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The Profundity and Dynamism of Islamic Architecture

Spahic Omer*

Abstract

This article discusses how profound and dynamic the world of Islamic architecture is. The article focuses on the issues of properly conceptualizing Islamic architecture, its genesis, the role of Islamic spirituality in it, and its relationship with both tradition and modernity. The article concludes that Islamic architecture is a microcosm of Muslims' cultural and civilizational awareness and evolution. In order to ensure its timeless appeal, Islamic architecture embodies the principle of unity in diversity: the unity of Islamic worldview, purpose and values, and the diversity of shifting methods, procedures and styles. The problems concerning Islamic architecture today are chiefly relatable to the Muslim problems of ideas and values that form the soul of Islamic architecture. The problems of external manifestations are of secondary importance.

Keywords: Islamic architecture, Islam, Muslims, spirituality, values.

Introduction

Islamic architecture is a very important subject insofar as properly grasping the level of the Muslim religious consciousness, cultural sophistication and civilizational evolution is concerned. The subject is of no less importance and value to Islamic and global scholarship than, for instance, the subjects of Islamic epistemology, science, law and economics, which, however, have traditionally been receiving more attention and have been regarded as more essential, relevant and so, more impactful sectors than Islamic architecture. Islamic architecture is an all-embracing field. It comprises both the world of ideas and values and that of practicality and function. The extent of the value and quality of Islamic architecture is attributable to the extent of the health of the relationship between the two worlds.

Islamic architecture serves as a framework of Islam as a complete code of existence and a framework of its eclectic culture and civilization. It is therefore as comprehensive, profound and dynamic as the latter. This article

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discusses the meaning and significance of Islamic architecture as a concept and physical reality, laying emphasis on the profundity and dynamism of its conceptual, utilitarian and artistic dimensions. The article deals with the issues of conceptualizing Islamic architecture and its genesis, the relationship between tradition and modernity in Islamic architecture, and the role of Islamic spirituality in it.

Conceptualizing Islamic Architecture

Islamic architecture is a style of architecture that embodies the core of the Islamic *'aqīdah* (belief system or articles of faith) and the body of inclusive Islamic standards and behavioural moral values. Islamic architecture does so through its three main dimensions: as a philosophy, process, and a final outcome, and at the planes of the conceptualization, planning, designing, constructing, and the using of the built environment. This is done partly latently and intuitively, as a result of people's prior personification of the same Islamic beliefs, principles and values, which they then radiate and implement in the various fields of their individual and collective lives - including the realm of the built environment – and partly consciously through a series of premeditated and thought-out methods, steps and even procedural guidelines.

Islamic architecture is a framework of both human lives and the implementation of the Islamic message. This is so because Islam is a comprehensive way of life and the two are meant for each other: life needs Islam to be inspired, guided and properly lived thereby, while Islam needs life to be exteriorized, actualized and “seen” therein. It is thus often acknowledged that Islam is life and life, in turn, is Islam. Apart from framing and containing human lives and Islam, Islamic architecture, moreover, facilitates nurtures and further promotes them.

Herein lies the significance and strength of the universe of Islamic architecture, as it has to cope with and cater to the needs of the vicissitudes of life and their dynamism as well as changeability. As a result, some of the most remarkable characteristics of Islamic architecture revolve around the notions of the profundity and inviolability of its meaning, purpose and wide-ranging functions, on the one hand, and the dynamism, fluidity and open-endedness of its physical and artistic considerations, on the other.

Indeed, Islamic architecture stands for the cultural and civilizational identity of Muslims. Yet, it is their own real-life identity. It is a microcosm of Muslims' cultural and civilizational awareness and evolution. It is their soul. Ensuring its universal and timeless appeal,

Islamic architecture represents the principle of unity in diversity: the unity of vision, purpose and values, and the diversity of methods, forms and styles. Needless to say that the more a style of architecture embodies the faith and tenets of Islam, the more Islamic it becomes.

As a matter of semantics, the suitable architectural styles of Muslims throughout history can be called either “Islamic” or “Muslim”. In English, both approximately denote the same thing – which however is not entirely the case with Arabic.¹ The adjective “Islamic” means “relating to Islam”, or “connected with Islam, or with people or countries who follow it.”² Correspondingly, the adjective “Muslim” implies “relating to Islam or Muslims”, or “relating to the religion, law or civilization of Islam.”³ The former is more inclusive than the latter. The adjective “Islamic” takes its meaning from the fact that it reflects some characteristics of Islam, in varying degrees. It can be used in two contexts. First, it describes things, ideas and events whose origins are in Islam. Second, the adjective “Islamic” can be used to describe things that are present in Islamic societies and cultures, even if their origins are not rooted entirely in Islam or produced exclusively by Muslim peoples. “The Islamic civilization came to existence because Muslims’ ideas and ideals were dominant, but they were not the sole engines that produced its rich legacy.”⁴

There is no doubt that Islamic architecture reveals a remarkable consistency in content and appearance, no matter when and where it was conceived and produced. This unity does not prevent styles, materials and motifs from changing somewhat from one geographical region or chronological period to another. Regardless of his race, colour, language or homeland, a Muslim experiences this architectural identity and unity everywhere he goes. Just as he finds in each land, not identical, but similar Islamically-inspired responses to life’s political, economic and social challenges, he also finds, not identical, but similar architectural and other aesthetic expressions of the Islamic spirit.⁵ What is more, the power of the aesthetic values of Islam are such that, even without the conscious awareness and pursuance of those values, the architect, artist,

¹ Ahmed Souaiaia, *What is the Difference between “Muslim” and “Islamic”?*, inside: “Islamic Societies Review”, 2016, pp. 1-3, <http://www.reasonedcomments.org/2016/11/what-is-difference-between-muslim-and.html>, accessed on July 1, 2019.

² *Islamic*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/islamic>, accessed on July 1, 2019.

³ *Muslim*, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/muslim>, accessed on July 1, 2019.

⁴ Ahmed Souaiaia, *What is the Difference between “Muslim” and “Islamic”?*, pp. 1-3.

