

Issues in Contemporary Islamic Housing

Isu-isu Kontemporari Perumahan Islam

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Abstract

This paper discusses the subject of Islamic housing and some major requirements for its revival today. The following thrusts are the focus of the paper: 1) The meaning of Islamic housing; 2) Sound housing policies; 3) Avoiding major transgressions associated with housing; 4) Endless creativity and Islamic housing; 5) Some practical suggestions for planning and designing Islamic houses. The paper concludes that Islam as a comprehensive way of life influenced greatly the planning and designing of the houses of its adherents. Not only that, Islam also laid a solid foundation, in some instances in the form of laws, for creating what became known as the phenomenon of Islamic housing. In Islam, the house is an institution. It occupies an important position. It is a family development center. It is a microcosm of Islamic culture and civilization. The character of the paper is conceptual rather than empirical.

Keywords: Housing, Islam, Policies, Wrongdoings, the Family.

Abstrak

Kajian ini membincang mengenai subjek perumahan Islam dan beberapa syarat untuk kebangkitannya semula. Tujahan seperti berikut adalah tumpuan kajian ini: 1) Erti perumahan Islam; 2) Polisi perumahan yang kukuh; 3) Mengelak kesalahan besar yang berkaitan dengan perumahan; 4) Kreativiti tanpa henti dan perumahan Islam; 5) Beberapa cadangan praktikal untuk reka-bentuk perumahan Islam. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa, Islam sebagai cara hidup yang menyeluruh, banyak mempengaruhi perancangan dan reka-bentuk perumahan penganutnya. Bukan itu sahaja, Islam juga membentangkan asas yang kukuh dalam bentuk undang-undang, untuk mencipta apa yang dikenali sebagai fenomena perumahan Islam. Dalam Islam,

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rumah itu adalah sebuah institusi. Ia ditempatkan di kedudukan tinggi. Ia merupakan pusat pembangunan keluarga. Ia adalah mikrokosmos budaya dan tamadun Islam. Sifat kajian ini adalah secara konseptual dan bukan empirikal.

Kata Kunci: Perumahan, Islam, Polisi, Kesalahan, Keluarga.

Introduction

In Islam, the house is a place to rest, relax the body and mind, and enjoy legitimate worldly delights. Within the realm of their houses, Muslims also worship, teach, learn and propagate the message of Islam. Central to the standards by which a house may be categorized as “Islamic” are the holiness and purity of its philosophy, vision, function and utility, accompanied by convenience, efficiency, safety, awareness of the physical surroundings, and anything else that Islam reckons as indispensable for living a decent and accountable family life. The sheer physical and artistic appearance is therefore inferior and matters only when it comes into complete conformity with the above mentioned criteria. Muslim architects, planners, structural engineers and final users alike, should perceive the house phenomenon as a sheer means, an instrument, a carrier of the spiritual, not a goal itself. Islamic housing is a blend of the belief system, teachings and values of Islam, on the one hand, and the prerequisites and influences of indigenous cultures, climates, topographies, building materials, talents, technologies and economies, on the other. The nature of the paper, along with its contents, references, methodology and conclusions, is conceptual and philosophical, rather than empirical. Still however, the paper contains myriads of practical suggestions as to the ways Islamic housing is to be conceived, produced and utilized today. As a result, for the sake of visual demonstration, clarification and paper enrichment, several illustrations have been inserted into the body of the paper.

Islamic Housing: Significance

The house institution occupies an extraordinary place in Islam. It is a family development center. It is a microcosm of Islamic culture and civilization in that individuals and families bred and nurtured therein constitute the fundamental units of the Islamic *Ummah* (community). The places where people live are the first and arguably most influential and critical educational and development centers. If functioning properly, such centers have a potential to produce, in concert with other societal establishments and centers, the individuals who will be capable of transforming and making better their immediate surroundings and the whole communities they belong to.

Conversely, if misconstrued and their roles distorted, the places where people live have a potential to become a breeding ground for nearly all social ills, which if left unchecked are able to paralyze entire communities and eventually stifle the civilizational undertakings of theirs. It follows that in Islamic society there should exist a high level of ideological compatibility between the house and other societal institutions. An ideological incompatibility, or dichotomy, between the two poles is unacceptable and can only hinder, if not thwart altogether, the progress of society.

Islamic housing is a mixture of the heavenly and terrestrial factors and elements. Both sides are extremely important, playing their respective roles. They finely complement and add to each other's strength and operation.¹ Neglecting either of the two poles in Islamic housing inevitably leads to a serious damage in its fundamental nature, at a conceptual or a practical level. The heavenly or divine factors give Islamic housing a soul, moral fiber and its conspicuous identity. They present it with a special aura which is effortlessly exuded by Islamic houses inside as well as outside their ambits. The terrestrial factors, on the other hand, impart about Islamic housing an intuition about its compelling worldliness, simplicity and utter practicality and pragmatism. They provide a powerful

¹ Stefano Bianca, *Urban Form in the Arab World*, (London; New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 22-23.

feeling about Islamic houses' and their users' congenital mortality, so nobody should ever get carried away and deceived to treat his house or his self differently. Even though Islamic housing is inspired and deeply rooted in a transcendental idea and message, it still operates and is greatly influenced and shaped by the exigencies of space and time factors and experiences.

