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Islamic Architecture:
Between Tradition and Aestheticism

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Abstract

The review of the concept "Islamic architecture" and its relevance in engendering a sustainable architecture for contemporary Muslim societies is timely and worth to undertake. The vast array of living Islamic monuments and urban sites as well as the increase of patrons advocating its style prove its resilience in the age of modernism. Despite the fact that the subject of Islamic architecture has been overwhelmingly debated, this paper attempts first to draw a conceptual and critical theoretical framework, emphasizing the significance of the adjective "Islamic" next to the word "architecture." It argues the one-sided academic approach to canonize Islamic architecture as a set of dead artifacts with a monotonous aesthetic discourse distant from its contemporary milieu and people. The resilience of the socio-cultural or ethico-mythical (Ricoeur, 1965) dimension of architecture is currently a vital element for several worldwide communities and places. This paper is therefore a review of Islamic architecture in terms of spiritual, cultural and regional sustainability in a contemporary static global architectural context.

Keywords: Islamic architecture; tradition; secularism, aestheticism; revivalism; sustainability

Introduction

The field of Islamic architecture has been a subject of a fervent academic debate since the beginning of the twentieth century. This debate is not centred around whether an architecture belonging to the Islamic world exists or not since the rise of Islam, but rather the relevancy of using the adjective Islamic next to the word architecture. Oleg Grabar, who was undoubtedly a leading and influential scholar of Islamic art, questioned vehemently the significance of the adjective "Islamic." Does it exclusively designate religious architecture, such as mosques and shrines, or secular buildings as well? This argument stems from an established school of thought that whenever the adjectives Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist are used next to the term architecture, they denote more the architecture of churches, synagogues, and temples. Accordingly, this separation between the secular and the religious architecture is sought in other cultures.

This debate becomes more intense when Islamic architecture is delineated as an architecture that embodies the principles of the Islamic faith. Nonetheless, this question of link between faith and the physical environment first surfaced in Europe following the wave of secularism before the advent of the 19th century and led to a modernist architecture embracing international ethos of absolute abstraction and aestheticism. Predicting this change, two nineteenth-century eminent scholars fought for the revival of spirituality in the making of architecture. John Ruskin and Welby Pugin advocated the medieval Gothic architecture as the true European architecture because of its sacredness and Christian essence. Ruskin (1985) states that:

To turn our prison into a palace is an easy thing. Exactly in the degree in which Greek and Roman architecture is lifeless, unprofitable, and unchristian, in the same degree our own ancient Gothic is animated, serviceable, and faithful. It is flexible to all duty, enduring to all time, instructive to all hearts. Honourable and holy in all offices…

Ruskin's prophecy and warning came true with architecture becoming in the twentieth century static and spiritless. This static architecture has subsequently struck all regions of the world. Some architects view it as

progressive, modern, and innovative. It has also attracted architects from the Muslim world who have adhered to its ideology either due to fascination with its technological side or to ignoring the relevance of architectural heritage. In addition, the lack of assimilating Islamic architectural heritage has resulted in bowing before the modernist school of architecture by embracing its "international style," which is devoid of a contextual imprint.

Despite that this international style seems to democratize architecture as a product that could reach the universal masses through standardization and simplification of production processes, based on outstanding ideologies and concepts, its forms and spaces are, unfortunately, out of context. These modernist ideologies, which are rooted in the abstract and existentialist philosophy, promote the distancing of architecture from any spiritual or cultural codification. Thus, modern architecture, which is founded on a severe critic of tradition, finds its way to shape a contemporary physical environment that is fully secular and profane.

This paper introduces a review of Islamic architecture and its link with Islam. It situates how secularism was and is at odds with Islamic architecture though Orientalists' efforts to alienate its typology as religious versus secular. The decline of this architecture is exacerbated with the modern forces of aestheticism that advocates the sacralising of mere objects at the expense of spiritual, cultural and social essence. The paper ends with a discussion of the challenge of revivalism of Islamic architecture and poses critical questions on its future development.

