

A Mosque Between Significance and Style

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The style of Quranic inscriptions on a North American masjid (mosque) in North America represents a dialogue between two equally valid frames of reference; the tradition of Islamic art, and the Muslim Diaspora. The Islamic Center of Washington DC represents one of many interesting examples of the use of inscriptions in North America. Conceived in 1949, the building was inaugurated by President Eisenhower in 1957. The principal client was a Palestinian Muslim, but the financial sponsors of the building were several Muslim ambassadors from the Middle East, Turkey, and the Indian subcontinent, who were assigned to Washington, DC. Although not the first masjid to be established in the US, it was the first one to appear in a major American city. The inauguration of the Washington masjid signalled a major turning point

**Islamic Center,
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The meaning and interpretation of the inscriptions on a mosque in North America provide some insights into the concomitant qualities of belief, order, space, and form. Mosque inscriptions reveal the American Muslim community's concern with the expressive nuances of Islamic art and architecture, for this community has long recognized that the extreme stylistic characteristics of an inscription—except with little variation—can be expressed in any medium.

in the development of masjid architecture in America.¹The first historical document about the Washington masjid was published by Muhammad Abdul-Rauf (1978), former Imam of the Islamic Center of Washington DC; it explained the intriguing history of the building. More recent publications are intended to enable art historians to understand the “pluralistic” genres of the North American community and the complex features of aesthetics treatment.²

The genre of aesthetic features employed in the Washington masjid can best be understood by studying the inscriptions that depict both meaning and style. The meanings of the inscriptions allow for an interpretation of what is actually represented as well as for the construction of a history of the American masjid. However, like similar religious buildings elsewhere, difficulties remain with regard to interpreting the stylistic qualities of the North American masjid, which are mainly derived from a “mixed bag” of conventions, from Muslim Art and from the circumstances of Diaspora in North America.

Deciphering the text of any inscription is surely overwhelming for a faithful believer who is not adept in reading Arabic or recognizing the nuances of a writing style from among the seven major styles—which could mean the majority of American Muslims. Although each inscription is primarily addressed to the community with the intention of furthering its knowledge of the religious tradition, it is necessarily of interest to art historians who are also concerned with deciphering aesthetic elements. Close ties bind together the religious customs of a Diaspora Muslim community with those of the larger global community (ummah). It is primarily for this reason that inscriptions are indeed informative, even if the style remains essentially conventional, or defies straightforward interpretation. It is also in this sense that there is something impressive about the attempts made by the builders of the Washington masjid to engage the mind in contemplation; every inscription enhances the spirit of devotion.

Dialogue: religious significance and style

The Washington DC masjid was designed by Mario Rossi, an Italian Muslim architect, who also designed several buildings of this type in Alexandria and Cairo between 1940 and 1950. Rossi's design for the building is reminiscent of Mamluk architectural vocabulary from twelfth-fifteenth century Egypt while it clearly ignores the American architectural context: it makes no effort to invoke American architectural language. Insofar as possible traditional crafts and materials were imported from Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, along with skilled craftsmen, needed for the making of the building.

The three-*iwan* (vaulted hall) plan is framed by an exterior double *riwaq* (arcade or portico open on at least one side), which serves as an extra-mural space or *ziyadah*. The arcade remains parallel with the street, but the plan of the masjid is purposely tangential to conform to the qiblah axis, which was calculated by using the Great Circle to face Makkah. Typically, a Mamluk building would have a *sahn* or courtyard open to the sky, sharing a contiguous function and circulation with the iwans. Owing to the climate in North America, a clearstory dome encloses the *sahn* of the mosque. A *riwaq*, consisting of five contiguous arches serves as a horizontal entry portal, and street facade. For additional emphasis an inscription band of Kufic script is placed at the upper part of the facade. It reads: “In houses of worship which Allah has permitted to be raised so that His name be remembered, in them, there [are such who] extol His limitless glory at morning and evening” (*Surat*



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al-Nur 24:36).

Several verses of the Quran have been arranged in a symmetrical configuration and in various patterns on the interior walls and ceilings of the masjid. The Divine Names of Allah (*asma'i Allah al-husna*) and many often-quoted verses from the Quran are inscribed in large framed borders of *thuluth* script along with smaller framed panels of ornamental Kufic script. Two inscription bands run horizontally across the face of the mihrab. The one at the top reads: "Verily we have seen the turning of your face to the heaven" (and the lower band, just slightly higher than a man's height, continues) "surely we shall turn you to a qiblah that shall please you." (*Surat al-Baqara* 2:144). The mihrab is a hybrid element: its decorative treatment employs Iznik and Bursa traditional glazed tiles—blue, red, and green—which are commonly found in Classical Ottoman buildings. As a whole, the Washington masjid epitomizes an array of Muslim aesthetic themes; moreover, the inscriptions evoke a rich symbolic meaning, which creates a quiet, devotional atmosphere.

One of the defining elements of inscriptions that we have discussed is the simulation of two modes of aesthetic reasoning: one "universal" and the other "particular." Firstly, the aesthetic image of the "universal" embraces convention and origin; it expresses its own mimetic essence as well by asserting meaning and truth. It is self-evident in its relationship to the world and therefore, it maintains the right to exist. Secondly, the "particular" mode of expression, which seeks to find its own American identity, in the face of obvious social and cultural realities, is a dynamic gesture that represents innovation and change.

The Washington masjid provides a convincing narrative. Firstly, the skilful use of inscriptions can be traced back to an earlier epoch. Clearly Rossi felt free to use a variety of inscriptions to create a nostalgic composition, which borrows from a different place and time. Secondly, the edifice provokes a number of questions concerning the syncretic use of extant features in an American masjid. Thirdly, it evokes cultural values related to time, space, memory, and beauty. In the production of religious art and architecture, the American Muslim community claim one or more of these values. Memory is crucial to Muslims in the Diaspora, because it can be used as mechanism for maintaining various cultural habits and customs thus keeping these sentiments alive in an alien environment. Finally, the principles that underlie sacred art and architec-

ture are fundamentally linked to religious communities in the "East" and the "West." Variations in space, form, and aesthetic expression may be affected by varying geographical or regional conditions while the operative tenets of dogma remain constant. Dogma transcends aesthetic considerations, although aesthetic considerations are recognized as being inseparable from belief. Sacred aesthetics are inextricably linked to sacred symbols and forms, and are thus reflected in the laying-out of sacred space. Within the character of sacred space we often find principles of "traditional" form. That is, religious practice invariably influences the principles and the processes of art and architecture. In the design of the contemporary mosque, we observe the search for a "new" taxonomy of content. In the Muslim world, it is often "historicism" and the struggle to deal with cultural and regional building traditions; in the West, it can easily be a fusion of "kitsch" with "postmodern aesthetics" which dominates the aesthetics genre. In both cases, there is a need to extract the underlying formative and generative aesthetic principles, which have been rooted in the mosque as an authentic typological model or archetype. Art is not created ex-nihilo.

Islamic Center, Washington DC

Notes

1. See Muhammad Abdul Rauf, *Al-Markaz al-Islami bi-Washington* [The Islamic Center of Washington] (Washington, DC: Colortone Press, 1978).
2. See, Akel Ismail Kahera, "The Arts III: Visual and Religious Art," in *Encyclopaedia of American Immigration*, ed. James Ciment and Immanuel Ness (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., June 2001).

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