Sound Housing Policies

For successfully completing the project of reviving Islamic housing, having sound housing policies in place is absolutely essential. The primary goal of those policies will be to ensure that people without much ado can acquire decent, proper, functional and affordable houses. People are supposed to get houses that function as their family development centers, which are perceived as their earthly sanctuaries and even paradise. They are not to get just a roof of their heads, or just a shelter that protects them against the harmful natural elements. Houses are to function as a means for achieving a spiritual purpose on earth. They are thus to be affordable and all the problems related to them are to be solvable within the means of their owners and users. Houses are not to be turned into a goal of people's existence because, perhaps, acquiring or maintaining them is too complicated and expensive, or because a world in which houses are produced does not correspond with the world of a majority of people. Houses are to be an asset and not a liability to people. Houses, furthermore, are to be a source of joy and happiness and not a source of stress and anxiety to people. Here the roles of government authorities and agencies, as well as their affiliates, will be of paramount importance. Regular customer satisfaction surveys are to be conducted in order to ascertain that Muslims are happy with their houses, as well as to identify areas and concerns where improvements are due. The best way to find out whether the Muslim customers are satisfied with their houses is to honestly ask them and to listen to them. They handsomely pay for their houses and they spend a great deal of their lives in them. Hence, they are the most important stakeholders in Islamic housing. Their views and feedback are to be constantly sought and valued.

Sound housing policies revolve, mainly, around the following concerns.

Firstly, the involvement of the community in all the steps concerned with the planning, constructing and maintaining of the housing projects is needed. “There is much that government can do in this area. Government can encourage and nurture the creation of community organizations. They can then work with them to mutually design and carry out housing projects. When the private sector is involved, government can act with and on behalf of the people to insure that quality housing is produced. Once constructed, government can offer technical assistance for maintenance of housing units and the associated residential infrastructure.”²

Secondly, “insuring that those who build housing, whether they are self-builders or private sector firms, have access to good quality building materials at a cost they can afford. In far too many situations, it is inadequate access to building materials that limits the kinds of construction activity that could contribute significantly to the solution of the housing problem.”³

Thirdly, there ought to exist comprehensive building standards that ensure the quality of housing.⁴ These standards, however, should be amplified and need transcend the scope of the concerns of, for example, water, sanitation, sewage drainage, the form and size of houses and some of their components, reducing the danger of fire and other hazards, etc. --

² Charles L. Choguill, *The Search for Policies to Support Sustainable Housing*, The Proceedings of the International Conference on Sustainable Housing, 18-19.9.2006, Penang, Malaysia, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5. See also: Rouhi Al-Sherif, *Solving the Housing Problems for Poor Groups in Islamic Cities*, (pp. 249-266); *Housing and City Planning Problems in the City of Tehran*, by a representative from the municipality of Tehran, (pp. 155-160); *Inside: Housing in the Islamic City*, Proceedings of a Symposium held in Ankara, Turkey, on 21-25.7.1984. Proceedings prepared by: Center of Planning and Architectural Studies, Cairo.

albeit without diminishing the importance of those issues and concerns even in the slightest. Building standards should entail myriads of other issues and concerns in relation to the psychological and spiritual wellbeing of people as well.

Fourthly, finding ways and means to reduce the costs of housing to a minimum, as well as help people finance their houses and housing loans. The poor in society cannot be neglected. However, with expensive houses dominating the market, even the middle-class population, let alone the poor, will be severely affected.⁵

Fifthly, there must be adequate land for residential construction at a price that households can afford, even if it means that government agencies should free up some of their own surplus land holdings.⁶

Sixthly, there should be sets of comprehensive housing policies which will aim to tackle the housing problems that are connected to some relatively new social and natural phenomena, such as sustainable development, recycling, energy efficient built environment, environmental impact assessment, crime prevention, resistance to natural disasters common to an area, and the like.

Seventhly, there ought to exist clear policies and guidelines that will target and monitor the proper conduct of Islamic housing professionals. This could be part of a broad and comprehensive Islamic architectural, as well as planning and development, ethics.

⁵ See: Mahbub ul Haq, *Islamic Architecture and the Poor People of Islam*, in *Places of Public Gathering in Islam*, edited by Linda Safran, (Philadelphia: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1980), p. 126-127.

⁶ Charles L. Choguill, *The Search for Policies to Support Sustainable Housing*, p. 5.



A house in Jubail, Saudi Arabia.



Terrace houses are very popular in Malaysia. Some terrace houses in Kuala Lumpur.



A traditional courtyard house in Cairo, Egypt.



Crudely screened balconies on an apartment building in Damascus, Syria. Obviously, the people embraced some utilitarian ends at the expense of the aesthetic ones.



An apartment building in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.



A courtyard house that once belonged to Imam Khomeini in Qom, Iran.

Avoiding Major Transgressions Associated with Housing

Built environment in general, and housing in particular, constitute a very fertile ground for committing and nurturing some major transgressions which Islam categorically forbids. The most serious amongst those transgressions, certainly, are: wastefulness, showing off, haughtiness, discrimination between people, corruption, greed, jealousy, rivalry, environmental destruction, inflicting harm, cheating and dishonesty. All these transgressions Islam regards as grave sins which can seriously impinge on the spiritual wellbeing of a person and that of a whole community. So serious are those sins that they have a potential to deny their perpetrators Allah's grace in both worlds and His Paradise in the Hereafter, plunging them into the agony of Allah's wrath and Hellfire instead.⁷

Thus, the general educational systems of Muslims in general, and the Islamic built environment education in particular, are expected to seriously address the matter. Islamic education is not the one that produces greedy, materialistic and egocentric professionals who readily dispense with moral principles both in their professional and private lives. Islamic education, on the contrary, produces capable but ethical and accountable professionals who are no less skilled and competent than their peers who come from typical secular educational systems. Besides, Islamic education, at the same time, guides and prepares its people to become responsible fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, neighbors, consumers, citizens, etc. In other words, Islamic education, pragmatic, dynamic and fervent as it is, prepares Muslims to face head-on the life realities and challenges in their entirety, as there is much more to life than professional engagements in, for instance, architecture, engineering, economics, medicine, politics, etc. According to the Islamic message, therefore, knowledge without righteousness is of no use and it is a very dangerous and deceiv-

⁷ Some of the Qur'anic verses that can be used as reference here are as follows: al-Shu'ara' 128-130, 139, al-Fajr 6-8, al-Tawbah 108, al-A'raf 78, al-Hajj, 45-46, al-Isra' 27.

ing proposition. Likewise, righteousness without knowledge is deficient. The two must be integrated serving as such as a foundation of people's lives and, in turn, as their driving cultural and civilizational force.