⁵ Lois Lamy al-Faruqi, *Islam and Art*, (Islamabad: National Hijra Council, 1985), p. 12.

user and the spectator alike have been guided to an architectural and artistic unity in Islam which is unmistakable.¹

At the heart of this Islamic architectural identity resides the idea of Islamic monotheism or *tawhīd* (Almighty Allah's Oneness) as a religious philosophy and experience whose core is Allah as the Absolute Creator and Master of the universe, as normativeness, as the final end at which all finalistic nexuses aim and come to rest, and as the ultimate object of all innate hope, craving and desire.² Muslims create their civilization, including architecture, based on this principle and faith. This translates itself into a common identity regardless of the difference in time and space. However, on account of the striking positions and roles of creativity and freedom of thought and action that Islam guarantees its followers within the parameters of faith and piety, diversity where diversity was due was fostered to a great extent, enriching the history of Islamic architecture, and with it the world, with evidences that are not copies of each other. Rather, they are integral parts of the same organic whole, sprouting from and complementing each other.³

Predicated on the principles of unity in diversity, qualified flexibility and dynamism of Islamic architecture, Ernst Grube perceives Islamic architecture as "hidden architecture". That means that Islamic architecture truly exists and can be fully experienced and understood not when seen as monument or symbol visible to all and from all sides, but only when entered, penetrated, interacted with and experienced from within.⁴ That means, furthermore, when we become and behave like Islamic architecture's immediate users, developing emotional and spiritual relationships with it. That is, ultimately, when we and Islamic architecture identify each other as one; yet, when we become one. "Closely related to the concept of a 'hidden architecture' is the striking and almost total absence of a specific architectural form for a specific function. There are very few forms in Islamic architecture that cannot be adapted for a variety of purposes; conversely, a Muslim building serving a specific function can assume a variety of forms."⁵

¹ Ibid., p. 12.

² Isma'il Ragi al-Faruqi, *Al Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995), p. 2.

³ Afif Bahnassi, *The Islamic Architecture and Its Specificities in Teaching Curricula*, (Rabat: ISESCO, 2003), p. 1.

⁴ Ernst Grube, *What is Islamic Architecture?*, inside: "Architecture of the Islamic World", edited by George Michell, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), pp. 10-14.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 10-14.

According to Isma'il Ragi al-Faruqi, if Islam as a comprehensive religion, worldview and culture neglected to influence the architecture of its peoples, such would be a terrible shortcoming. Like all other fine arts, architecture is an aesthetic expression of Muslims insofar as they have a unique and distinct view of reality and its physical and metaphysical constituents, of space and time, of history, and of the *ummah* or community and Muslims' organic relation thereto.¹ As such, Islam's influence is expected to pervade the totality of human life, with architecture and the rest of the built environment receiving much attention on a par with the other most vital life segments.

So unified and interrelated are Islam as a way of life and Islamic architecture as a physical manifestation of such a lifestyle, that it is yet affirmed that by simply pointing to a masterpiece of Islamic architecture would be sufficient as an answer to the question of what Islam in reality is. That answer, summary as it is, would be nonetheless valid, in that Islamic architecture expresses what its name indicates, and "it does so without ambiguity".² As a religious and civilizational fundamental rule, the most outward manifestation of a religion or civilization like Islam – and art and architecture are by definition an exteriorization – "should reflect in its own fashion what is most inward in that civilization."³

The Issue of Genesis

Oleg Grabar (d. 2011), a French-born art historian and archaeologist who was a leading authority in the field of Islamic art and architecture in the West, wrote that "with the partial exception of Q27:44, the Qur'an does not contain any statement which may be construed as a description of manufactured things or as a doctrinal guide for making or evaluating visually perceptible forms." That is so mainly because "the world in which the revelation of the Qur'an was made was not one which knew or particularly prized works of art".⁴

In the same spirit, K.A.C Creswell (d. 1974), a English architectural historian who penned some of the seminal and most authoritative works on Islamic architecture in the West, called the history of the early

¹ Isma'il Ragi al-Faruqi, *Islam and Architecture*, inside: "Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization", edited by Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), pp. 99-117.

² Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam, Language and Meaning*, (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd, 1976), p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ Oleg Grabar, *Early Islamic Art, 650-1100*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2005), p. 87.

Islamic society architecturally primitive in the extreme; that the Prophet (pbuh) was entirely without architectural ambitions; that the first Muslims brought nothing architectural to the conquered countries beyond what would serve their simple ritual requirements; and that especially in Syria in the early days of the Islamic presence, there was no any building activity and the first mosques were churches that had been converted or merely divided.¹

Many other in particular Western scholars in Islamic architecture followed suit and arrived at similar inferences. Some of them are Alexander Hahn² who said that “Muhammad himself had no use for architecture”; Peter Watson³ who alleged that the Prophet (pbuh) was “hostile to the decoration of mosques”; and Brenda Schildgen⁴ who astonishingly contended that the Prophet (pbuh) seemed “to prohibit religious art and architecture”.

To be fair to Oleg Grabar, he later somewhat corrected his position. He wrote in his article “Art and Culture in the Islamic World”, which was contributed to an encyclopaedia of Islamic art and architecture titled “Islam, Art and Architecture”: “But it is possible to argue that Islam’s initial revelation, the Koran, contains passages and points of view on which attitudes to the arts could be, and often were, based. Many of them acquired different interpretations over the centuries and it should someday be possible to sketch out a history of their use.”⁵ Oleg Grabar then proceeded to analyse a number of such Qur’anic passages and the different categories of the arts they deal with, including architecture. He also rightly maintained somewhere else that the Prophet’s *ḥadīth* or

¹ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), pp. 3-17.

² Alexander Hahn, *Mathematical Excursions to the World’s Great Buildings*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 54.

³ Peter Watson, *Ideas, a History from Fire to Freud*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), https://books.google.com.my/books?id=5XwXAAAAQBAJ&pg=PT254&lpq=PT254&dq=the+most+unprofitable+thing+that+eats+up+the+wealth+of+a+believer+is+building&source=bl&ots=X_JWfxhboI&sig=BZkePkScdi8m7VrDSVuwYwnNI9M&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiTMSwtvDZAhUMK48KHeWBCD8Q6AEIQTAJ#v=onepage&q=thing%20that%20eats%20up%20the%20wealth%20of%20a%20believer%20is%20building&f=false, accessed on June 23, 2019.

⁴ Brenda Schildgen, *Heritage of Heresy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 7.

⁵ Oleg Grabar, *Art and Culture in the Islamic World*, inside: “Islam, Art and Architecture”, edited by Markus Hattstein & Peter Delius, (Cologne: Konemann, 2000), pp. 35-43.

Sunnah contains “theoretical positions and practical opinions on the making of works of art.”¹

What is common to all the mentioned and many other comparable statements and views is the strongly accentuated message that Islam is irrelevant to architecture. Its concerns should not transcend the ambit of sheer religious rituals and personal relations with God. Architecture is an entirely secular and material domain devoid of any spiritual significance or experience. It should be divested of its right and merit to express the noblest aspirations and ends of man. In contrast, it should be primed only to fulfil the base needs of utility and everyday function, and to be subjected to “correspondence with nature, a sort of pagan neo-Hellenism”.²

One wonders why most Western art and architecture historians rarely discussed the works of Islamic architecture with sympathy and understanding, and why not beyond the departments of forms, plans, materials and superficial functions. This is notwithstanding their commendable amount of careful research and documentation across the vast expanse of the Muslim world. Most of the prevalent misinterpretations and outright errors that today surround Islamic art and architecture are due to such people’s intellectual legacies, and the legacies of those who followed in their footsteps in the Muslim world. That could be the case because of the inherent difficulty of understanding artistic and architectural styles and traditions alien to one’s own, or because of a chauvinistic desire to see one’s own artistic and architectural traditions as prior in importance or superior in skill and beauty to any produced by a foreign society,³ specifically those societies that at the time of the studies proved politically, economically and militarily substantially despondent and inferior.