Islamic faith and architecture

Going back to the origin, architecture was one the first means to materialize the rise of Islamic faith. The mosque and house complex of the Prophet is the first designed buildings in Madina (Ling, 1983). Although some scholars try to trace the roots of this building to previous architectural styles, the main argument is that the Prophet and his first community were not focusing on a style but rather on a function: a space of gathering and praying. There is no single hadith hinting to that, and the mosque was a simple communal achievement with very simple local means. This polemical debate on the

origin of Islam and its material manifestation is exacerbated by the rarity of material evidence as well as archeological verification (Johns, 2003). Hence, the first functions of the mosque introduced its symbolic elements: a mihrab with its sense of directionality, a simple elevated minbar for the Prophet to preach, a covered hall of prayer to hold community gatherings/ prayers, a high place in the back wall for azan, a covered zone in the back for travellers, and an aisle for the Prophet's family.

This spatial arrangement of the first mosque following its primordial functions as prescribed by the prophet does not need to resort to a complicated theory in order to find out a Greek or Egyptian stylistic origin as pursued by several Western Orientalists. This mosque created the centre of a community around a Prophet. The growth of this community and its move from a place to another unquestionably introduced new elements of architecture. It is indisputable that the periphery of Islam with regions such as Persia, Africa, Europe, and Asia had added much to its centre.

The functions of that first mosque remained altered for centuries. Despite the fact that the colours, the texture of materials, building techniques, or styles may differ from a mosque in Morocco and another in China, the principal function, as a place of gathering and praying, has never changed. Therefore, to limit the mosque and its architecture to a certain style or form would be irrelevant. On the other hand, the mosque has generated unique architectural elements through its evolution, and has established a new architecture that is currently still under change with technological advents.

Islamic architecture is not, nonetheless, limited to the mosque that is used herein as an example. As Seyyed Hussein Nasr (1987) states: "The sacred architecture of Islam becomes an extension of nature as created by God within the environment constructed by man." Hence, the key function of the mosque—prayer— is itself not limited to the mosque per se. The house is a mosque where all rooms could be utilized to perform the salat with one condition: a cleansed ground. This is noticed today through the prohibition of walking with shoes inside the house even among Muslim immigrants in Europe or America—when the visitor is stricken with a notice at the door: take off your shoes please before entering.

The experience generated by a Muslim mind within its space cannot be the same for a user who has no knowledge of Muslim practices. Parallel to this, the same may occur with a Christian or Jewish house with a different scale of intensity. The Jewish houses in Fez are a good example. While I was conducting my field research on houses and palaces in Fez, I realized that Muslim and Jewish houses share all architectural elements including crafted geometric and floral ornamentation. However, their symbolic elements and comprehension of their decorative patterns are different. For instance, calligraphy is used in both cases almost in the same areas, but one in Arabic and the other in Hebrew. In addition, when you analyse the spatial arrangements and priorities given to different areas in the house, striking differences in perception and manners of exploring domestic spaces are deduced when Moroccan Jewish and Muslim families are interviewed. The spiritual dimension exists in both types, and the house is a permanent arena of particular rituals. Thus, these houses are coded; they reveal that walls have no meaning without a certain perception of their used space.

It is absurd to deny the role of a faith in making architectural spaces especially for users who conceived them according to their needs. For example, the new trend of non-Muslim foreigners purchasing and living in houses in the current Islamic historic cities such as the city of Fez reveals such dimension. One foreign British national, who bought a historic house in Fez of a reputed practicing Muslim scholar, where many elements reflect the very spiritual side of this user such as places of meditation (I'tiqaf), views the whole intricacy of this typical house as an exotic experience. The mental link between space and function is therefore essential to identify the meaning behind architectural constructs.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Islamic architecture is made exclusively for Muslims as its spaces can bear universal elements such as environmental and human features. In addition, its integration of a vast array of building techniques and environmental solutions through the wide geographical spread of Islam made it rich in terms of architectural and cultural expressions.

This synergy of space, function and architectural expression may be

generated by other faiths as well, and it is not surprising that these faiths shared many material and metaphysical similarities, especially in the medieval periods. This dimension has enabled Islamic architecture to travel far from East to West. In less than eighty years, it generated its own elements albeit geographical differences. Stephen Gardiner (1983) stresses this point when states that:

One of the strangest experiences a traveller can have is to stumble upon the Great Mosque in Cordoba, Spain. He might well wonder for a moment whether he had taken the wrong plane and arrived at the Taj Mahal, Isfahan, or even Mecca. One of the astonishing facts about Islamic architecture is the distance it travelled less than 80 years. When the Prophet Muhammad died in AD 632, the new religious movement proclaimed by him spread from the Arabian peninsula to Turkey in the north, India in the east, and the Atlantic coast of North Africa and to Spain in the west. Islamic architecture was a product of this religious movement; the distances travelled by the architectural style, and the consistency of its appearance from one continent to another, are proof of the strength of the Islamic faith.