Imparting the knowledge to the Muslim children and adolescents in the institutions designated for the purpose, which is either incomplete or defective, is a serious misdeed with some equally serious consequences. Without doubt, the case of the flawed educational systems in the Muslim world is the most responsible culprit behind the continuous bolstering and prolonging of the dismal conditions of Muslims, including their built environment. This covers the physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of the Muslim reality.⁸ As a result, the faculties of cognizance and wisdom in many people became severely impaired, if not totally shut, thus causing disorientation, confusion and paradoxes in their thinking and behavioral paradigms. Such degenerate life patterns, unfortunately, has become the rule, rather than an exception. The evidence of this sorry state of affairs is available virtually everywhere for everyone to see.

It is only when one reflects on the above given explanation that one can comprehend scores of absurdities in ways many Muslims build and use their houses. One then can also get a hint of where potential remedies are to be sought.

For example, how come that a person is so much concerned about wastefulness, developing a phobia about it in terms of dress, food and drink – and rightly so because Islam condemns wastefulness so much that spendthrifts are described by the Qur'an as brothers of Satan (al-Isrā': 27) – but fails to recognize that the same vice can be committed by means of building houses that are monsters in terms of energy consumption, or that are far bigger and have far more spaces and facilities than what is genuinely required and can be sensibly justified, thus leading to either excessive maintenance costs, or to acts of mismanagement, underutilization and even negligence? This also applies to wasting building

⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, (London: Rotledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 421-428.

materials, services, amenities, time, space(s), opportunities, private, public and natural resources, etc. In effect, more damage through squandering in housing is caused to resources than in the cases of dress, food and drink. Squandering in housing, therefore, should be regarded as more abominable than the same with regard to dress, food and drink.

Definitely, wastefulness in housing is real and everyone must take note.⁹ Nonetheless, if housing patrons and professionals create a house in such a way that its occupants have no choice but to commit wastefulness, because, for example, no inner space can be used without a source of artificial light, even during the day, or because no inner space can be used without an air conditioner during a hot spell, or because no inner space can be used without a source of artificial heating during cold spells, even if temperatures fluctuate significantly, or because maintaining the house is a financial nightmare to its users – due to this, the same housing patrons and professionals, it stands to reason, will be answerable for more than just the mediocre execution of their work. Whenever the occupants of a house commit an outright act of wastefulness, partly because of their own negligence and partly because of the ways their house has been designed and built and then as such has been imposed upon them, a housing professional, or a patron, who imposed upon the occupants of a house the behavioral pattern that causes them to waste will definitely partake of the blame. This is an evidence that architecture is a two edged profession. It can be a very risky business. Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, thus called architecture an “estimable calling” and then said that whosoever is engaged in it must be, first of all, righteous and pious.¹⁰

Another example of many Muslims’ paradoxical behavior concerning housing is the question of showing off, pride and haughtiness.¹¹

⁹ Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Kitab al-Libas, Hadith No. 3595, Kitab al-Taharah wa Sunanuha, Hadith No. 418 and 419.

¹⁰ *Sinan’s Autobiographies, Five Sixteenth-Century Texts*, p. 66. John Freely and Augusto Romano Burelli, *Sinan*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996) p. 11.

¹¹ Pride, showing off and haughtiness are associated with Satan who basically for that nature of his was of those who rejected Faith. (al-Baqarah 34) The Prophet (pbuh) thus

Many people in their personal lives and in their daily interactions with other people tend somewhat to shun these and other similar misconducts altogether – and rightly so because such things has no place in Islam, the religion of kindness, brotherhood, equality and human dignity, so much so that the Prophet (pbuh) once said that the person in whose heart a mustard seed’s weight of haughtiness is found will be thrown on his face into Hellfire¹² -- but the same people see nothing wrong with a verity that a house symbolizes a person’s status and wealth which a person strives to maintain as such, making it all the more telling as his status and wealth improve. They like to boast about their houses, feeling very happy when someone is impressed or talks admirably about them. With these people, modesty plays a very prominent role in some life areas, however, when it comes to housing, such a thing becomes imaginary.

Showing off one’s status and affluence through the means of housing can create a much more powerful negative impact on neighbors, visitors and spectators, and can consequently become much more repulsive, than the acts of showing off, pride and haughtiness through the words and some minor and inconsequential deeds. There is much at stake here, indeed. Islam teaches that all believers are equal brothers and sisters.¹³ Allah does not look into people’s wealth, status and looks. He looks into

once said: “He in whose heart a mustard seed’s weight of arrogance is found will be thrown on his face into Hellfire.” (See: Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, Kitab Musnad al-Mukaththirin min al-Sahabah, Hadith No. 6719)

The Prophet (pbuh) also said: “He who dies free from three things: arrogance, malignancy (*ghulul*) and debt, shall enter Paradise.” (Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Kitab al-Siyar, Hadith No. 1497).

Once the Prophet (pbuh) asked his companions whether they want to know some characteristics of the occupants of Hellfire, to which they replied in the affirmative. Then he told them: “Those who are cruel (*utull*), egotistical (*jawwaz*) and haughty (*mustakbir*).” (Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab Tafsir al-Qur’an, Hadith No. 4537).

¹² Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, Kitab Musnad al-Mukaththirin min al-Sahabah, Hadith No. 6719.

¹³ Allah explicitly says so in the Qur’an in *Surah al-Hujurat*, verse No. 10.

their hearts and deeds. The best among people are those who are most Allah conscious and most virtuous.¹⁴

Moreover, the houses which are meant to be a means and instrument of showing off and arrogance are extremely demanding and costly. They consume a lot of their owners' and users' riches, time and energy. They become an object of their inventive evil contriving, growing spending clout and their intense materialistic desires. Such people do not control their houses; on the contrary, their houses control them. They do not own their houses; their houses "own" them. They simply worship their houses, faithfully putting themselves and everything they possess at their houses' disposal. They become so attached to their houses that just a thought of possibly losing them is sufficient to give them the shivers, making them think that without their houses almost the whole life will become hollow, meaningless and worthless. They use their houses for seeking their illusory dreams, comfort and security.