Isma’il Ragi al-Faruqi wrote about how the Western scholars of Islamic art and architecture have failed in their assessment of the latter’s real value, in spite of their exhausting application to the task of studying, collecting and systematizing the same into art schools and styles: “Nobody can survey the field without being struck by the Western scholars’ arduous application to the task, without falling in admiration of and gratitude for their legacy of scholarship and museum-achievements. There is no road to the serious study of Islamic art except through their works; and there is as yet no library of Islamic art in which these works do not constitute the overwhelming majority. And yet, the Western

¹ Oleg Grabar, *Early Islamic Art, 650-1100*, p. 87.

² Isma’il Ragi al-Faruqi, *Islam and Architecture*, inside: “Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization”, pp. 99-117.

³ Lois Lamy’ al-Faruqi, *Islam and Art*, p. 7.

scholars of Islamic art have been unfair in their overall assessment of its real value. For all their self-application, their seriousness and brilliance, their hard work and perseverance, they have failed in the supreme effort of understanding the spirit of that art, of discovering and analysing its Islamicness. For lack of any such understanding, they fell upon the spirit of their own art (i.e. Western art) and, armed with that spirit as absolute norm of all art, they sought to bend Islamic art to its categories. And, when Islamic art naturally refused to be so bent, their misunderstanding of it deepened. The charge they imputed to Islamic art was always the same, namely, that it had failed in that in which their Western art had excelled and almost everyone repeated the charge.”¹

Similar charges against the Western scholars and Western scholarship of Islamic art and architecture have been levelled by Lois Lamya’ al-Faruqi who affirmed: “In almost every case, however, these non-Muslim scholars mastered an exterior knowledge of the Muslim artistic tradition but failed to penetrate beyond the outer veil to the heart of the Islamic aesthetic norms and standards. Because of their alien background and sometimes even an apparent antagonism to the materials, they were doomed to view Islamic artistic creations as misconceived and unsuccessful attempts to match the glories of Western art works. They have been unable to escape the blinding cultural pull to judge every artistic creation of Islamic culture by criteria which are valid for their own art, but not necessarily valid in any other culture. These art historians failed to realize that the Islamic artist, whether consciously or unconsciously, had his own criteria for the beautiful and for the artistic expression of his world God view.”²

Be that as it may, considering the authentic nature and identity of Islamic architecture, observing and trying to judge it solely from the naturalistic perspective will do a great injustice to it. Most Western observers did exactly that, though, as they committed the most fundamental scientific blunder and judged Islamic architecture based on their own ideological and cultural moulds. They neither wanted, nor tried, to break away for a moment from their prescriptive templates and approach Islamic architecture objectively and independently, recognizing it for what it actually is and what it exactly stands for.

¹ Isma’il Ragi al-Faruqi, *Misconceptions of the Nature of Islamic Art*, inside: “Journal of Islam and the Modern Age”, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1970, (New Delhi: Jamia Nagar, 1970), pp. 29-48.

² Lois Lamya’ al-Faruqi, *Islam and Art*, p. 13.

Form and everything naturalistically and humanistically representational in Islamic architecture is important and plays a significant role. However, they remain secondary in character, playing second fiddle to its all-round spiritual disposition and function. The latter is the cause, the former the effect. The extraordinary spiritual and intellectual aspects of Islamic architecture are what make Islamic architecture different from other architectural styles and schools of thought. That makes it special. The form of Islamic architecture is but a mirror where its transcendent ideas and values are externalized and rendered operational. Thus, Islamic architecture ought to be looked at in its totality, as a combination of matter and spirit, the earth and Heaven, individual idealism and collective pragmatism, human imagination and creativity and the divinely-inspired existential blueprint. The Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah – especially such aspects of the Prophet's life and tradition as pertain to the building and development of the city-state of Madinah - are the repositories of the philosophy, soul and ethical orientation and identity of Islamic architecture.

Islamic architecture, furthermore, is about striking a delicate balance between the exigencies and requirements of this world and those of the Hereafter. If the latter is the objective, the former is only its means, or a way of getting to it. Islamic architecture is not an end in itself. Accordingly, Islamic architecture cannot get irrelevant, inadequate, antiquated and obsolete. Nor can it be subjected to the dialectics of the West-inspired discourses on tradition-*versus*-modernity, cultural and intellectual rebirth or renaissance, and enlightenment or illumination of human intellect, culture and morality. The only problems that could be associated with Islamic architecture hinge upon purifying and reforming people's perceptions about it, streamlining and improving its education and practice, and in terms of its auxiliary physical and fluctuating aspects to make it move more efficiently with the times so that its vitality, freshness and innovation are ensured.

It goes without saying that Islamic architecture commenced as soon as its discernible soul, ontological personality, causes and aims were introduced, irrespective of the level of sophistication and elegance in its first built environment manifestations. That time was the time of the Prophet (pbuh) and the first and most exemplary generation of Muslims, who lived in the first and archetypal Islamic urban environment: Madinah as the city of the Prophet (pbuh).

It was then that the realm of Islamic architecture – as an expression of a worldview and its values, and as a reflection of the way the people lived their lives - was formed and its first physical articulations came to pass. As simple and unassuming as they were, the first Madinah private and religious

buildings were meant to reflect, improve and facilitate the people's new Islamic lifestyle. And they did so at once dramatically and emphatically. Just as the Prophet's life and the lives of the first Muslims were the symbols and paragons of piety and virtue, so did their houses and mosques, yet the whole built environment of the city of Madinah, stand as the signs and models of a Muslim collective integrity and spiritual triumph.

Both the first Muslims under the leadership of their Prophet (pbuh) and their built environment succeeded almost miraculously in performing their respective missions. Hence, the first Muslims were the most outstanding generation in Islam, and Madinah with its built environment the most excellent city whose essence was attempted to be emulated ever since in every upcoming Islamic urban environment. That was an evidence of the undisputed excellence of the earliest architecture of Muslims. Afterwards, Muslims were only trying to keep up the high architectural standards set by the Prophet (pbuh) and the first Muslims, while facing as part of natural processes the challenges imposed by the vicissitudes of everyday life and its time and space factors. Doing so enriched significantly the secondary and less significant physical properties of Islamic architecture and its vocabulary. However, it did nothing to its substance and truth, which are permanent and abiding. Islamic architecture's alterable and evolving physical properties are the receptacle, or a bearer, so to speak, of the former. They are their physical locus.

Thus, the genesis of Islamic architecture coincided with the time of the Prophet (pbuh) and the creation of the Madinah city. At the same time, that was the golden age of Islamic architecture, in that the first Muslims were most successful in each and every department of civilization-building procedures. Their time and efforts constituted standard-setting processes.