This explains the continuous resilience of Muslim users to adapt their spaces to their specific tradition though in super modern architectural spaces. The chief example is that of Gulf cities such as Dubai, where local users are very attached to their Islamic tradition in the midst of an extreme modernistic physical realm that is often spiritless.

The question that ought to be asked accordingly is not how this separation between architecture and faith is made and promoted, but rather how to communicate with Muslim societies in their own intrinsic cultural, spiritual and visual idioms. Thus, it is imperative to explore the direct and indirect links of Islamic tradition with the making of the built environment without falling into the intellectual constructs of secularism applied to Muslim societies, as promoted by Orientalists such as Ira Lapidus (1975).

Secularism and Islamic architecture

The incessant refusal of Muslim societies to fully accept Western secularism mirrors Islam's resilience to separate between the individual, community, and society on one hand, and its spiritual environment on the other hand. This is manifested today through the many contradictions in Muslim countries that wanted to radically change its societal system from a traditional to a fully modern or totally progressive one. Bernard Lewis (1993) believes that the separation of church and state is a Western and Christian formulation which is entirely alien to Islam. " ...one must ask...whether Jews and Muslims may perhaps have caught a Christian disease (secularism) and might therefore consider a Christian remedy," he writes.

Architecture follows this line regarding the issue of fulfilling the needs of the progressive society while its core is still very traditional. This could be witnessed through a very peculiar behavioural pattern of Muslim users in the imported architectural theme parks—where this user's state of mind and spirit is in a sheer contradiction with an utter artificial material environment. "Progress" as transposed from the West to the Islamic world since the nineteenth-century industrialization has been in tandem with "secularism."

Accordingly, some Muslim scholars have advocated secularism as an emancipative means of the innovative mind while condemning the return to tradition. Mohammed Arkoun (1986), a central figure in the first meetings of Aga Khan Award of Architecture, which focused on redefining Islamic architecture, satirically argues the relevancy of Islam in the modern environment by asking the following questions:

Why do Muslims resist secularism more than Westerners or the Japanese? Is it because Islam has already discovered, taught and actualized all the sciences, institutions, economic and social organizations introduced by modernity? Is it also because modernity is a bad way of life that leads man astray from the Right Path traced by God in the Revelation? Or, is it, rather, because the majority of Muslim population is still dominated by the archaic and traditional culture, and that, under prepared to receive the more sophisticated culture produced by modernity?

Arkoun's discussion has been proven ironic since the modernist and post-modernist fames have fallen, and architecture has been driven again to question its regional and traditional roots. The tabula raza ideology, which is imposed by the modernists to universalize architecture, is currently assessed as obsolete (Rogers, 1993). This tabula raza ideology is the denial of the genius loci or the spirit of a locality. It is to erase any symbolic cultural root and start from scratch relying solely on an unconditional and abstract design process enshrined in a mere aestheticism.

The persistence of Islamic tradition as an individual, community, and societal system, through its living and sustainable Islamic communities and cities, contradicts thoroughly the assumption that this tradition is fully archaic. This tradition may have shown signs of severe decline, but it does not mean it is dead with no resilient memory. This resilient memory and its social image, which sustains through individual and community practices, cannot be ignored for the sake of a solely intellectual or ideological exercise.

Cities such as Fez (Morocco), Ghardaya (Algeria), Damascus (Syria), and Sana (Yemen), which preserve their living traditional urban fabric, are a proof of such an a resilient memory. It is true that these examples are currently heritage areas and no contemporary similar urban settlements have been designed with similar socio-cultural sustainability, but they cannot be overlooked whilst they are vibrant living urban environments. The denial of resilient memory of tradition is primarily due to the weak interpretation and exploration of Islamic architectural tradition and historic antecedents, as both practice and theory, to generate a highly contemporary performative architecture that stems from the womb of its society.

These arguments are essential to the repositioning of the role of Islamic tradition and its lingering implications on contemporary architectural and urban fabrics. This is not a vindication of Islamic doctrine as a set of absolute laws as viewed by some Islamic regimes that distorted the reality of dynamic Islamic societies by making the individual freedom under jeopardy. The lack of continuum and adaptation of Islamic tradition to contemporary forces has resulted in disastrous contradictions and sterility in all fields including architecture. However, to ignore the building tradition

in the making of actual architectural and urban contexts seems rather to ignore the memory of people and its reciprocal generated places.

