

## CONCEPTUALIZING ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

*Spahic Omer*

### *Introduction*

In this paper, I will discuss the meaning of Islamic architecture and some of its functions and salient characteristics. The discussion will be divided into the following sections: (1) The meaning of Islamic architecture; (2) Islamic architecture as a means, not an end; (3) Two examples: the Islamic house and the mosque; (4) Pragmatism and Islamic architecture; (5) Towards the revival of Islamic architecture. The nature of the paper is conceptual or philosophical, rather than empirical. The paper seeks to enhance the awareness, both of the professionals and general readership, as to the importance of correctly conceptualizing and practicing Islamic architecture. Obviously, this is not a paper written from a pure perspective of architecture. The paper deals with the subject of Islamic architecture as a religious, cultural and civilizational phenomenon deeply rooted in the history of its existence and survival, and as closely linked to the existence and survival of Islamic society.

### *The meaning of Islamic architecture*

Much has been written and said about the meaning of Islamic architecture. Nonetheless, scholars considerably differed – and they still do – in their verdicts as to whether there is an architecture that can be called “Islamic.” If there is, what then is the meaning as well as main characteristics of such an architectural tradition? To many such people, Islam as a religion seems irrelevant to architecture. Architecture is viewed merely as one of life’s biggest necessities and much too sophisticated to need a religion as a point of reference.

The answer to the above quandary is that Islamic architecture, as both a concept and sensory reality, exists. Saying otherwise would do a great deal of injustice to both the religion of Islam and its peoples

who strove hard for centuries to realize it in their thought, deeds and words. Islam is a comprehensive worldview and a complete way of life. Islam has neglected no segment of existence. Practicing Islam inevitably means the creation of a comprehensive culture and civilization which carry the imprints of Islamic values, teachings and principles; in some aspects more so and in other aspects less. Islam signifies not only prescribed rituals at appointed times, but also comprehensive articles of faith, philosophy, ideology, culture, civilization and all of life's systems: personal, family and societal. The subject of architecture is no exception to this tenet. Islamic beliefs shape the ways in which the Muslims build.

However, it must be borne in mind that 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 art and architecture, 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. Islam is based on essential human nature, which is constant and not subject to change according to time and space. It is the outward forms which change while the fundamental principles, the basic values and the essential human nature, together with men's basic needs, remain unchanged.

So what would be the most proper understanding of Islamic architecture?

Islamic architecture is an architecture whose functions and, to a lesser extent, form, are inspired primarily by Islam. Islamic architecture is a framework for the implementation of Islam. It facilitates, fosters and stimulates Muslims' *'ibadah* (worship) activities, which, in turn, account for every moment of their earthly lives. Islamic architecture only comes into existence under the aegis