All subsequent contributions to the subordinate artistic, functional and expressive dimensions of Islamic architecture served as supplements and performance-enhancers, nothing less, nothing more. Their mere existence was due to the earliest times and the legacies of the protagonists of those times. Yet, the legitimacy of future contributions was always to be assessed against the backdrop of such legacies. It follows that every successful future of Islamic architecture stands on the shoulders of the earliest "giants". For example, regardless of the simplicity of the form of the Prophet's Mosque, the Mosque made a powerful and perennially valid architectural statement about the following: the institution of the mosque as a community development centre; human resources and community-building processes; the meaning of life and its relationship with the metaphysical dominion;

respect for and peaceful coexistence with the order of nature (sustainable development); the relationship between man and God, man and man, and man and his surroundings; form-function relationship; encouraging and aiding people's equality, justice and other human rights; professional ethics; authentic hygiene; and grand Heaven-oriented aesthetics.

In short, there was nothing architecturally positive, nor wholesome and productive for human life, which the Prophet's Mosque did not exemplify. How could there be, then, a better and more beautiful and functional mosque at any stage in Muslim history than the Prophet's Mosque? Or how could someone ever claim that there was no architecture during the Prophet's time, and that his epoch was architecturally primitive in the extreme? Surely, everything the Prophet (pbuh) did was trustworthy and authoritative. His divinely administered personal infallibility and perfection were exclusive and they extended into the compass of everything he did. In actual fact, the Prophet's Mosque, the Prophet's dealings generally with mosques, and his numerous statements directly and indirectly concerning them, served as the core, source of inspiration and guidance, and a point of reference for the comprehensive vocabulary of mosque architecture then and now.

Every subsequent mosque that was good, beautiful and functional was so only because it stayed faithful to the paradigm and criteria set by the Prophet (pbuh) and his Mosque, impressing the effects of the circumstances of different eras and geographical locations upon them. No mosque could be ever dubbed good, beautiful and functional if it violated primarily the conceptual, ethical and functional architectural benchmarks set by the Prophet (pbuh) and his Mosque. The more a mosque did so, the more it drifted away from the value of beauty, appropriateness and functionality, and towards the abyss of repugnance, unseemliness and inconsequentiality. Mosque architecture in particular and Islamic architecture in general, cannot be based on a spiritual and ethical ugliness, or defiance. This is a universal principle. Nothing can be exempted from it, including the corollaries of human scientific and technological development.

Another example was the Prophet's and his companions' houses. Regardless of the minimalism of their form, they nonetheless made a powerful and enduringly binding architectural statement about the following: the institution of the house as a family development centre; the family institution as the fundamental and most critical component in society and civilization-building; the meaning and significance of life at large and its relationship with the metaphysical province; respect for and peaceful coexistence with the order of nature (sustainable development); the

relationship between man and God, man and man, and man and his surroundings; form-function relationship; reassuring and facilitating egalitarianism and justice among people; authentic hygiene and aesthetics; the true import of well-being, contentment, self-fulfilment and happiness.

In a nutshell, those houses symbolized and embodied everything that was architecturally affirmative and beneficial for human life. One can then wonder how there could be a better and more comprehensively valuable brand of residential architecture, or how someone could argue that there was no architecture whatsoever during the Prophet's time, and that his epoch generally was architecturally primitive in the extreme. Definitely, the Prophet's and his companions' houses, their relationships with and abundant reports concerning building and using them, combined with myriads of Islamic general teachings and values which directly and indirectly influenced Islamic residential architecture, served as the crux, source of inspiration and guidance, and a point of reference for the shaping of the easily recognizable identity of Islamic residential architecture and its wide-ranging vocabulary, then and now.

Every subsequent Muslim housing type, which proved excellent and functional, was so only because it adhered to the architectural philosophy and behavioural criteria instituted by the Prophet (pbuh), and which were implemented by the Prophet's houses and the houses of his companions in the socio-economic, religious, cultural and environmental context of Madinah. There is no housing type that can be dubbed excellent and effective if it breached especially the theoretical, ethical and functional architectural benchmarks set by the Prophet (pbuh) and the houses of Madinah. The more a housing type did so, the more it deviated from the true spirit of Islam and its perceptions of success, good life and happiness.

Because those ostensibly simple houses satisfied the modest needs of their occupants, facilitated the entire individual and family-oriented functions, fulfilled the spiritual and ethical requirements of the Islamic message, and produced the lowest possible ecological footprint - they were outstanding and exemplary houses. They were an example of brilliant domestic lifestyle and its architecture. They thus set a high standard for every other successful Islamic housing style in the future.

Good domestic architecture is not about having lofty buildings with lofty facilities and majestic decoration. Rather, it about fully comprehends the meaning of life and one's personal together with family roles, rights and responsibilities in it, and how the physical loci of housing personify, contain, facilitate and advance such a profound realization and ontological commitment. Good architecture, on the

whole, is only that which impeccably amalgamates the two poles of life's reality under the sway of different natural and man-generated contexts. Good architecture, in addition, is about actualizing and living the permanent and unchangeable in the throes of the temporary and changeable. It is about giving the former a current and up-to-date display within the moulds, methods and conventions of the latter. It would be an architectural crime to give precedence to either of the two orbits at the expense of the other.

Islamic Architecture between Tradition and Modernity

It is owing to this that Islamic architecture is neither exclusively traditional, nor exclusively modern or contemporary. Instead, it is a process of actualizing and effectuating the relevant substances of the Islamic revealed knowledge in the form of the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah, and clothing them with the aura and garb of time and space dynamics. Neglecting innovation and contemporaneity in Islamic architecture, because of the undue reverence for tradition, would be as deficient and erroneous a course of action as neglecting tradition, because of the unwarranted veneration for the modern-day slants and panaches.

In an authentic architecture that promotes the authentic interests of man and the natural world, therefore, such terms as sophistication and simplicity, creativity and the lack of it, modernity and tradition, stylishness and tastelessness, are relative and prejudiced. Absolute and objective are only the genuine spiritual, moral and intellectual wellbeing, prosperity and happiness of man, in tandem with the overall wellbeing and sustainability of his surroundings.

There is nothing special in having imposing and majestic buildings which house disoriented, sceptical, self-centred and greedy individuals fully under control of their disordered, nihilistic, egotistical and pleasure-seeking tendencies. Such buildings appear as though grand and majestic not because people genuinely need them, or because they know exactly what and why they are doing, but because people are materialists who believe that matter - rather than spirit or any other form of immateriality and incorporeality - only exists and that possessing material goods and enjoying physical comfort is more important than engaging in spiritual and moral values.

Thus deceived, people end up seeking solace only in material possessions. However, matter and the desires of this world are like seawater; the more one drinks of it, the thirstier he becomes. The routine goes on unabated until a person eventually becomes destroyed precisely

by that which he hankered and lived for. Such people turn themselves into bottomless pits, wanting and amassing more and more of material goods. They recognize only corporeal pleasures and happiness.

