Contemporary Expressions of Islam in Buildings:
The Religious and the Secular

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The topic of this seminar is vast. This introductory paper intends to examine contemporary expressions of Islam in buildings. The choice of plurals ("expressions", "buildings") is intentional. It is not just a single expression of a single idealized Islam that concerns us. Rather, it is "Islam" as a system of beliefs, as an articulator of values, as a key agent in the formulation of socio-cultural identity, and social and political force, and as a wellspring of spiritual strength and inspiration that is intended. And because these multidimensional manifestations vary from country to country and from region to region, we are dealing with a complex set of realities. Furthermore, these realities are viewed through a prismatic crystal that brings to bear history, myth, and value-laden symbolism. It is a difficult task indeed to disentangle so many elements to arrive at "a truthful image". So let us be realistic enough to talk of expressions rather than just "Islam".

We have, by the nature of our field of endeavour, limited the range of expressions considered to those related to building. But, in this introductory paper, it is perhaps better to emphasize "buildings", for building as a social function, as process, and as an end-product is also a vast domain. To do so will enable us to look at some architectural examples and to try to relate them to the forces at work in contemporary expressions of Islam, and to find manifestations of those expressions in the examples provided.

With these caveats, it is pertinent to look at some of the questions involved:

• The spiritual and the temporal in contemporary Muslim societies;
• Some societal issues, to provide the context for the discussion of architectural examples;
• The changing function of the mosque in relation both to other buildings and to the changing societal context;
• The symbolism of mosque architecture, which remains paramount even though our concerns transcend mosque architecture;
• Some notable contemporary projects that illustrate the points raised in the preceding sets of issues;
• The identification of patterns and trends in the architectural examples; and,
• The definition of a summative framework to capture (in matrix form) the interactions between the socio-cultural and the architectural.

From such an overview, the unfolding programme of the seminar can be better seen as the systematic filling in of the different facets of the vast domain we will have just barely identified.

Background: The Spiritual in Contemporary Muslim Societies

Muslim societies, in the throes of rapid modernization, are being buffeted by major changes in demographic structure, rural-urban

Mosques in Morocco (top) and China (above)
Photographs: H.-U. Khan/AKAA; C. Little/AKAA.
The tremendous variability of the physical manifestations of the architecture of Muslim societies is evidenced in these examples of mosques from Morocco, China (preceding page), Egypt (top), and Mali (above). Trying to find surface commonalities between such diverse structures misses the point when seeking the very real, though subtle, common thread that makes them part of the broader whole that defines the architecture of Muslim societies.

Photographs: Archives AKAA; S. Basak/AKAA

balance, productive economic base, and established social order. Extremely rapid urbanization, population growth, and a revolution in transport and telecommunications have all contributed to an unprecedented socio-cultural ferment in the two generations that have taken charge of the independent Muslim world.

To these trends, one must also add an evolving notion of cultural identity, which has been badly shaken by the experience of the last thirty years. Secularization and modernity, both ill-defined concepts only vaguely understood by the elites, were widely embraced as the prevailing ethos of the newly independent Muslim societies, with the possible exceptions of Pakistan, whose very foundation was its Islamic identity, and the Arabian peninsula, whose history and cultural evolution represent a very special case in the Muslim world. But that ethos is now ebbing, and a powerful new tide is rising, calling for a "return to traditional values", and emphasizing spiritual values versus crass materialism. Unfortunately, the new tide is mostly being channelled in a very dogmatic, narrow-minded, if not obscurantist, direction.

Where do the intellectuals of the Muslim world stand in the context of this major interplay of cultural currents and ideas?

This must be the starting point for treating the issues of the spiritual and the temporal in the built environment of Muslim societies today. It is also the key to understanding the architecture of the mosque in contemporary Muslim societies, as well as specific manifestations of other building types, since the cultural milieu is the essential framework within which this set of issues must be addressed.

The seminar discussions would greatly benefit from a common understanding of some key concepts, ideas, and terms, including modernity, tradition, secular, spiritual, sacred, profane, etc. Our speakers are therefore invited to be precise in the manner in which they use these terms and constructs.

