new experience as you leave the noise and batter on the street into a higher and spiritual realm.

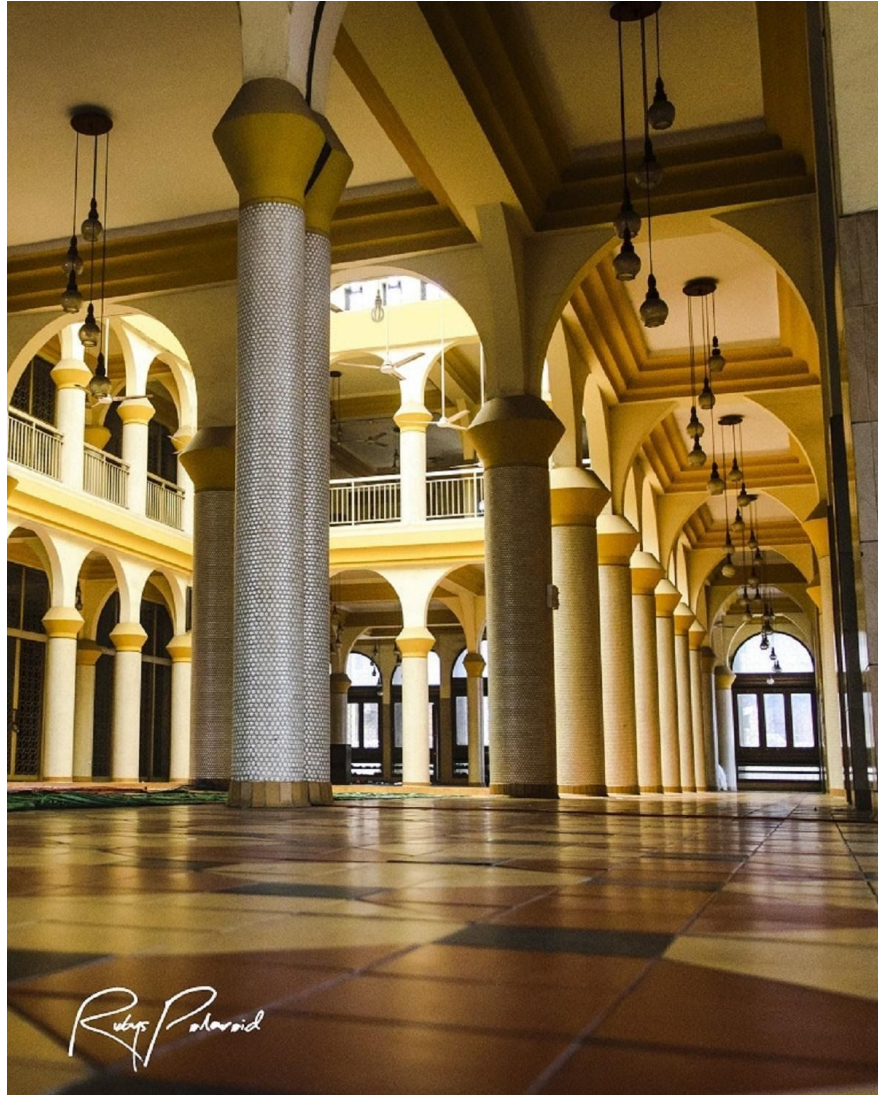
The entry into the mosque is through large doorways that are ornamented with recessing stepped frames. The three doorways lead into the *riwaq*(arcade) just before the prayer area serve as a transition between the outdoors and indoors.^[6] It is a closed space covered by roof trusses and a see through roofing membrane which allows a flood of sunlight through during the day.



Logos Central Mosque Riwaq. Photo: Olajide Ayenii, 2017^[8]

The double volume prayer area just after the *riwaq* is demarcated by iron screen walls with geometric decorations. This geometric rhythm is continued on the horseshoe shaped openings on all sides of the space. It also houses the beautiful art of calligraphy which are positioned on the walls and the dome above. This space cannot be completely described without this remarkable dome hovering over it. The 15 metres diameter wide architectural element is at the centre of 16 smaller domes arranged in a grid of fives. The main dome is perforated with thirty-six openings that are shaped as a combination of horseshoe arches and rectangles. These openings are accentuated by blue tiles and calligraphy below it. As light penetrates through these openings, it brings the interior to life giving depth to this space with profound spiritual attributes. Emerging from the dome are the pendentives that extend as tapering capitals for the columns that reach for the ground.