Hence, people build and get houses, but not homes. They stuff their houses with superfluous material properties, but empty and impoverish their souls of every truly meaningful and enriching asset. They have much, but enjoy very little. Houses are getting ever more impersonal and colder. People live together in them, but are alienated and far away from each other. Everything is high-tech and wirelesses, but communication between people are poor. Instead of being safe havens and paradises on earth, houses have become the means of personal confinement and entrapment. One wonders, at the end of the day, if people own houses and things, or they own them. What made people embrace quantity in favour of quality, and cultural along with civilizational hollowness and junk in favour of their profundity, grace and sophistication?

Unquestionably, the architecture that epitomizes, encourages and aids depressing materialistic lifestyles – or any other flawed system of thought - cannot be classified as a mark of success, no matter how deceptively attractive it may appear on the surface. That architecture should be classified as a sign of failure instead, as much as are the worldviews and ideologies that conceived and gave rise to it. Nor should it be seen as a sign of development and prosperity, but a sign of “contemporary” backwardness and primitiveness.

Accordingly, for example, modernist architecture should not be viewed and applauded in isolation from the doctrines and canons of modernity as an out-and-out rebellion against traditions and religions, and a desperate quest for a new and better world inspired by scientific creativity, technological dynamics and moral, as well as intellectual, permissiveness. Perceptions should encompass the whole package.

The shortcomings and failings of modernity mean positively the shortcomings and failings of modernist architecture as well. The causal and reciprocal relationship between the two should not be overlooked, nor underestimated. The same holds true in connection with post-modernity and post-modernist architecture, neoclassical, Rococo, Baroque, Renaissance, Gothic and other prominent architectural styles during the Late Middle Ages and the modern era. All those architectural styles were the products of certain philosophies and dogmas, whose strengths and weaknesses, and so, longevity or otherwise, were commensurate with the strengths, weaknesses and durability of the latter.

It is therefore grossly inappropriate to impose on Muslims, who possess their own Islamic worldview, life purpose, tradition, culture and history, any alien architectural school of thought and style. Some of the major problems associated with Muslims and Muslim societies today stem from their futile attempts to adopt and reconcile between their being Muslim and their cultures and civilizations – with architecture playing a dominant role therein – which are alien to their beliefs, values and practices. For example, it is impossible for Muslims to peacefully practice and live Islam at any of their personal, family and social planes, while at the same time, in order to frame and facilitate the former, they try to adopt such architectural styles as exemplify the viewpoints of secularism, materialism, humanism and naturalism.

There cannot be compatibility between a lifestyle that deifies Almighty God alone, and an architectural style that refutes God and, as an alternative, deifies man and his limited abilities and qualified accomplishments. Those in the Muslim world who endorse the prospect of such an improbable alliance either gravely misunderstand both Islam and modernity, or partially do understand but fail to contextualize their wisdom and all the potential repercussions originating from their propositions.

All this means that for authentic Islamic architecture - which will successfully integrate the precepts of tradition and the exigencies of modernity - to remain alive and relevant in modern times, the notion of what could be called an “architectural *ijtihād*” is to be initiated and optimized. Generally speaking, *ijtihād* means the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Qur’an, the Prophet’s Sunnah and *ijmā’*¹ or scholarly consensus. *Ijtihād* in the form of *qiyās* or deductive analogy is one of the four sources of Islamic law. It requires a thorough knowledge of theology, revealed texts, and legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*); a sophisticated capacity for legal reasoning; and a thorough knowledge of Arabic. *Ijtihād* is further considered a required religious duty for those qualified to perform it. Its results must not contradict the Qur’an and Sunnah.¹

The architectural *ijtihād* should function as the lifeblood of the *fiqh* (Islamic legal system or jurisprudence) of architecture, with the latter dealing with such subjects as the rules of constructing and using roads, markets and market-places; constructing, decorating and using mosques; constructing and using other public institutions and facilities; and

¹ *Ijtihad*, (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e990,2019>, Accessed on June 26, 2019.

constructing, decorating and using residential buildings. At any rate, initiating nowadays an architectural *ijtihād* and the *fiqh* of architecture will be timely. But doing so will be nothing new. It will only lead to the revival and continuation of a well-established Islamic tradition. Many classical works on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) feature loads of planning and building rules and principles, which are reflective of particular times and regions. Yet, some treatises were composed exclusively for that purpose.

Some of the salient points discussed above are encapsulated in the way Titus Burckhardt understands the evolution of the discernible and total identity of Islamic art and architecture. For him, that evolution went through four major stages. Firstly, the phase of “proto-art” where art was not perceived, nor articulated, in the conventional sense of the word. It resided at the level of revealed - yet heavenly - ideas, beliefs and symbols, which later gradually manifested themselves at the different levels of cultural and civilizational realities. The Ka’bah, a simple cube of masonry, represents this phase. Its spiritual dimension corresponds to myth or revelation, depending on the point of view. “This means that the inherent symbolism of the Ka’bah, in its shape and the rites associated with it, contains in embryo everything expressed by the sacred art of Islam.”¹

The second stage is represented by the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem, which was built between 688 and 692, about 60 years after the Prophet’s death. The building is the most ancient Muslim monument surviving in a state of complete preservation. However, it still belongs to Byzantine art in terms of its overall architectural form, but in terms of its religious and symbolic functions, decoration, and “the choice of its constituent elements”, it was a work of Islamic art.²

The third stage is represented by the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, started in 706 and finished in 715. The Mosque is “*a priori* a work of Islamic art, at least in its major forms if not in the details.”³

About the fourth and final phase, Titus Burckhardt writes that after this date, and more precisely towards the middle of the eight century A.D., the new art was to expand very rapidly and on a broad front. The great works which then emerged out of the darkness of time, such as the Great Mosque of Cordova, founded in 785, and that of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, finished in 879, no longer represented phases in a still tentative evolution but were, in their quality as art, unsurpassable masterpieces.

¹ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam, Language and Meaning*, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

This means that Islamic art had, by the middle of the second century of the Hijrah, found its own physical language,¹ in addition to its proto-spiritual language which had been presented by the revelation.

Islamic Architecture and Spirituality

Just like everything else in Islam, Islamic architecture, too, is infused with its spirituality. From the level of ideas to that of the net function and people's using of the Islamic built environment, Islamic architecture is a theophany, or clear manifestation, of the soul and most fundamental values of the Islamic message. If the universe, featuring both its perceptible and imperceptible aspects, is to be perceived as a theophany of Almighty Allah's signs (*āyat*) and His most beautiful Names and Attributes, Islamic architecture, then, is to be recognised as a conceptual and physical extension of such heavenly riches. This is understandable given that for creating his built environment, man must avail himself of his spiritual and cognitive talents and the natural resources and building materials, all of which have been given to man as heavenly gifts to be carefully used for the implementation of his noble earthly mission and purpose. Man is an instrument, channel and principal object of the Divine Will and Plan.