Yet another example of many Muslims' contradictory behavior concerning housing is the question of the '*awrah*'.¹⁵ Again, it is inexplicable how some Muslims, both men and women, are very particular about this Islamic tenet when they are outside their houses under the public glare – and rightly so. However, when they are at home, the following factors: the mishandling of the sizes, arrangements, positioning and screening of the doors, windows and other apertures, the ways balconies, patios, porches and open-type kitchens are planned and built, and the unavailability of appropriate spaces for guests and visitors – all these can seriously endanger the preservation of their '*awrah* and can cause them to violate the '*awrah* and privacy of others. Unfortunately, about the whole thing, they feel no, or very little, pang of conscience. One wonders then how come that the issue of '*awrah* is so important outside the house's domain, but inside the house the same can be somewhat over-

¹⁴ Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, The Virtues of Companions, Hadith No. 6144.

¹⁵ See: Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Kitab al-Adab, Hadith No. 4412. Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, Musnad al-Mukaththirin min al-Sahabah, Hadith No. 4554.

looked and let pass when, for example, a person uses his balcony, porch or patio, when a person is in a kitchen where he or she can easily be overseen by a neighbor or a passerby, when a person uses a critical door, a window, or an aperture, when a person entertains his or her visitors and guests, when a person has a maid, etc.

Finally, there are housing professionals who strive for excellence in some plain worship rituals, as well as in some other trivial deeds of theirs, but are more than happy with a deliberate mediocrity in matters concerning their assignments in the field of housing for which they are paid and from which they feed themselves and their family members. This is not all, though. Their deliberate mediocrity frequently leads them to other equally or even more hazardous acts, such as laziness, apathy, time mismanagement, abusing or misusing the public property and resources, inferior execution of tasks given, and even outright cheating and corruption.

However, these professionals fail to realize that excellence is an Islamic principle which is universal covering both the spiritual and secular realms and pursuits.¹⁶ When the Prophet (s.a.w.) said that Allah loves when we do something that we do it to perfection,¹⁷ he meant thereby every legitimate life activity because Islam is life, and life, in turn, is a multidimensional field of worship (*'ibadah*) for which man has been created. Every deed, word and thought of man in this world will count on the Day of Judgment either for or against him. Housing professionals cannot have a double face or a personality insofar as deifying Allah and serving His Islam and humanity is concerned: one in places designated for worship and the other one outside them, as though Allah exists only in the former while in the latter man is left to conduct his self as he wishes according to his personal desires, interests and whims. Indeed, if one deliberately embraces mediocrity as a way of work, shoring it up with

¹⁶ Al-Samahudi, *Wafa' al-Wafa*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1997), vol. 1 p. 333.

¹⁷ See: Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din), *Muhammad*, (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 1983), p. 325.

some other misdemeanors, one proportionately renders his earnings illegitimate with which he feeds his self and his family. There is a danger that some members of his family, having been raised on elements of *haram* (prohibitions), might become so accustomed to those elements that they eventually become even unable to distinguish between the right and wrong when they eventually grow up and start themselves to work and contribute to society. This is a vicious cycle which when one entangles his self, or others, in it, one can hardly extricate his self, or anybody else, from its fetters.

Endless Creativity and Islamic Housing

In order for the revival of Islamic housing to become a feasible prospect today, genuine creativity and resourcefulness on the part of Muslim housing professionals should know no boundaries. We have already stated on a couple of occasions that there is nothing rigidly predetermined as regards Islamic housing which should impose upon housing professionals a sense of strict following, narrowing in the process and stifling the scope and power of their creativity. Holding fast to the general conceptual and ethical frameworks presented by the Qur'an and the Prophet's *sunnah*, on the one hand, and holding fast to the prerequisites of Muslims' natural and man-made living conditions, on the other, Muslim housing professionals should bravely and confidently unleash their ambitions and talents, and embark on creating a housing legacy which both Allah and people will greatly appreciate. What will carry Muslim housing professionals and their tasks at hand through is a verity that whatever the results of their sincere and visionary undertakings, such will be deemed a success justifying the efforts. The only thing that is required, however, is a valid intention, vision, dedication and efforts, satisfying thereby the needs of Muslims in the most effective and appropriate ways.¹⁸ There should be no limits to, or discouragements from, new ex-

¹⁸ See: Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: its Implications for Thought and Life*, (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995), p. 208. Richard Ettinghausen, *Al-Ghazzali on Beauty*, in: *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, edited by M.A.J. Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), p. 27. Muhammad

perimentations. Rigid and categorical prescriptions have place neither in Islamic nor in conventional housing designs.

Any physical housing form resulting from this process can never be seen as strange, eccentric and unacceptable, so long as Muslims embrace it as the best and most correct thing for themselves. There is nothing that can be stranger, more eccentric, more incorrect and so more objectionable than blindly following and importing the housing answers and solutions which are at odds with certain precepts and values of Islam, or with certain life conditions of Muslims. For example, if there are countless types of doorways and windows out there, there will be nothing wrong in coming up with yet another window or doorway type which will be based on a Muslim architect's reflection on, and attempts to integrate, the relevant values and teachings of Islam into that novel type. Similarly, if there are countless systems of organizing the inner spaces of the house out there, there will be nothing wrong in contriving yet another plan and organization of domestic inner spaces based on a Muslim architect's consideration of, and attempts to integrate, the relevant values and teachings of Islam into that novel system. Also, if there are countless ways out there to integrate nature into housing and to make houses nature friendly, there will be nothing wrong in fashioning a new way to do so based on a Muslim architect's awareness of, and responsiveness to, the wide-ranging Islamic environmental ethics. Certainly, the same goes, in equal measure, to everything else concerning Islamic house designs, such as the plan and design of living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms and recreational spaces, making a house energy efficient, sustainable, and users and neighbors friendly, the subject of house aesthetics, privacy, economy, etc.