As well, our discussions should progress with the following questions in mind:

- What are the differences between the characteristics of the spiritual functions of Islam as a religion and Islam as a culture and social identity in today's Muslim societies?
- What is the role of the spiritual in the built environment of contemporary Muslim societies?
- What is the role of the mosque, as an institution and as a symbol, in the twin currents of spiritual rejuvenation and societal identity?
- What is the manifestation of the preceding factors in the changing patterns of the architecture of Muslim societies today?

Some Societal Issues

In order to put the discussion of the architectural examples (especially those of the mosque) into a societal context, it is pertinent to address some of the following issues:
Local non-Islamic characteristics owing to climatic, geographic, traditional, or other reasons can be very diverse, as exemplified symbolically by the two top diagrams. Combining a subtle overlay that Islam brings (symbolized by the common middle diagram) with the originals results in two different-looking outcomes (symbolized by the two bottom diagrams). Those who try to compare only the final appearance of the two bottom diagrams may find nothing in common between them — as do many observers who limit their review of the architecture of Muslim societies only to the physical manifestations of the buildings. Yet the common thread (middle diagram) is certainly there and indeed contributes much to the final outcome.

Diagram: I. Serageldin

- The role of Islam in society’s definition of self, and whether it differs among the various social classes;
- The changing social functions of the mosque and its place in the socio-cultural fabric of the various communities of the country;
- The links to the past as cultural and artistic sources of legitimacy and inspiration for action;
- The role of the state and local communities in organizing mutual support systems and in funding and building mosques. These issues of sponsorship are important in understanding some of the architectural as well as socio-political manifestations of the phenomena at hand.
- The degree to which the presumed dichotomy of “modernity” and “tradition” is relevant to the preceding issues;
- The degree to which the social culture is integrated and capable of adopting, adapting, and integrating new external elements;
- The symbols, if any, that are meaningful to different social groups and their evolution through time.

The existence of communities of Muslims in the West introduces special issues in this general discussion. The identity of these Muslims is severely at risk, as their adopted lands, with their extremely powerful cultural influences, seek directly or indirectly to absorb and assimilate them. The maintenance of a sense of self and community, especially among the second and third generations of immigrants, poses a real challenge.

In this context, the mosques that these communities have built acquire a special significance. They are the community’s primary means of self-expression, and they invariably serve as community centres as well as prayer buildings. The special needs of this increasingly large group of Muslims should be addressed both in the context of the philosophical and sociological issues they raise and in the specific buildings they have created, which should also be evaluated in architectural terms.

One of these mosques, the Sherefudin White Mosque in Visoko, Yugoslavia, was an Aga Khan Award winner, but it was built by a well-established community going back many generations. There are, however, many other structures, the products of recently settled communities, that deserve our special attention.

Finally, the role of women in contemporary Muslim society raises some issues that must be addressed if we are not to suppress the contributions of half of our population.

The Changing Function of the Mosque in Contemporary Society

It is important to recognize the interlinked strands of two general themes: the evolution of the functions of the mosque as a building and as a social element; and the forces that are introducing substantial changes in Muslim societies themselves. It is clear that the interaction
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Among several simplistic dichotomies that plague our ability to address the issues is one of modernity and tradition. Yet this unique fifteenth-century calligraphy (top) vibrates with as much "modernity" as any Mondrian painting. The recent efforts of talented Arab artists to use calligraphy, such as Kamal Boullata's work (above), show how the present still finds wellsprings of inspiration from the past, as represented by the Kufic script of a tenth-century A.D. Quran (top right).

Photographs: Courtesy of I. Serageldin

of these two themes is at the heart of a better understanding of the changing function of the mosque.

Under the first theme, the evolving functions of the mosque would include traditional prayer space, community focus, school, landmark, and centre of legislation, learning, and social gathering. These functional changes have to be positioned vis-à-vis the evolution, growth, and complexity of Muslim societies: from the Prophet's in Medina to those in the medieval golden age. From the nineteenth century, one begins to distinguish a wide variety of new structures coming into play, with the mosque gradually losing some of its traditional functions, at the same time that Muslim societies were confronting Western modernism for the first time. The spin-off of the non-prayer functions of the mosque into different building types has resulted in a gradual diminution of the demands on a single mosque building. This development could have been liberating for mosque architecture, but effectively it has increasingly confined it within a set of predetermined architectural idioms. Finally, the recent trends in the evolution of mosques that indicate a return to a more full-fledged array of social functions should be noted.