Hence, man's built environment is not his possession. It is God's. God is the Creator, Owner and Master; man is no more than a creation, servant and user. Man only uses, reuses, consumes, manages, processes, composes and constructs on the basis of what has been rendered available for him by his Creator. Neither can man be called "creator" and his production "creation", in the actual sense of the word, for creating *ex nihilo* (out of absolute nothingness) is the quality of God alone. Man can be dubbed "creator" and his civilizational output "creation" only metaphorically and in a relative sense.

Everything that pertains to man and his fleeting existence on earth is to be seen through the lens of *amānah*, or trust, and accountability. Man has been entrusted with an honourable terrestrial purpose and assignment, with everything in the heavens and the earth being subjected to him to be dutifully used as means for realizing his challenging mission. Man thus stands between the ultimate greatness and power of God and his own smallness and frailties, between the vast potentials and boons of life and his own circumscribed flairs and powers, between the infallibility and perfection of Heaven and the fallibility and imperfection of his self and his

¹ Ibid., p. 9.

own jurisdiction, and between the apparent fascination and lures of this world and the mandate and exigencies of the spiritual realm.

Islamic architecture is loaded with spirituality because it is conceived, designed, built and used by the people who possess the Islamic worldview and are adorned by Islamic teachings and morals. It is also spiritual inasmuch as it exists in order to endorse, mirror and facilitate the divine existential paradigm, which is correlated not only with the manufactured world of man, but also with existence taken as a whole. Islamic architecture, it can be deduced, is a theophany of man-made signs (*āyat*) which together with the rest of cosmic divine signs form an open “book”, so to say, with uncountable “pages” that contain and exude the supreme truth and wisdom of Islam. In this manner, Islamic architecture supports and somewhat contributes to the functioning of cosmic signs (*āyat*) which could be called “God’s primordial revelation”¹ and which permeate all creation. The combination of the revealed signs (*āyat*) contained in the Holy Qur’an, and those created ontological signs (also called *ayat*) contained in the “book” of creation, brings to light truth and certainty to humankind. However, it must be stressed that the revealed signs take precedence over the created signs, serving as their foundation and point of reference. Only that way can the created signs be properly unearthed, understood and enhanced.

It is therefore often said that Islamic architecture is as much awe-inspiring and mystifying as it is spiritually and emotionally stimulating. Consequently, it is to be spiritually and intellectually contemplated and “read” as much as it is to be enjoyed and benefited from through daily usage. When spiritual, intellectual and emotional relationships between Islamic architecture and its creators as well users stop to exist, that will spell the end of Islamic architecture. When the relationships are reduced to mere mechanical, procedural and symbolic qualities, such conditions will allude to some serious deterioration not only in the ways people regard and utilize their built environment, but also in the ways they perceive and live their lives.

The spiritual disposition of Islamic architecture is the result of interplay between the following three essential thrusts of the Islamic faith:

First, man has been created as Allah’s vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth. That means that man by means of divine guidance is to improve and advance the world for and on behalf of Allah, to sustain the order and balance instituted by Allah on the earth and beyond, to create

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam, Enduring Values for Humanity*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), p. 14.

cultures and civilizations and to rule justly over people, and to apply the directives and recommendations of Allah among people, animals and inanimate beings, so that all of the above could be possible. It is because of this that Islam does not tolerate injustice, oppression, environmental destruction, and all sorts of mischief through the land and sea, and towards people and every other living and non-living terrestrial entity. The Prophet (pbuh) was unequivocal when he said that, howsoever, there should be neither harming nor reciprocating of harm (towards anybody, in any manner, to any degree or extent, and under any circumstances) (Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith No. 2340).

Second, the Prophet (pbuh) established the doctrines that Allah is beautiful and loves beauty (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 131), that He is good and accepts only that which is good (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 1686), and that He loves to see the effects of His blessings and favours on people (Jami' al-Tirmidhi, Hadith No. 2963). This implies that since Allah loves beauty, He created everything perfect and beautiful. Moreover, He also wants His servants to do so, that is, to love beauty, be beautiful and generate beauty through words, deeds, character, garments, general outward appearance, and the cultural and civilizational creations of theirs. In doing so, however, people must subscribe to and apply only the highest heavenly standards of goodness and beauty, without contaminating them with the effects of their intrinsic inadequacies, myopia and whims. It is on account of this that Islam abhors ugliness with all its physical and metaphysical dimensions and features. It does so, for example, as much in evil speech and conduct as in ungodly art and architecture.

Third, the Prophet (pbuh) affirmed that Allah created Adam (man) in His own image (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 6227; Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 2841). The meaning of this distinctive *ḥadīth* could be summarized as follows. Almighty Allah has an image that befits Him. That image is one of His attributes which cannot be likened to any of His creations, just as His essence cannot be likened to the essence of any of the created things. The Qur'an confirms this: "There is certainly nothing like Him (or: naught is as His likeness)" (al-Shūra, 11). The *ḥadīth* also means that Allah created Adam in His image, for He has a face, an eye, a hand, and a foot, and Adam had a face, an eye, a hand, and a foot, but that does not mean that these things are exactly the same. There is some similarity, but it is not exactly the same. Words cannot describe exactly the essence and attributes of Allah because languages are also created things. Similarities between the Creator and creation, and the Transcendent and physical, as well as transient, are confined to the domain of approximate appellations only. This is part of a provisional,

yet sufficient, knowledge about Allah given to man in this world. The rest – as much as Allah wills - is to be imparted on the Day of Judgment.

This additionally means that within his human and earthly contexts, man – as envisioned and created by his Creator and Master - enjoys the capacities to think and know, be creative and innovative, and make things and generate experiences. He is created to be resourceful, productive, and to leave cultural and civilizational legacies behind. He is meant to be the most creative of the created beings, the most powerful amidst the powerless creations on earth, and the freest, most unconstrained and forward-looking among the earthly beings bound in servitude to Almighty Allah.

These merits of man set him apart from other creatures and make him accountable in the eyes of the Islamic law (Sharī'ah). It is no wonder that the primary objectives of the same Shari'ah revolve around the preservation of man's faith (*dīn*), life (*nafs*), mind (*'aql*), wealth (*māl*) and posterity (*nasl*). Man's overall wellbeing and interests must be painstakingly safeguarded, so that he could always live and perform as expected. It is for the same reason, surely, that the believer's honour and dignity are among the most precious and inviolable things, and violating them incurs some of the biggest sins.

The implication of this third thrust is that people are fated to build, creating thereby physical frameworks for their provident and sophisticated lifestyles. As regards Islamic architecture, that means that the built environments of Muslims should reflect the profundity and consequentiality of their life orientation and purpose, and at once material and spiritual achievements. Islamic architecture, it follows, should be unassuming but grand, simple but brilliant, peaceful but revealing and illuminating, often introverted and veiled but expressive and welcoming, spiritual and virtuous but, at the same time, worldly and refined.