A Muslim architect ought to possess a true Islamic mentality. This Islamic mentality will give a Muslim architect a sound vision and mission in life. He will be made a man that possesses an authentic Islamic identity. He will remain faithful to his religion, people, culture and

Qutub, *Manhaj al-Fann al-Islami*, (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1983), p. 124. Lois Lamy al-Faruqi, *Islam and Art*, (Islamabad: National Hijra Council, 1985), p. 22.

profession. He will be further characterized by such commendable traits as bravery, sincerity, efficiency, excellence, originality, wisdom and faithfulness.

A true Muslim architect will never say, for example, that what determined his house design(s) was the fact that he looked around at other houses to get a general idea of what he wanted, or that he browsed through as many international home and real estate books, magazines and internet sites as he could lay his hands on, in order to see what house designs and with what features he liked, or did not like, so that he could integrate them into his own designs. A true Muslim architect, furthermore, will never say, as another example, that he was so impressed with a house design somewhere in a physical, social, cultural and religious context different from his own, that he wanted to replicate, or parachute, it in a region where he lives. Nor will a true Muslim architect ever think that, instead of playing a primary, the implications of the needs of his people, culture, religion and society play a secondary role in determining his house designs. To do all this will be a clear evidence of the lack, or corruption, of a vision, identity, creativity, courage, excellence, wisdom and truthfulness. A true Muslim architect never lives in a utopian and idealistic world of his own, detached from and unconcerned about the real and problems and challenges loaded world of his clients.

Muslim housing professionals should remember that as long as they are on the right path, applying the right methods, they cannot do wrong as regards their housing solutions pursuits, even if some planning and design maneuvers at a first glance might appear somewhat unconventional. Even then, that still could be a sign of a remarkable design breakthrough. If everything is to be conventional, predictable and typical, where, then, would be the role of creativity and originality, and when, then, could a breakthrough come about? Creative breakthroughs are normally associated with the brave and farsighted revolts against the established standards, practices and customs, where the latter's permanence and absolute authority are unjustified. Muslim housing professionals should stop at nothing legitimate in their pursuit of reviving Islamic housing today. The only way to success, however, is to widely open the

door of Islamic creativity, and to permanently shut the door of blind following and imitation with reference to both foreign cultures and the Muslim distant past.



A house in the village of Orahovica, near Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina.



A village house in Penang, Malaysia.



A traditional house in Rashid (Rosetta), Egypt.



Residential areas in San'a, Yemen.



A residential area in Bursa, Turkey.



An apartment building in Penang, Malaysia.

Some Practical Suggestions for Planning and Designing Islamic Houses

The following are some practical suggestions which should feature in nearly all Islamic houses. A number of the proposed Islamic housing features can be incorporated into Islamic houses and their renovations at little or minimal cost. Some features, indeed, cost nothing. They are about more effective and more creative use of features and spaces that may already exist and are common in most houses.

The proposed suggestions are as follows:

1. Islamic houses are to be as spacious as possible. There is nothing wrong in promoting spacious and comfortable houses for the sake of facilitating the attainment of some noble goals in them, while at the same time staying away from the influences of vice and sin. Admittedly, a big house can function better than a small one. The former's potential is a lot greater. The functions of a big house can easily be increased and diversified, something that is very difficult to achieve with a small house. It stands to reason that an excessive and unnecessary asceticism in housing, whereby the required performances of the house institution might be severely affected, is not recommended.¹⁹
2. As a transitional point from the outside to the inside, and *vice versa*, a front door should be designed in such a way that it does not give immediate access to domestic quarters, but lead to a vestibule, or a lobby, instead. Facing and standing close to a front door, there could be a wall inside a house, as part of an inner space. The purpose of that wall will be to prevent the interior from being exposed to the outside world once a front

¹⁹ Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, Kitab Musnad al-Makkiyyin, Hadith No. 14830. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, translated into English by Fazlul Karim, (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1982), vol. 2 p. 164. Muhammad Uthman 'Abd al-Sattar, *al-Madinah al-Islamiyyah*, (Kuwait: 'Alam al-Ma'rifah, 1988), p. 333.

door is opened. Whenever a front door is opened, the only thing one could see from outside will be that wall. In some places, however, for the similar purpose people like to place a small wall, or just a screen, outside and right in front of a doorway. In this case, a front door can hardly be seen from a road or a corridor outside a house, let alone what lies behind it. The front doors of neighbors should be set back from each other, especially when narrow corridors separate dwelling units like in compact neighborhoods and apartments. A front door should not be excessively huge. If it is huge, however, it can be double-leaf. A small door can also be pierced through a big panel that fills a doorway, or through one of the two big adjacent independent panels that hinge on each side of a doorway. Numerous variations on this basic design are possible. Doors with a few sections can then be operated as per needs. A front door should be decorated with certain calligraphic inscriptions. From the outside, a front door should feature the Islamic greeting, which is to be communicated upon entering, a simple but relevant supplication, or a verse, or verses, from the Qur'an, or an account from the Prophet (pbuh). From the inside, as a decorative element too, a front door should feature the supplication for leaving a house. These inscriptions will constantly remind the occupants of a house of the Islamic demeanor in relation to entering and leaving a house. At, or near, a front door there should be adequate means for seeking permission before entering.

3. Designing windows and other apertures should be in such a way that they duly comply with the requirements of privacy protection, though without compromising their intended functions. The more densely populated and busier a neighborhood, the more attention ought to be given to the matter. The following general suggestions could be considered: reducing the existence of the windows and apertures that face the outside world and trimming down their sizes, resourcefully and artis-

tically screening windows, positioning windows and apertures strategically and above the eye-level, using opaque and semi-transparent glass, parapets, employing blocks and slabs used as both screening and decorative elements, etc.

