

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE  
HOUSES OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH)<sup>1</sup>  
AND THE FIRST MUSLIMS IN MADINAH

*Spahic Omer*

*Introduction: The essence of building in Islam*

In Islam, building activities in principle can be classified as permissible (*ibahah*), warranting their executors no reward or penalty. However, no sooner does the same become misconstrued and mishandled, violating, in turn, some of the divinely prescribed norms and principles, then it becomes either recommended against (*makruh*) or prohibited (*haram*), depending on the severity of the contravention. In contrast, if observing the objectives of the Islamic message is meant, foremost, that they thus be realized, the whole thing then becomes highly praiseworthy and so correspondingly rewarding. In other words, erecting buildings becomes an act of worship (*'ibadah*) whereby a person duly discharges some of the duties entrusted to him as a vicegerent on earth.

On coming to this world and on becoming a member of an intricate macro web comprising different worlds and life forms, man needed not long to understand that building as an art accounted for one of the necessary requirements for his cultural and civilization growth, if not for his bare survival. According to the Islamic *tawhidic* worldview, constructed buildings are meant not only to meet some of the necessary requirements in relation to man's existence on earth, but also to facilitate, promote and inspire his unending '*ibadah* (worship) practices entrusted to him by his Lord. As a result, the form, design, and function of the buildings, created by the Muslims normally inspired by Islam, are permeated with the Islamic undying spirit, and stand for the embodiment of the Islamic principles, values and standards. Given that such buildings symbolize a physical

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<sup>1</sup> "pbuh" stands for "peace be upon him" which Muslims are required to utter whenever the Prophet Muhammad's name is mentioned.

locus of their daily individual, family and social activities, the Islamic built environment assists greatly in making God's righteous servants' lives all one sweet song of praise to Him. Hence, it goes without saying that central to the Islamic notion of building is the total function of the constructed edifices; size, along with the overall physical appearance, is inferior and matters only when it comes into complete conformity with the aforementioned criterion.

Alfred Frazer, as reported by M. A. J. Beg, said about the fundamental nature of Islamic architecture: "The architecture of Islam is the expression of a religion and its view of the world rather than that of a particular people or political or economic system."<sup>2</sup>

In the same vein, Titus Burckhardt also wrote that it is not surprising, nor strange, that the most outward manifestation of Islam as a religion and civilization reflects in its own fashion what is most inward in it.<sup>3</sup>

Titus Burckhardt also remarked: "If one were to reply to the question 'what is Islam?' by simply pointing to one of the masterpieces of Islamic art such as, for example, the Mosque of Cordova, or that of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, or one of the madrasahs in Samarqand....that reply, summary as it is, would be nonetheless valid, for the art of Islam expresses what its name indicates, and it does so without ambiguity."<sup>4</sup>

However, one must not be so obsessed with the matter of building that some of the vices most commonly committed in building, such as wasting, exercising and promoting haughtiness, mutual envy and rivalry in building, may possibly be committed, even moderately. People ought to observe moderation, their limitations, personal and societal needs, and of course the value and utility of whatever they erect. Via its form, status, function and maintenance, the Islamic built environment is to be an asset to the community rather than a liability.

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<sup>2</sup> *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, edited by M.A.J. Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), p. 16 (Introduction).

<sup>3</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd., 1976), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.