In short, Islamic architecture integrates the goodness of this world and the Hereafter, of Heaven and earth, and of matter and spirit. It does not shy away from good and pure things that Allah has put at the disposal of man as His vicegerent or viceroy on earth. Through Islamic architecture, Muslims demonstrate that they have a talent and qualified authority over particular assets and forces of nature, but want to use them only for the service of God and His will.

Naturally, enhancing the service and obedience to God often translates itself into optimizing the human talent and provisional authority over the earth, so that the former is further encouraged and made easier. Such is the nature of human life that the Hereafter cannot be earned – or ruined – except in this world and on this earth; nor can

this world make any sense without the existence of the Hereafter. Likewise, spirituality can be fostered and appreciated only with the presence, conquest and control of matter. Spirit alone is unthinkable, whereas matter alone is useless and unfulfilling. It is a marriage of convenience between the two sides of the existential divide.

It is thus inappropriate in Islam to resort as a regular course of action to undue architectural minimalism and austerity, defying the fundamental rules of societal development and cultural evolution. What could be called “deliberate architectural asceticism” virtually does not exist in Islam and Islamic civilization. Islamic seeming censure and condemnation of certain architectural tendencies and aspects were always conditional, when outright unethical behavioural modes were attached to them and were made to dominate over them, for example. Islam never condemned architecture or art as such. Even the Prophet’s built environment in Madinah, as modest and down-to-earth as it was, underwent a series of changes during the time of the Prophet (pbuh) himself as a result of the powerful laws that preside over the development of societies and cultures. Excessive architectural austerity and plainness can be practiced sometimes and under some unusual conditions, but it by no means should be universalized in character and application, and be presented as an Islamic approach.

Islam treats architecture like every other human activity. It is inherently neither good nor bad. It all depends on intentions, rationale, goals and modes of delivery and function. Sometimes little and modest might be more problematic than lavish and superb. Comprehensive excellence and inclusive piety and virtue are the standards that imbue everything that carries the adjective “Islamic”. Islam is always against excessive and unnecessary austerity, poverty, self-denial and privation, just as it is against profligacy, wastefulness, boastfulness and vanity. Moderation and balance should be the way.

The Prophet (pbuh) said for instance that a good and spacious house is part of a person’s happiness in this world - the other three things being a righteous wife, a good neighbour and a comfortable mount. That positively means that a bad and inadequate house is part, as well as a cause, of a person’s distress in this world. The Prophet (pbuh) is also reported to have supplicated: “O Allah, forgive me my sin, make my house spacious, and bless me in that which You provide to me” (Jami’ al-Tirmidhi, Hadith No. 3500). And it is self-evident that it is easier to pursue the happiness of the Hereafter on the back of the happiness of this world.

Thus, Allah says in the Qur’an: “For there are people who (merely) pray: “O our Sustainer! Give us in this world” - and such shall not partake

in the blessings of the life to come. But there are among them such as pray: “O our Sustainer! Grant us good in this world and good in the life to come, and keep us safe from suffering through the fire” (al-Baqarah, 200-201).

By the same token, it is not permissible for anyone to render forbidden and illegal that which Allah has made lawful. People should make the most of that which is good as regards foods, things, dress, deeds, persons, natural resources and opportunities. These are all categorized in the Qur’an as *tayyibat* (generally all good and pure things in this world). Allah says: “O you who believe! Make not unlawful the good things (*tayyibat*) which Allah has made lawful for you but commit no excess: for Allah loves not those given to excess” (al-Mā’idah, 87). In pleasures that are good and lawful the crime is excess. It is never approved by Allah. There is no merit merely in abstention or asceticism either, though the humility or unselfishness that may go with asceticism may have its value. Allah’s gifts of all kinds are to be used with gratitude and for good reasons.

All forms of monasticism, chiefly eremitic (a hermit lifestyle) and coenobitic (a communal lifestyle), and everything that goes with them, are precluded as well.¹ Allah also says: “Say: Who has forbidden the beautiful (gifts and adornments) of Allah which He has produced for his servants and the things clean and pure (which He has provided) for sustenance? Say: they are in the life of this world for those who believe (and) purely for them on the Day of Judgment. Thus do We explain the signs in detail for those who understand” (al-A’raf, 32). Unnecessary asceticism often means the negation of art and beauty, while extravagance means the corruption and distortion of the same. Neither has necessary sanctity or goodness attached to it.

The substance of Islamic architecture is in some ways reminiscent of the substance of human beings. While it is not entirely irrelevant who they are, what they own and wear, and how they generally look like (form), the most important thing will always be people’s faith, good deeds and moral fibre, i.e., performance. The Prophet (pbuh) said: “Verily, Allah does not look at your appearance or wealth, but rather He looks at your hearts and actions” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Hadith No. 2564).

The human body is the container and carrier of the soul, made perfectly suitable for its load. Its importance is only as much. Without

¹ *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali*, <https://www.quran411.com/quran/quran-english-yusuf-ali.pdf>, accessed on July 2, 2019.

the soul, the body is worthless, but with the soul, it is functional, yet indispensable. That is why the union between the body and soul forms the real self as a person's essential being, particular nature or personality that distinguishes him from others who have their own selves. No self as the object of introspection or reflexive action could be possible with the absence of either the body or soul, or both. The body is a perfect example of the conditions of the physical world, and the soul of the conditions of the metaphysical world. The self is a delicate equilibrium between the bodily and spiritual forces of attraction and repulsion which are constantly at work. Upsetting the equilibrium leads to negatively affecting the disposition and performance of each of the body and soul, commensurately with the extent of the disorders.

It is no coincidence that the Prophet (pbuh) in one *ḥadīth* combined all of those factors, projecting thereby the meaning of Islamic aesthetics and its two-edged relationship with the physical world. By so doing, the Prophet (pbuh) brought to the fore the issues of pride, arrogance, Allah as beautiful and loving beauty, beautiful clothing and footwear, rejecting the truth and belittling people - so that they all could be juxtaposed against each other, and they all could be seen in their proper light. The Prophet (pbuh) said: "No one will enter Paradise who has an atom's weight of pride in his heart." A man said: "What if a man likes his clothes to look good and his shoes to look good?" He said: "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride means denying the truth and looking down on people" (Saḥīḥ Muslim, Hadith No. 91).

Islamic architecture is perhaps the best illustration of the Islamic meaning of beauty, which is inseparable from both virtue and truth. As Plato once said: "Beauty is the splendour of truth." In Islam, since Allah is beautiful and loves beauty, he created everything according to the highest heavenly standards of beauty. The world is at once the result of heavenly artistry and the physical theatre where the effects of Allah's beautiful Names and Attributes in connection with creation and beauty are most clearly manifested. As some Sufis would say, "ultimately all beauty is the radiation on a particular level of reality of the Beauty of the Face of the Beloved."¹

Through beautiful and functional Islamic architecture, Muslims strive to maintain the established high standards of beauty on earth. Islamic architecture is an extension of the created and revealed artistic order, deriving from it its strength and identity. This simultaneously is

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam, Enduring Values for Humanity*, p. 148.

the beginning and end of the Islamic view of sustainability and sustainable development. Beauty is not simply a subjective state existing only “in the eye of the beholder”.