In parallel with the first theme, the rapidly changing character of Muslim societies has to be understood in the context of rising demographic pressures, the broadening of a secularized and modern education, the creation of new economic bases for society with huge shifts towards manufacturing and service industries, and the creation of very large cities, all of which impose issues of scale on architectural expression. But beyond scale, one must recognize that as the complexity of the modern urban scene increases, the townscape evolves rapidly and the role of the mosque as major landmark and organizer of space within the townscape is put in question by towering modern structures and the demands of an ever-increasing infrastructure.

The links between these two themes highlight a number of key issues:
This modern mosque structure, designed by Gulzar Haider for a Muslim community in Plainfield, Indiana, shows the use of a modern vocabulary which eschews the use of traditional architectural elements for external recognition. Photograph: Courtesy of Gulzar Haider

The old city of Damascus, seen from the air, both demonstrates the organic urban texture as well as the prominent place of the mosque. Photograph: I. Serageldin and S. El-Sadek, The Arab City, p. 96

Introduction

- To what extent were the functional changes reflected in the architectural form? Or did the architecture respond to other, more subtle symbolic messages while reflecting an ever-greater scope of building technology?
- Did alternative structures or activity nodes develop their own architectural lexicon? Modern universities have indeed chosen to build separate student centres and congregation areas and activity nodes, while relegating the mosque to a peripheral role. Can the functions of these different structures still be subsumed within the architectural constructs of a modern mosque?
- What do the problems of urban scale dictate in terms of defining the function of the mosque? Can there be a single Masjid Jami that serves the entire city? Does one have to consider a nested hierarchy of mosque structures to serve different scales?
- Can one redefine the multiple purposes of modern complexes as the new functions of a mosque structure, or is the mosque inevitably
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The Mostafa Mahmoud Mosque complex (top) includes a prayer area (centre) and many social facilities such as a medical unit (top right), a library (above) and a museum. It is the result of private, rather than state, sponsorship. Photographs: R. Fadel

to be relegated only to prayer by the necessities of responding to functional requirements?

The Symbolism of Mosque Architecture

Traditionally the mosque has played a central role in most Muslim environments as the organizer of space and society. It also defines the identity of the society and provides a point of reference to citizens and passers-by as well as travellers. The powerful symbolism of the mosque’s traditional architectural vocabulary is unique to Muslim culture and is uniquely identified with it, to the extent of being almost a shorthand designation for “Muslims”. The minaret, dome, gateway, and mihrab are all key elements of much of mosque architecture. They speak to all Muslims (and even to non-Muslims) with a powerful symbolism that transcends space and time. Yet today we witness the degradation of the symbols to signs and even signals. We have a substantial number of examples in which the deterioration of the semiotic frameworks of contemporary societies is reflected in a semantic disorder and a loss of architectural expression.

The historical examples raise another paradox: impressive monuments that have provided the sense of identity for societies in a culture of mass poverty. The ability to reproduce and relate to an architectural iconography that is connected primarily to wealth and opulence needs to be redefined. The dichotomies and tensions of contemporary Muslim societies, and their inability to confront their own selves, pose problems for all contemporary architects and all Muslim intellectuals.

Indeed one has to recognize the need to resymbolize the existing environment in Muslim societies as a fundamental task of contemporary intellectuals in the Muslim world (see the work of
Arkoun on this point). In the context of this discussion, we should focus on the intellectual content of the form-giving new architecture and on the role of a new architecture in reshaping and resymbolizing the environment.

A second strand to be woven into this background discussion is the study of how the problem of modernizing the architectural language of religious buildings has been handled elsewhere, especially in the case of modern church architecture. The debates of the 1950s on the role of the established idioms (steeples, bell-towers, apses, etc.) within a modern view of the contemporary church building have relevance to debates on the architecture of the contemporary mosque.

