

THE NEW MOSQUE AND ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTRE IN ROME

James Steele reports on the recently-completed mosque by the Italian firm Portoghesi-Gigliotti and the Iraqi architect Sami Mousawi.

The initiative to build the Rome Mosque dates back to 1972. The ambassadors of all the Islamic countries assigned to Italy, together with representatives of the Muslim residents, approached the President of the Republic to set up the Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia in the ancient city. While its main purpose was to serve the Muslim community, the foundation charter of the Cultural Centre also declared that it should become an international forum to encourage a dialogue between Islam and the Western world.

In 1975, at the behest of the Italian government, the City Council of Rome graciously donated a 30,000 square metre building site to the new corporation. The site is located at the base of Monte Antenne, and is bounded by the Roma-Nord railway on one side, and the Via G. Pezzana on the other. In the same year, the board of directors of the Cultural Centre also sponsored an international competition and a jury of experts on Islamic architecture and culture selected two projects, submitted by Iraqi architect Sami Mousawi and the firm of Portoghesi-Gigliotti, respectively. The Centro Islamico asked both architectural firms to collaborate on a project, which they agreed to do, and the final design was approved by the city council in 1983. The contract was given to the Rome-based firm Fortunato Federici in the following year.

In its final form, the complex includes a Juma mosque, prominently located towards the front of the site, along the Via G. Pezzana, which is designed to accommodate 2,000 worshippers, and the Cultural Centre itself, which also includes a smaller prayer hall for daily use; a library containing many rare books on Islamic culture; a 400 seat auditorium; exhibition space; reception halls; conference rooms and administrative offices. The Cultural Centre component of the project is organized in two lines behind the mosque, creating a horizontal backdrop between it and Monte Antenne. These two lines are then offset to accommodate the curving edge of the site, and have an open

courtyard between them. Large areas have been set aside for parking and landscaped gardens, which have been further enhanced by the addition of more than 100 Roman pines which the city council has had transplanted from Monte Antenne. The entire complex is built in straw-coloured brick, which has been hand-ground on both its outer edge and on the flat sides to which the mortar has been applied. This technique, which was used on many Roman mausoleums in the past, as well as the Antonio da Sangallo portion of the Farnese Palace and the Oratorio di S. Filippo o Neri by Borromini, was chosen because of its historical association with the city, as well as its elegant appearance. Travertine lintels on the windows and lead roofing complete this attempt at contextual integration.

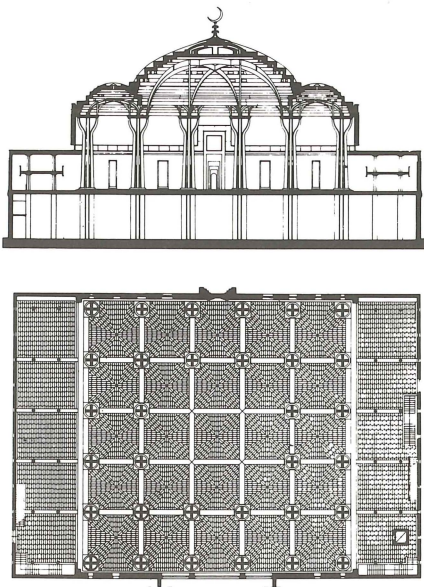
The mosque, which is the focal point of the Centre, is based on the typological format of a square hypostyle hall with a main dome, side aisles, and exterior courtyard, which is ingeniously used here to link the prayer hall with the cultural activities nearby. As explained by historian Dogan Kuban, this typology has evolved along with two others. Kuban puts it in the following way: "Three great Islamic cultures developed three great styles of mosque architecture. The first is the so-called Arabic mosque, the primary source of all further mosque design, which started with the Bayt of the Prophet (PBUH) ... its hallmark is the great hypostyle hall and courtyard integrated with it through the medium of an arcade system. After the fifth century (H) eleventh century A.D., another type of mosque ... developed in Iran and Central Asia. This was the so-called *iwān* type in which the *iwān* motif connected to a large domed hall was introduced. The third great style was that of the Ottoman Turks which found its full development in the hands of Sinan. Its conspicuous sign was the domed hall. In these mosques, instead of the homogeneous horizontality of the multi-support hall of the Arabic mosque, there was a unified single space under the domination of a single dome. It was a totally different concept of space which continued in a sense, the earlier

imperial traditions of the Mediterranean and the Near East; those of the Roman Pantheon and the Sassanian halls ...".¹

This characteristically concise explanation is important because it not only places the Mousawi/Portoghesi mosque within a precise tradition, but also emphasizes the cross-cultural fertilization that contributed to the central dome and exterior courtyard typology that Sinan finally developed. In a long list of references that Portoghesi himself offers as inspirations for his prayer hall there are almost an equal number from both the East and the West, reflecting the unilateral borrowing of forms that has actually taken place over time. While his list also shows a marked personal preference for the baroque, it is generally indicative of his thorough knowledge of history. It includes the domes of the mosques of Tlemcen Cordoba and the Abencerrajes of the Alhambra on the one hand, as well as the Cupolas of S. Lorenzo in Turin by Guarino Guarini and the Vallinotto Sanctuary by Vittone on the other.