Beauty is meant to be universal and ever-present. The Arabic most common word for beauty is “*jamāl*”. However, related to the same word are the words “*ijmāl*”, “*jumlah*” and “*jamāla*”, which mean generalization, totality, and to gather or accumulate to excess respectively.

Islamic architecture proves that beauty is a human right and life’s standard thing. It is the rule and, at the same time, symbol, as well as quintessence, of goodness. Ugliness, on the other hand, is an anomaly and exception. It is equivalent to evil. In Arabic, the word “*qubh*” means both ugliness and evil. Beauty is additionally associated with reality and its undeniable existence, and ugliness with unreality and nonexistence.

Another word in Arabic for beauty is “*husn*” (“*hasan*” is beautiful and “*hasuna*” to be beautiful). The word’s various derivatives attest to the above-mentioned point of beauty’s righteousness, absoluteness and totality. Some of the most important concepts derived therefrom are goodness and excellence (*hasan*), virtue and good deed (*hasanah*), kindness and good outcome (*husna*), benevolence and merit (*ihsān*), to do good and excel (*aḥsana*), benefactor and doer of good (*muḥsin*).

It goes without saying that beauty, goodness and truth are indivisible in Islam.¹ According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Qur’anic term “*al-muhsinun*”, which is normally translated as “the doers of good”, can also be translated as “those enmeshed in beauty”.² Hence, such Qur’anic idioms as “Allah is with the doers of good (*al-muḥsinīn*)” (al-‘Ankabut, 69), and “Allah loves the doers of good (*al-muḥsinīn*)” (al-Baqarah, 195), could likewise be understood and translated as “Allah is with those enmeshed in beauty” and “Allah loves those enmeshed in beauty” respectively. The goal of human life is to beautify the soul through goodness and virtue and to make it worthy of offering to God Who is the Beautiful. That is, the goal of human life is to be beautiful, live beautifully, return to the Beautiful, and be admitted into Paradise which is the highest representation of pleasure and beauty, the culmination of its bliss being beholding the Beauty of the Face of the most Beautiful and most Beloved.

In traditional Islamic society, architecture and all the arts associated with it signified life itself. They were not particular and separated from life,

¹ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam, Language and Meaning*, p. 1. Lois Lamy al-Faruqi, *Islam and Art*, pp. 20-29. Isma’il Ragi al-Faruqi, *Al Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, pp. 199-202.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam, Enduring Values for Humanity*, p. 150.

and each other, activities. An observation has been made that in modern society the artist is a special kind of person, while in traditional society every person is a special kind of artist. “This observation holds completely true for traditional Islamic society as well, where no distinction was made between fine arts and industrial arts or major and minor arts or religious and secular art. Everything was marked by the seal of Islamic spirituality.”¹

Genuine Islamic architecture is at once beautiful, appropriate, authentic and functional. It typifies and promotes peace with God, order of nature, people and self. It is organically related to other natural and man-made dimensions of life. Those dimensions are so seamlessly fused and interwoven that it is often hard to say where one stops and another begins. All human activities are unified and integrated within a divine norm and pattern. The loss of this unity, at least on a more external level, is one of the primary factors responsible for the plight of the modern city within the Islamic world.

People are becoming more and more concerned about the juridical and formalist aspects of religion, increasingly neglecting its profound wisdom, fineness and penchant for beauty. In the process, people’s lives are becoming more mechanized, de-spiritualized and detached from the intrinsic beauty, tranquillity and peace of nature. More and more obstacles are placed between people and the two sources of truth: the revealed or divine, and the created or ontological source. The ugliness, one-dimensionality and uncertainty of modernity and its befuddled and chaotic versions of beauty, art and architecture have overshadowed the distinction, beauty and profundity of tradition, religious morals and truth. Modernity’s agnostic, nihilistic and hedonistic worldviews serve as a poisoned chalice for all forms of tradition and religion.

Conclusion

Islamic architecture is the face of Islam and its culture and civilization. Moreover, it is their spirit and identity, owing to the principle that the most outward manifestation of a culture and civilization should reflect in its own fashion what is most inward in them. The external environment which man creates for himself is no more than a reflection of his inner state. As the saying goes: “As within, so without”.² The architecture of Muslim peoples could be called either “Islamic” or “Muslim”, for both adjectives imply being connected with Islam and Muslims, or relating to

¹ Ibid., pp. 151-152.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, p. 228.

the religion, law and civilization of Islam, even though the former does so more comprehensively than the latter.

Islamic architecture is neither exclusively traditional, nor exclusively modern or contemporary. It is so profound and spirituality-laden that it can easily rise above the tradition-*versus*-modernity dialectics and its variables. Instead, Islamic architecture is a dynamic process of actualizing and effectuating the relevant substances of the Islamic revealed knowledge and enfolding them in the frame of time and space dynamics. Abandoning novelty and contemporaneity in Islamic architecture, due to the excessive reverence for tradition, would be as incorrect a course of action as abandoning tradition, due to the excessive reverence for the modern-day slants and panaches.

Today's problems concerning Islamic architecture are predominantly relatable to the Muslim problems of ideas and values. As a result of ungodly and merciless crusades of Western modernity and post-modernity, Muslims are increasingly compromising the Islamic harmony between heavenly truth, goodness, beauty and the authentic functionality and utility of their architecture. More and more components of the Muslim built environment are divorced from unadulterated righteousness and beauty, making them inconsequential and worthless spirituality-wise. Then, what becomes ugly in this manner becomes ultimately "useless". It also becomes false and runs against man's deepest interests.

Consequently, the beautiful and functional models of traditional Islamic built environment have been gradually forsaken and replaced with alien alternatives which have nothing - or very little - to do with Islamic teachings and values, prevalent local cultures, natural milieus and socio-economic conditions. This led to making the built environments of Muslims - especially in large cities - generally ugly, chaotic, fake, inharmonious, misleading and hollow. Such was a testimony of Muslim intellectual failure, moral disorientation and spiritual laxity. What Seyyed Hossein Nasr calls a "Western cult of ugliness"¹ - thanks to the omnipresence of vile modernity and its offshoot, post-modernity - has also spread and took hold in the Muslim world, resulting in unconceivable ugliness in built environments and extensive environmental destruction.

Unsightliness and unpleasantness became the norms, and authentic beauty and its splendour an exception. The latter was seen as a luxury for the rich and the privileged ones. A "Muslim cult of ugliness" was thus created as well, and was up and running.

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam, Enduring Values for Humanity*, p. 150.

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