Aestheticism and Islamic architecture

This severe separation between the genuine cultural and spiritual content on the one hand and architecture on the other has resulted in a movement of aestheticism (Vesely, 1985) that has become the source of designing the current pseudo-Islamic architecture following a mere synthesis of forms and symbols. This has led to the reduction of Islamic architecture to a simple collection of images. The local genius of fertilizing the Islamic architectural heritage has lost its momentum, and hence, the standardization of the process of making a suitable and sustainable architecture Muslim societies.

The grounded expertise of craftsmanship that challenged building materials, climate, user's needs, and different geographical environments so that to mould an architecture, which transcends the physical constraints, has been perverted to a new industrialized process that focuses on quantity rather on quality. This industrialization has also generated a new myth of sacralising the object for the sake of art as such at the expanse of the cultural, spiritual and contextual values. This has generated an unethical architecture of mere polished objects (Harries, 1998).

Following the technological needs of this "industrialized" architecture, the focus is made on the construction processes whereas the behavioural mode is substituted with a rigid functional architecture (Serageldin, 1996). Thus, the possibilities, provided by Islamic architecture as a highly interactive architecture, where behaviour, conduct, senses, and spirituality were part of its fabric, are now interlocked in formulas derived out of limiting technological objects and economic means. The outcomes of this technological architecture, and city planning, are too much confining of the daily human experience. Joseph Rykwert (1976) asserts that:

The way in which space is occupied is much studied, but exclusively in physical terms of occupation and amenity. The physiological space, the

cultural, the juridical, the religious, are not treated as aspects of the ecological space with whose economy the urbanist is concerned. His attention is focused on the more immediate physical problems, the resolution of which seems most urgent. But the solutions proposed, because of their physical presence, impinge on the symbolic world of the citizens; and often the arbitrary forms thrown up by harassed planners and architects are evolved on an irrational residue, motivated by unstated spiritual as well as aesthetic prejudice whose irrationality contributes further to the instability of the community, and may set up a pattern of interaction between the community and its outward shell which will be disastrous for both.

Islamic architecture, throughout centuries, has been enriched by its historically rich antecedents that adapted with time and place in order to create sustainable spaces for its diverse communities. It ought to be, henceforth, explored within its generative contents and forms. Beyond hermeneutical and ideological bias, there is no issue then calling this architecture "Islamic." Norberg-Schulz defended accordingly the use of Islamic as an adjective for architecture by asserting that: "We should not be reluctant to use the word "Islamic", but rather happy and proud to use it. Let us avoid the error so common in Europe which is to deny one's identity and lose self-confidence." (Evin, 1986).

Revivalism of Islamic architecture

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, several architects from the contemporary Muslim world have embarked upon this daunting task of revivalism of Islamic architecture that responds to the memory and tradition of current Muslim societies. For the enduring complexity of reviving its particular vocabularies and idioms to suit the contemporary needs—with a different context and parameters, —these architects have been considered pioneering in terms of adapting its antecedents in order to cope with the time of modernization and progress.

Hassan Fathy, Abdel-Wahid al-Wakil, Mohamed Saleh Makkia, and Rassim Badran contributed to the first movement of shifting the paradigm of modernism and offering a fresh breath for a dynamic Islamic architecture.

This generated different trends on how to explore Islamic architectural heritage, and how to respond to the challenges of rapid urbanization. Nonetheless, it is unrealistic to conceive a contemporary Islamic architecture as that of the past fulfilling the same purpose with the same means in an era of globalism.

As architecture is the vehicle of representation of societies, Islamic architecture has lost its momentum with the lack of adaptability to technological progress as well as social decadence, except in few countries. The possibility of igniting or regenerating the synergy of Islamic architecture is therefore concomitant to the assimilation of contemporary technologies and forms. This would not be fulfilled unless its current producers are fully equipped with sound research and established architectural practices with a sense of constructive critic. The lack of such conditions resulted in adoring solely its historic glorious symbols duplicated in monotonous facades. The consequence is a pastiche-like architecture that is neither Islamic nor contemporary, and which proliferates throughout the current physical environment of the whole Islamic world.

Several other questions are accordingly still open to research: Is it an issue of understanding and practice of Islam that ceased to catalyse arts, e.g., Islamic architecture? Is it the inability of Muslims to understand the forces of contemporary technology and ideology as Arkoun posited? Is it the change forever of the city setting that is not suitable for its typology anymore?