Some Notable Contemporary Projects

The problems of designing the key buildings of a Muslim community involve many issues. The continuity of key symbolic elements (minaret, dome, gateway, and mihrab) can be transformed without being degraded and can be retained while voided of their content. It is the skill of the architects, the depth of their understanding of and their affinity with the communities concerned that makes the difference between kitsch and creativity. The Aga Khan Award winners have shown that creativity can have multiple manifestations, but that each design must be authentic and true to be effective. There are many ways of providing better mosques and areas of congregation that respond to the need of Muslim societies to anchor their self-identity into structures built today and that speak to them and their children as eloquently as the symbols of the past did to their parents and grandparents. Only by freeing the imagination and creativity of architects will this type of architecture make its all-important contribution to an integrated and integrating contemporary Muslim culture.

Our discussions, however, should transcend cataloguing the many interesting new examples of contemporary mosque architecture. We should try, through attentive and insightful criticism, to define patterns and, perhaps, identify trends.

Among the issues this seminar should address are the following:

- The emergence of the state mosque and the divorce of this massive public works structure from its societal milieu.
- The degree of success of novel architectural forms. How acceptable to the population are they? The Sherefudin White Mosque in Visoko, Yugoslavia, is a notable example of a modern structure that was not only accepted and used by the population but one that also generated pride. To what extent are other structures also elements of identification for their users and the surrounding society, and to what extent do they contribute to the development of a new symbolism that is read and understood by the population?

The Bhong Mosque complex is certainly understood and
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Project for the State Mosque of Iraq by Rasem Badran. The mosque is completely detached from a social environment and/or physical urban context. Photograph: Courtesy of Rasem Badran

The Sherejudin White Mosque of Visoko, Yugoslavia, a 1983 Aga Khan Award winner, shows a bold modern reinterpretation of the architecture of the mosque. Photograph: J. Betant/AAKA

appreciated by the population, but does it define a new symbolism or does it simply reflect a wave of populism?

- The visibility of mosques in the contemporary building environment, in spite of the emergence of other large modern structures, continues to underline their importance and impact as form-givers in contemporary architectural language. But are they performing the required role in developing new forms and new language?

- What is the place of traditional forms in contemporary mosques? How does one position the notable work of El-Wakil, for example, in the overall scheme of modernity and tradition in contemporary mosque architecture?

Patterns and Trends

To better understand the wealth of examples we have seen, it is helpful to position them within a matrix that looks at both building types and architectural approaches. A matrix can undoubtedly be used for all types of buildings, which will help draw forth the myriad manifestations of the spiritual in all facets of the built environment. It is hoped that the deliberations of this seminar will also reveal such expressions. For the present, and for simplicity, let us review such a matrix for the architecture of the contemporary mosque. It could conceivably have five building types (or four if we omit zawiyas) and five architectural approaches.

The following are the key definitions:

Building Types:

Large State Mosque. Huge structures commissioned by central government authorities to express the state’s commitment to Islam
State mosque projects express the state’s vision of its Muslim identity. The Koçatepe Mosque, in Ankara, Turkey (above), is a modern replica of Sinan’s work and was chosen by the state authorities over the modern design by Vedat Dalokay (top) that had won the original 1957 competition.

Photographs: N. Yurtseven; Courtesy of I. Serageldin

or to stand as a symbol of national purpose. Usually there will be only one such monument in a country (possibly two to three in large countries, but certainly no more than one in a single city).

**Major Landmark Structure.** Large mosques that are architecturally designed to provide a “landmark” function above and beyond fulfilling their societal functions. Architectural monumentality is being sought by the designer. It impinges on the townscape and affects the order of space in the urban environment.

**Community Centre Complex.** The building, which can have many of the same characteristics as the major landmark structure, is specifically intended to house multiple functions (e.g., library, school, meeting rooms, gallery, etc.) in addition to the mosque per se as a place for prayer.

**Small Local Mosque.** Either a small neighbourhood mosque or the central mosque of a small village. The structure’s most distinguishing characteristic is its modest dimensions. It may have multiple functions.