4. Islamic houses must facilitate the privacy protection among the family members inside the house's realm. As a minimum requirement, every Islamic house should have a room for parents, another room for female children, and yet another room for male children. There also should be a common living room, a couple of toilets, a kitchen and a common store.
5. Islamic houses must facilitate the privacy protection between guests and visitors and the occupants of a house. Thus, there should be a space designated for guests and visitors in every house. This space should be positioned somewhere near a front door, away from a house's core, so that the normal domestic life is not seriously disrupted. There should be a toilet nearby. However, if some houses cannot afford a separate space for guests and visitors, any other space which is strategically located can serve the purpose. If there are no guests or visitors at home, the same space could be utilized for some other domestic purposes, subject to the needs and creativeness of a family. This is very important because this way the notion of entertaining guests and visitors, which Islam regards as very essential, will go down well with every family member. If, however, the presence of guests and visitors seriously disrupts the domestic life of people's houses, some of them, as a result, may develop a phobia about the whole matter. This, in turn, may lead to the gradual decline and eventual abandoning of the concept of Islamic hospitality, putting then some critical Islamic precepts and ideas, such as brotherhood, munificence, mutual love, care and respect, at stake.
6. Free intermingling between men and women among visitors, if they are from more than one family and are not closely related to each other, and between visitors and the family mem-

bers of different genders, also if they are not closely related to each other, should be avoided, at most, and discouraged, at least. Organization of a house's inner spaces should promote and facilitate this segregation. Living rooms can be partitioned for the purpose. If a living room is not big enough to be partitioned, it can be used, for example, for men only, while another room, like a recreation, or a multipurpose, or a family room, can be used for women. If there is a space normally designated for visitors and guests, that space can be used for one group and a living room for the other group.

7. A living room should be planned near a front door. Because of its position, and because a room for visitors and guests is always located near it, which they also utilize, a living room is normally perceived as a semi-public space in a house. Thus, a clear demarcation line should be drawn between a living room and a house's most guarded sections, such as the kitchen and sleeping rooms.
8. Serious consideration should be given to the fact that many households in many Muslim countries have domestic maids or helpers, who are generally women and who stay in houses where they work. This means that a foreign person resides in a house. This entails many serious implications regarding the privacy of both a maid and the family members which must be addressed by Muslims. A staying place for a maid should be assigned near those spaces which are considered least sensitive for the privacy of both a maid and a household. The most ideal solution, perhaps, will be if a maid gets a room with her own bathroom at the rear of a house where a kitchen, a store and maybe a backyard are located. This room should function as somewhat semi-autonomous and semi-separated from the rest of a house's fabric and its vibrant life, thereby illustrating both the position and rights of a maid at home. The rule is that the more the room of a maid stays separated from the domestic life of a house, the better it is. Perhaps, in addi-

tion, there should be some precise provisions on this matter in the housing policies of those countries where employing domestic maids or helpers is a common practice.

9. Sleeping rooms should be planned and designed in such a way as to help the residents of a house to face the direction of the *qiblah* in Makkah when they sleep on their right side, as recommended by the Prophet (pbuh).²⁰ One can also sleep with his head facing the *qiblah* and his feet facing the opposite direction. Though it is not a sin, but it is not recommended that one sleeps either on his left side or with his feet towards the *qiblah*. Moreover, a sleeping room should not have exceedingly sumptuous and cozy furnishings that can cause one to sleep excessively and even to become lazy. The state of sleeping rooms in Islamic houses and their furnishings should encourage and facilitate an Islamic tradition of going early to bed and waking up early refreshed and recharged for the *Fajr* (dawn) prayer, and even earlier for voluntary night prayers. Sleeping rooms should have neither those furnishing styles and accessories, nor entertainment elements, which could stand in the way of following the mentioned Islamic traditions. There should be least distractions. It was the practice of the Prophet (pbuh), as well the practice of the early and exemplary generations of Muslims, to have a light dinner, go to bed early and then to wake up before dawn for their prayers.²¹
10. When planning and designing toilets, a Muslim architect should bear in mind that Muslims are advised not to face the *qiblah* direction, nor to turn their backs to it, whenever they defecate or urinate. They are to face any of the other sides, as counseled by the Prophet (pbuh).²² According to some schol-

²⁰ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Wudu', Hadith No. 239.

²¹ *Why are We not Able to Wake up for Fajr?*, <http://www.jannah.org/articles/fajr.html>.

²² Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 380.

ars, so seriously does Islam view the issue of toilets and their directions that even if one has no choice but to use a toilet and in the process face or turn his back to the *qiblah*, one should try to deflect from an existing direction as much as possible. This was what the Muslims did after they had conquered Syria and found out that the toilets there were facing the *qiblah*.²³ However, a majority of Muslim scholars are of the view that not facing the *qiblah* side, nor turning the back towards it, while answering the call of nature, is a preferable thing, not an obligation, and violating it incurs no sin. Many scholars assert, furthermore, that this particular injunction applies only to open areas where there are no walls or fixed partitions. But if there are walls, then there is neither prohibition nor detestation in facing the *qiblah* side, or turning the back towards it, while answering the call of nature. Besides, toilets are recommended to be spacious enough lest their users might have some contact unawares with impurity. Ample water -- preferably running water -- should always be available for cleaning the body and place. How important water in toilets is reveals a tradition according to which the Prophet (pbuh) once used a toilet. When he came out, he found that some water had been brought to him for ablution. On seeing it, he asked who had brought the water. When told that it was a companion 'Abdullah b. 'Abbas, the Prophet (pbuh) then supplicated for him: "O my Lord, enlighten him as to the matters pertaining to the religion!"²⁴

11. A kitchen is to be designed in a way that it reflects as much as possible the way Islam looks at our sustenance and how it should be handled and consumed. This is a very important point especially at the present when materialism and hedonism are many people's religious faith, and consumption, ex-

²³Ibid., Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 380.