All these inquiries are legitimate to decode further an architecture connoted as Islamic. Whilst Islamic architecture is widely practiced through copying its historic portfolio of forms, it is still mysterious for most practicing architects as a grassroots process. Thus, the urgency to redefine and fertilize this architecture is important for orienting a large number of architectural competitions and projects launched under the umbrella of an ill-defined "Islamic architecture."

In Muslim countries with unlimited resources, the label of Islamic architecture is heavily used to satisfy rich patrons. However, the result of

such aristocratic design mimicking Islamic motifs is merely underlying the theme park approach as well as absolute eclecticism and aestheticism for the mere sake of creating the exotic and exceptional.

Conclusion

The link between architecture and Islamic context is more an individual, community, and societal one, which creates a representational realm to manifest the impact of a social and cultural practicum on shaping a physical order. Beyond any apologia, the full denial of such synergy and the claim that there is no link between architecture and its material culture would be but a polemical modernist and orientalist paradigm. This is due to the fact that most sources introducing "Islamic architecture" are in a way or another extensively related to Orientalist biased views whilst discarding the tangible and intangible evidence of numerous existing and breathing Islamic monuments, sites, and cities.

Despite the fact that the contemporary practice of Islamic architecture has presented a pervert image due to the clash between the modern production and the ancestral craftsmanship, there is yet a potential to revive its genuine creative forms. This revivalism cannot occur without reviewing the impact of the modern wave of aestheticism on making the physical environment that is currently interlocked in pastiche forms for the sake of mere aesthetics. Islamic architecture, as other genuine living traditional world architectures, goes beyond the physical representation of the container in order to reveal content that is a genesis of symbolic space. The resilience of this symbolic space maintains the socio-cultural dimension of the physical environment as a vehicle of its dynamic sustainability.

The sustainability of Islamic architecture and the synergization of its content are therefore essential to lever the on-going eclectic and extragenuous architectural production, which is detached from the intrinsic needs of contemporary communities. To envisage a revived Islamic architecture in the challenging global milieu requires an authentic delineation of its concepts as well as disseminating its genuine practice that if catalysed may generate creative holistic contemporary architectural and urban designs.

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العمارة الإسلامية بين التأصيل والبعد الجمالي

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كلية الهندسة - جامعة الشارقة
الشارقة - الإمارات العربية المتحدة

الملخص

إن مراجعة مفهوم العمارة الإسلامية وجدواه حاليا في خلق عمارة مستدامة للمجتمعات الإسلامية المعاصرة هو موضوع بحث آني ومهم للغاية. ونظرا للعدد الهائل من المعالم والمواقع العمرانية الإسلامية الحية، وكذا ارتفاع عدد المستثمرين والطالبين لإحياء هذا الطراز المعماري يبرهن عن مدى استمراريته وتجذره رغم عهد الحداثة الذي أفرغ كل ما هو تراثي من مضمونه. وبالرغم من أن موضوع العمارة الإسلامية قد دُرِسَ بشكل موسع، فإنَّ هذه الورقة تحاول رسم إطار تصوري ونقدي نظري بالتركيز على دلالات نعت "إسلامي" بجانب كلمة "عمارة." كما تجادل النهج الأكاديمي الأحادي الجانب الذي يبلور برتابة العمارة الإسلامية على أساس أنها مجموعة من التحف الميتة مع خطاب جمالي محض أبعدها عن وسطها المعاصر وحاجيات ساكنيها. وقد برهنت الدراسات المعاصرة الناقدة لفلسفة الجماليات السطحية أهمية المضمون الاجتماعي والثقافي والإيديولوجي للعمارة بصفتها وعاءً حضاريًّا (ومن بينهم « Ricoeur» الذي يعتبر هذا البعد في دراسة العمارة عنصرًا حيويًّا للعديد من المجتمعات المحلية في جميع أنحاء العالم، وخصوصا الأماكن التي مازالت فيها العمارة تعكس الوجه الحضاري لبيئتها. ولذلك تستعرض هذه الورقة العمارة الإسلامية باعتبارها مكونًا أساسيًّا من حيث الاستدامة الروحية والثقافية والبيئية في سياق عمارة العولمة التي تبحث عن عنصر الدهشة الجمالية بغية الاستهلاك المطلق.