**Zawiyas.** Small prayer areas within larger complexes. These are not covered in the typology proposed here, because they do not usually provide an architectural construct by themselves. From a sociological point of view, however, the proliferation of such zawiyas has become a noticeable phenomenon in some countries.

**Architectural Approaches:**

**The Popular (Vernacular) Approach.** The Yaama and Niono mosques have the serene balance of the traditional. Their message is clear and understood by the community they serve and there is no denying the authenticity they exude, even to the foreign visitor. The only jarring note appears in use of the modern material of corrugated tile in one part of the Niono Mosque. The mason himself saw it as incongruous and informed the attendees at the Istanbul seminar that he wanted to rectify it because it did not “fit well” with the products of traditional builders.

**The Traditional Approach.** Some trained and registered architects choose to work in either the vernacular or historically relevant, traditional architectural language. They imbue their work with the self-discipline that the mastery of these conventions, techniques, and proportions requires.

**The Populist Approach.** The exuberance and delight that characterize the mixture of crudeness and stylishness of the Bhong Mosque say much about the present semantic disorder. It is successful with the people it serves, and it raises key issues that architects must address fully if they are to do their share in resymbolizing the Muslim environment of today.
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The Adaptive Modern Approach. The Said Naum Mosque demonstrates a serious effort to be both distinctly modern and yet echo the traditional vocabulary.

The Modernist Approach. The Sherefudin White Mosque of Visoko, Yugoslavia, stands out as an attempt to truly break with the traditional Bosnian architecture surrounding it, while providing a landmark building. This project, which is an example of the modern movement, has the convincing distinction of having been commissioned and paid for by its users. The seven-year debate that preceded its construction, as well as the subsequent use the community makes of it, shows that traditional communities will sponsor avant-garde works and identify with them.

A Summation

The preceding discussion provides the context for an approach that links socio-cultural issues with architectural ones. It allows us to construct a matrix for mapping the architectural manifestations of building by architectural approach (rows) and building type (columns), which for mosque architecture would look something like this:

Analytical Matrix for Examples of Contemporary Mosque Architecture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Architectural Approach</th>
<th>Building Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large State Mosque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major Landmark Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Centre Complex</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small Local Mosque</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vernacular or Popular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive Modern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The columns could be expanded to include examples of other building types or manifestations of buildings and urban spaces, following a taxonomy that could be varied on issues other than scale and/or sponsorship.
The matrix also provides a framework for the seminar discussions. The next session will try to provide the philosophical, social, and cultural explanations for the choices between the different forms of architectural expressions (the rows) given the shifting societal context. To the extent that sponsorship and functions also affect the choice of building type and the architectural approach, such links and patterns acquire new significance. Professor Arkoun’s presentation will do that. Dr. Afaf Mahfouz’s presentation will tackle some of these same issues from the important, though often overlooked, perspective of the contemporary Muslim woman.

We will then move to the architecture of the mosque. Mr. Hasan-Uddin Khan will present an overview of this important topic, focusing on the relevant design directions. This paper will be complemented by Professor Gulzar Haider’s presentation on the buildings of Muslim communities in the West followed by comments on the organization of space in Muslim communities. After each presentation, distinguished scholars will provide a counterpoint to lead off the discussions, which should be both lively and instructive.

To round off our tour d’horizon, a special session will then be devoted to the Indonesian experience. That rich menu should provide ample material for a general discussion to link all the presentations and bring out the key points. Professor Azim Nanji will then have the difficult task of summing up the entire proceedings.

Envoi

The material we will cover and the issues I have presented here provide the basis for an intellectual approach to Contemporary Expressions of Islam in Buildings. It should promote a more thoughtful and enlightened critique of the efforts of contemporary architects and encourage constructive innovation.
The Said Naum Mosque, an AKAA winner (honourable mention) in 1986, is an outstanding example of the adaptive modern approach. Photograph: K. Adle/AKAA

While this is a daunting task, it is nevertheless important to open new vistas in the continuing search for the development of a new and contemporary architectural language in the Muslim world. Much intellectual effort as well as architectural talent will be required, for the future of Muslim societies is, even now, being forged.