²⁴Ibid., Kitab al-Wudu', Hadith No. 140.

cess and gluttony their orthodoxy. The location and the décor of a kitchen in a house should suggest that in Islam people eat to live, and not live to eat. Food consumption is a means, not an end. Overindulgence and wastefulness are severely censured by Islam. Food consumption, though a great blessing and gift from Allah, should be associated with good sense, self-control, accountability, compassion and sharing. Muslim kitchens should thus be characterized by moderation in all terms. They should function as fields where the mentioned glorious Islamic teachings and values are propagated and practiced. Since women spend much of their time in them, kitchens should be placed in the deepest and most secured from the public eye section of a house. Provision of windows and other openings in kitchens for the sake of ventilation and lighting, though necessary, must be handled very judiciously at all times, so that the dignity and moral shield of kitchens and what regularly transpires in them remain safeguarded. Links between kitchens and the rest of a house's most guarded core should be well executed and maintained, forming an axis at a safe distance from whatever could take place potentially involving outsiders, visitors or guests at a main entrance, or in a guest room, or in a living room. The existence of a buffer between the two sections, or privacy levels, in a house will ensure that regardless of what was happening and who was in a house, women will still face no problems to uninterrupted perform their domestic duties and to freely move around.

12. Islamic house designs should consider the *qiblah* direction. Every Islamic house is a place of worship, i.e., a "mosque". People not only pray therein, but also carry out the rest of their activities for the sake of pleasing Allah. In the heart of every Muslim resides the Ka'bah in Makkah in which direction they pray five times a day. Hence, in every Islamic house, and inside each and every major inner space, there should be a

clear physical indication of the Qiblah direction, on the ceiling or on the relevant walls, simple or elaborate. This can be part of a decorative strategy in a house.

13. In every Islamic house, a space should be designated for a *musalla* (a place for praying or worship) -- no matter where and how big or small -- where the five daily prayers, *tadarus al-Qur'an* (collective study of the Qur'an), *tadhkirah* (religious reminders and motivational conversations), meditation, discussions, *dhikr* (remembering Allah), etc., could be conducted. Some of these activities will be conducted individually and some collectively among family members. Relatives and neighbors can be occasionally invited for the purpose. To have a *musalla* in one's house, one does not need a special room. A designated corner, or just any space, in a house can do the job. The designated place should permanently have some articles like a praying mat, religious posters, and a shelf with a few copies of the Qur'an and the copies of other religious texts. The place can be distinctively marked and even decorated. Since the five daily prayers will be the most common activity at the allocated place, a makeshift niche (*mihrab*), or just an ornamental carving on a wall pointing to the direction of the *qiblah*, will be desirable. The existence of a *musalla* and all the things that go with it at home will help people, especially children, to grow up and live on completely comfortable and friendly terms with Islamic spirituality, making it their permanent and best life companion.
14. In an Islamic house, a studying room, or an area, or just a corner, should be earmarked with sufficient facilities in it. If possible, a small library can be attached to it. A studying area can be placed next to a *musalla*, due to the similarities of the purposes and roles of the two. The two can even be integrated into one single space. The place is to be frequently used by every family member, and now and then by relatives and neighbors. The presence of a studying area in an Islamic house, in-

spired by how serious Islam about knowledge is, will go a long way in inculcating into the minds and hearts of Muslims, especially children, a culture of earnestly acting upon and appreciating learning. Likewise, it will help to curb through the means of knowledge and appropriate, creative and critical attitudes and thinking a growing menace posed by some materialistic and hedonistic tendencies whereby the house is seen as no more than a place to eat, sleep and take excessive pleasure in other worldly delights.

15. An Islamic house is expected to take into account the climate, topography, wind direction and the movement of the sun, so that it is turned as much as possible into an effective self-heating, cooling, ventilation and illuminating mechanism. An Islamic house will get the most out of the sources of natural energy that surround and impact upon it. It will resist the harmful influences of its neighboring environmental factors and elements. It will be self-protected and well insulated. Generally, an Islamic house will be favorably responsive to its ecosystem, irrespective of whether it exists in warm or cold climates, in dry or rainy conditions. It will be an “ally”, not an “adversary”, to its surroundings. It will not depend solely on artificial sources and means for energy. However, due to vast differences in climates, topographies and environments from one place to the other, this matter will be best dealt with on a case by case basis. Good, extensive and creative field research will be vital. What will be affected most in all cases, though, are the house envelope, choice of building materials, the orientation and depth of houses, the layout of inner spaces, the thickness and color of walls, the type, form, contour and color of roofs, as well as the positioning, style and size of entrances, windows and other openings. This consideration will help a house to be energy efficient, nature friendly and sustainable. It will help a house to stave off wastefulness. It goes without saying that Islamic housing and the contemporary notion of

passive design are fairly compatible as both of them call for manipulating and controlling daylight, air quality, temperature, humidity, noise levels and insulation for the sake of people's comfort and health.

16. An Islamic house will incorporate into its fold as much nature as possible. This consideration will also help a house to be energy efficient, sustainable and its natural surroundings friendly. Due to vast differences in weather and natural conditions from one place to the other, this matter too will be best dealt with on a case by case basis. Good, extensive and creative field research will be vital. To have various elements from nature in an Islamic house is highly desired because such leads people to benefit from the spiritual dimensions entailed in the natural environment right at their doorsteps, because of the recreational potentials that the natural environment innately has, and finally because of the psychological and emotional healing power that nature generally possesses. Indeed, benefiting from the world of nature is effortless. Just observing flowers, a tree, or green grass, or allowing to be coddled by a breeze or the rays of sunlight, or watching the day turn into night, and night into the day, can present a person with tremendous spiritual, recreational and remedial advantages. It has been proven over and over again that the weather, nature and temperature clearly influence human behavior.²⁵ So do crowding and lack of comfort at home, to the extent that "prolonged high indoor density often impairs mental and physical health, task performance, child development and social interaction."²⁶ "Increasingly there is evidence for a fairly direct effect of certain forms of nature on our psycho-

²⁵ Robert Gifford, *Environmental Psychology*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), p. 316.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

logical function.”²⁷ It is believed that viewing and being in nature improves our health, both mentally and physically. “The evidence is clear that nature usually helps people recover from stress associated with modern industrial life.”²⁸ This consideration further means that no harm will an Islamic house cause to its natural surroundings.

