The first buildings produced by the first Muslims were extremely simple in their form. Neither ornament nor decorative patterns were applied to any of their sections. This trend has known no exception worthy of consideration. However, as the first Hijrah century was approaching its end, things drastically changed. Decorating buildings—including places of worship—in many ways was increasingly making its way to becoming a permanent, and for many, the most appreciable feature of Islamic fine arts. A set of factors, such as the rapid development of Islamic eclectic culture and civilization—as well as the ever increasing need for intensifying and diversifying the methods and media for propagating Islam in the lands just opened to Islam and its government—to name a few—contributed directly or indirectly to the birth of this phenomenon.

In Islam, architecture is but a means, an instrument, a carrier of the spiritual, not a goal in itself. It fulfills an honorable mission. The Muslim architect and structural engineer are—first and foremost—concerned about how the end result of their efforts will fare when juxtaposed with existing universal settings—a result of heavenly artistry—in terms of both function and outward appearance: will it go well with it, or will it appear as something of a misfit, oddity, or even offensive?

The whole of nature—Allah’s physical realm—incessantly voluntarily sings in unison Allah’s praises and celebrates His glory, i.e., worships Him. Nature, furthermore, is a perceptible sign of the Creator’s will and presence, which is as evident in the most trivial as in the most splendid of places. Hence, every new architectural component is meant to become, in a way, a ‘sign’ itself—a man-made ‘sign’—lest they should become irreconcilable with both nature and the spiritual and psychological disposition of the users. The function and form of
erected edifices are always to adhere to the existing spiritual patterns of the natural environment.

It is due to this that function is always at the core of Islamic architecture. When it comes to form in Muslim buildings, mass is literally made invisible and all naturalistic qualities dispensed with. Muslims developed the culture of covering all surfaces with certain designs aimed at drawing the attention from the upshots of human endeavors to a higher order of expression and meaning. At the end, a building simply appears as though enveloped within pleasing, dynamic and contemplation-provoking webs of colored decoration. This way, the function of a building is greatly amplified and diversified.

This paper will cast some light on the subject of Islamic architecture, focussing in on the following issues: the general Islamic position on building; some aspects of the Prophet’s rich experience in building; Islam and interaction with space; peaceful coexistence with nature; and last but not least, the impact of the Islamic worldview on forming the identity of Islamic architecture.

Introduction

Humans are not the only creatures that build. Many a creature that we classify at the bottom of the hierarchy of the animal kingdom, such as bees and ants, build elaborate structures. However, it has been suggested that it is awareness and imagination that single out humans as superior to other animals in architectural output.¹ While the rest of creation act on the environment instinctively with no reasoning or training—as preordained by Allah, the Creator of the universe—man does the same willingly and at his own discretion. Since his actions are