The whole structure is supported by an array of columns. The columns, aligned on a grid that originate from the pendentives, are decorated with mosaic tiles. Their arrangements form horseshoe arches as they travel away from the eyes. The arches are most prominently seen in the hallway that overlook the courtyards flanking the prayer area on both sides. This hallway leads to the madrasa and office blocks at the rear of the building. The blend of coloured arches and mosaic tiled columns exhibit the beauty of repetition in an architectural style that has lasted for many centuries.



Lagos Central Mosque Columns. Photo: Tolulope Sanusi, 2017^[9]

The ceiling on the first floor covers the praying area that overlooks the dome. It clearly depicts the spaces carved out by the domes-big and small, that grace its cover. The recessing stepped decorative element on the

doorway openings is also evident on the ceiling which is arranged into modules as a result of the column composition.

A striking feature that cannot be overlooked as one circulates this building is the detailing of geometric shapes. The octagonal star is significant in the mosque and is represented on almost all surfaces from the metal ornamentation of the openings, the tiles on the base of the dome, the balusters overlooking the void of the prayer area, the floor finishes and even on the doors. It holds a great symbolic attribute to this building as it is well articulated on almost all architectural features.



Octagonal star geometry screens at Lagos Central Mosque. Photo: Adefolatiwa Taiwo Toyé, 2018^[10]

Finally, the minarets provide access to one of the awe striking views of Lagos from the building. This view lies on the rooftop of the mosque. The only access to this space is the narrow spiral staircase enclosed in the minaret. But as you reach the landing it makes the journey worth it. The gleaming gold plated dome can be seen up close and the minarets become more intimate to the gaze. The once distant noise of the market below reaches the foreground and you are greeted with the view of the immediate horizon. It is at this spot that I truly appreciate the significance of this iconic landmark.



Lagos Central Mosque Rooftop View of Domes. Photo: Tolulope Sanusi, 2017^[1]

It shows how architecture can document the life of a city so well as it transforms through the ages. The Lagos Central Mosque transcends the spiritual purpose. For me, it is an example of what architecture strives to be. A structure that has become a part of the story of Lagos and still stands tall for decades. By serving an array of purposes for worshippers and visitors, it has become a symbolic example of architecture that has blended with the integral fabric of the society. It is one that invites me and welcomes me warmly every single time.

NOTES:

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- [3] Balogun, Muhsin Adekunle. *Syncretic Beliefs and Practices amongst Muslims in Lagos State Nigeria; with Special Reference to the Yoruba Speaking People of Epe*. 2011. University of Birmingham, PhD dissertation.
- [4] Lagos Central Mosque. “Our History.” *Lagos Central Mosque Jamaatul Muslimeen Council*, www.lagoscentralmosque.org/history.html. Accessed 6 May 2020.
- [5] Behrens-Abouseif, D., and Vernoit, S., editors. *Islamic Art in the 19th Century: Tradition, Innovation and Eclecticism*. Brill, 2006.
- [6] Petersen, A. *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture*. Psychology Press, 1996.
- [7] Obu, Chukwuka Tolulope “Lagos Central Mosque (Lagos Island) view into the sky, worship center/building for Muslims” Wikimedia Commons, 2016, www.commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lagos_Central_Mosque.jpg. Accessed 5 August 2020.
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- [9] Sanusi, Tolulope. “Central Mosque Grand Atrium.” Rubyspolaroid, 2017, www.rubyspolaroid.wordpress.com/tag/mosque/#jp-carousel-4176 Accessed 9 November 2020.
- [10] Toyé, Adefolatomíwa T. “Lagos Central Mosque: Window Bars.” 2018. JPG File.
- [11] Sanusi, Tolulope. “Lagos Central Mosque Rooftop.” Rubyspolaroid, 2017, www.rubyspolaroid.wordpress.com/tag/mosque/#jp-carousel-4176 Accessed 9 November 2020.