At a symposium focusing on recent Italian architecture in Europe, held in London in spring 1991, Portoghesi also discussed the organic origins of the unusual columns used in the Rome mosque. Despite Bertolt Brecht's assertion that it is now difficult to praise the beauty of a tree because it signifies a contradiction in an increasingly industrialized world, Portoghesi feels that there is no better symbol with which to express the diversity inherent in the unity of Islam. The roots, trunk, branches and leaves of the tree, like the various countries in which Islam prevails, are all different, and yet work together as a complete organism. In this regard, he referred to the Suna of Light, which says "God is the light of the heavens and the earth, and likens his light to a Niche in which is a lamp, and the lamp is a crystal, and the crystal is like a bright star, and the lamp burns with the oil of a blessed tree, an olive tree, neither oriental nor Western, the oil of which almost shines without touching fire. It is light upon light and God guides His light to whom He wishes, and God tells parables to men,

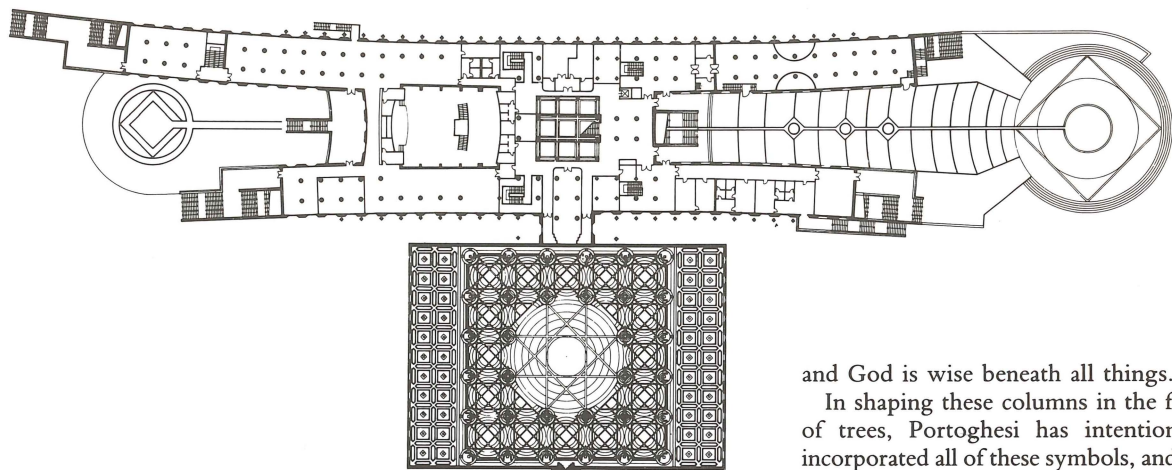
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Plan and section, main prayer hall.



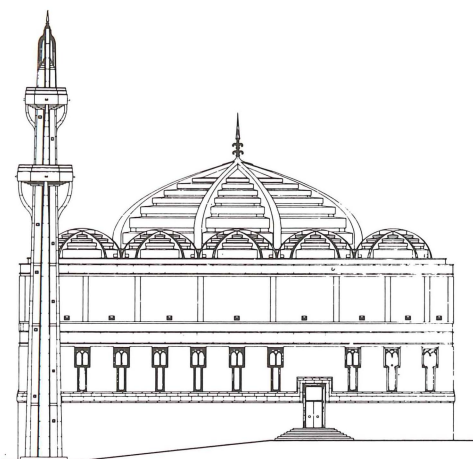
The prayer hall.



Plan of the mosque and Cultural Centre.

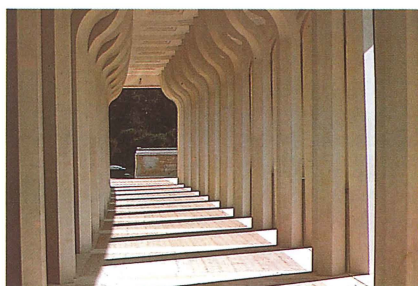
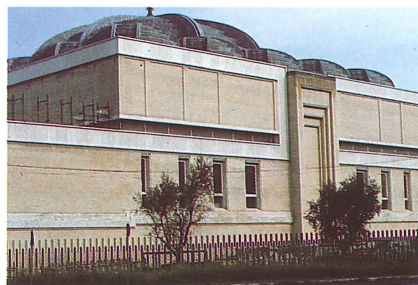
and God is wise beneath all things.”²

In shaping these columns in the form of trees, Portoghesi has intentionally incorporated all of these symbols, and has made the hypostyle portion of the prayer hall, which Kuban has shown to be vestigial to the first mosque, reminiscent of the date palms that were used there. These columns, which seem to defy gravity, are made of four sections joined together and widen at the top to suggest palm fronds or a dendritic canopy, as well as hands opened up in prayer. These capitals extend up into a system of interwoven arches that are also evident in the historical examples cited by Portoghesi, ending in concentric circles as the symbol of eternity. The arches are made of pre-fabricated white concrete and the roof is finished in encaustic plaster, which was typical of ancient Roman architecture.



South west Section, main prayer hall.

Left: View of the mosque and the sahan of the Islamic Centre.



Notes

1. Kuban, Dogan, unpublished introduction to a seminar on 'Contemporary Islamic Architecture' held at King Faisal University, March 1987. Expanded version on the Turkish mosque published in *Al-Bana*, 1987.
2. *Al-Ouran*, sura 35, 'An-Nur', p. 301, translation by Ahmed Ali, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1984.