17. An Islamic house will not generate any harm to its neighbors and their houses. It will not indiscriminately block the sun, wind, and views to them. It will not upset them with its noise, unpleasant smells, waste, sewage and other forms of pollution. An Islamic house will guard its privacy. At the same time, it will not violate its neighbors’ right for privacy either. It will not “show off”, nor will it epitomize pride, prejudice, discrimination and haughtiness. It will integrate itself well and peacefully into its existing physical and social contexts. It will project itself as highly compatible with them, yet as their integral part. An Islamic house cannot turn itself into the bane of someone’s life.
18. Balconies, porches, terraces, open roofs, courtyards and backyards in houses should be tactically designed and located, and should be properly screened and guarded, so that the ‘*awrah* and privacy of the family members, when they use them, are not infringed upon. Unfortunately, these are some of the housing components where the issues of the ‘*awrah* and privacy are perhaps most frequently and most severely violated today, as people regularly use them for recreation, interaction, socialization, natural ventilation and lighting purposes. It is true that all of balconies, porches, terraces, open roofs, courtyards and backyards can create favorable microclimates and com-

²⁷ Paul A. Bell, Thomas C. Greene, Jeffrey D. Fisher, Andrew Baum, *Environmental Psychology*, (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), p. 52.

²⁸ Robert Gifford, *Environmental Psychology*, p. 321. *Green Spaces “Improve Health”*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8307024.stm>.

fortable ambiances for their users, but the matter is two-edged and can become very sensitive, so it needs be carefully and responsibly attended to.

19. An Islamic house should be decorated with various Islamic themes employing various styles and methods. Here too moderation and clear purpose and goals will be the key. Calligraphy, abstract geometry and floral patterns, backed by a rich and ingenious use of light and colors, should dominate. Calligraphic inscriptions will be from the contents of the Holy Qur'an, the *sunnah* of the Prophet (pbuh), the sayings of famous Muslim sages, and from the contents of Islamic spiritual poetry, old and new. Calligraphic inscriptions will not be selected randomly. Rather, they will be selected in such a manner that the contents and spirit of their messages agree with the characters and functions of the spaces inside a house. They should be understandable to the users of a house. This way, decoration will be more meaningful and functional, and will thus have more effects on users. The objectives of decoration in Islamic houses, by and large, will be: to enhance the overall serviceability of houses; to promote the glorification of Allah and the humbling of man; to enhance the aesthetic appeal of houses; to incite contemplation, positive thinking and self-assessment inside houses; to both sooth and excite; to help the form of houses to become subservient to their function; and to help houses to function as both a means of and an avenue for the propagation of Islam (*da'wah Islamiyyah*). Decoration in Islamic houses must not feature statues and representations of humans.
20. An Islamic house should promote legitimate recreation. There should be enough facilities, means and spaces inside a house that can cater to this exigency of life which Islam perceives as natural and extremely important for people's physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. Living rooms, courtyards, backyards, porches, terraces and balconies are the spaces that can be uti-

lized most for the sake of recreation. However, people should always be creative enough both for inventing their legitimate types of house recreation and for finding ways and means as to how to ensure that the form and function of their houses satisfy their recreational needs. Quite often, though, for one to entertain and regenerate himself, one needs very little and very simple means. He perhaps needs just a chat with his loved ones. He perhaps needs just to give or receive attention from them. Many people like to complicate things and project attaining a genuine mode of recreation and its splendid goals beyond the rich of typical housing conditions. Quite often, furthermore, just having a collective family meal, while sharing a light conversation with a few jokes in the process, could do wonders. Pursuing a good and ingenious recreation at home is indispensable for maintaining one's emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing, as well as for enhancing the relationships between the family members based on understanding, forbearance, mutual love and care. Many social illnesses can be warded off in the process. Home recreation should not depend entirely on those artificial means, gadgets and devices, such as television, radio, video, computer, etc., which can easily be overused, and even abused, in which case their disadvantages become more plentiful than their advantages.

21. An Islamic house should possess the highest safety and security standards. The absolute wellbeing of people is the objective of Islam. It follows that the same must be the objective of whatever man, Allah's vicegerent on earth, does.
22. An Islamic house should give some consideration to the needs of the disabled and elderly people. Among these two categories of people might be a person's parents, visitors, guests, etc. Their rights must be respected too.
23. An Islamic house should have, if possible, more than a single circulation system. This is to facilitate the needed and unob-

structured movement of people inside a house, and from inside a house to its outside and *vice versa*, without putting the 'awrah, privacy and peace of any user of a house at stake.



The interior of an upper floor in a house in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.



A well protected open roof by a parapet in a house in San'a, Yemen.



An elaborately decorated screen on the roof of a house in Cairo, Egypt.



A courtyard house in Fez, Morocco.



A house in Jubail, Saudi Arabia.



A courtyard house in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.



A courtyard house in Damascus, Syria.

Conclusion

Housing professionals and general readership are to be aware of the importance of correctly conceptualizing, creating and using Islamic domestic architecture, especially at the present when the signs of a Muslim cultural and civilizational re-awakening are becoming increasingly evident. It is the nature of Islam that provides humanity with basic rules of morality and guidelines of proper conduct in those spheres of life which are not related to prescribed ritual worship, such as the spheres of building and planning, for example. Upon such general principles and guidelines people can establish systems, regulations, views and attitudes in order to comprehend and regulate their worldly life in accordance with their time, region and needs. Since every age has its own problems and challenges, the solutions and perceptions deduced from the fundamental principles and permanent values of life have got to be to some extent different. Their substance, however, due to the uniformity and consistency of the divinely given foundation and sources from which they stem, will always be the same.