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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

of the Islamic perceptions of God, man, nature, life, death and the Hereafter. Thus, Islamic architecture constitutes facilities which also function as a physical locus of the actualization of the Islamic message. Practically, Islamic architecture represents the religion of Islam that has been translated into reality at the hands of Muslims. It also represents the identity of Islamic culture and civilization.

Ibn Abdun, an Andalusian judge from the 12th century, is reported to have said, as quoted by Stefano Bianca: "As far as architecture is concerned, it is the haven where man's spirit, soul and body find refuge and shelter."[1] In other words, architecture is a container of people's lives.

Also, Ibn Qutayba, a Muslim scholar of the 9th century, compared the house, as quoted by Afif Bahnassi, to a shirt, saying that just as the shirt should fit its owner, the house too should suit its dwellers.[2] This is to say, the aesthetic and utilitarian ends of the house must correspond to the needs and capabilities of its users. The two must perfectly suit each other.

Central to Islamic architecture is function with all of its dimensions: corporeal, cerebral and spiritual. The form divorced from function is inconsequential. This, however, by no means implies that form plays no role in Islamic architecture. It does play a prominent role, but its relevance is a supportive one supplementing and enhancing function. The form is important, but in terms of value and substance it always comes second to function in its wider scope. There must be the closest relationship between the ideals that underpin the form of buildings and the ideals that underpin their function, with which the users of buildings must be at ease. A rift or conflict between the two is bound to lead to conflicts of far-reaching psychological proportions in the building's users.

We emphasize the word "function" simply because Islam is a religion not only of a faith and abstract philosophy but also of deeds, action and concrete life strategies. The term "*islam*" means "*submission,*" which in itself implies a continuous and comprehensive

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

[2] Afif Bahnassi, *The Islamic Architecture and its Specificities in Teaching Curricula*, http://www.isesco.org.ma/pub/Eng/Islarch/P2.htm

action. Islam is not a religion of symbols, slogans and rhetoric. It strikes a fine balance between the exigencies of the material and spiritual aspects of existence, between the conditions of this world and the Hereafter, and between the requirements of personal, family as well as societal development.[3] Islam means having a strong and complete faith in God and the other required realities from the spiritual and corporeal worlds plus performing good deeds under all circumstances. Possessing either aspect of Islam without the other is insufficient for attaining salvation. The two must be integrated in a whole that is called "Islam," which, in turn, must be interwoven with the life-force of the notion of comprehensive excellence or *ihsan*. Normally, what a believing person does first is to secure the belief aspect, which then causes him to perform good deeds. The relationship between the two is a causal one in which the former is the cause and the latter the effect. There is no person who has faith but does not perform good deeds. Likewise, there is no person who does deeds sanctioned by Islam and in the name of Islam but has no Islamic faith. A strong relationship between faith and good deeds are the only way towards comprehensive excellence.

Certainly, herein lies the actual importance of Islamic architecture, in the sense that it not only meets the requirements of living the Islamic lifestyle by just enveloping or framing it, but also by facilitating it, as well as promoting its worth by encouraging Islamic architecture users and observers to give such a lifestyle its due consideration and respect. Islamic architecture is both a field for the implementation of Islam and a vehicle for its promotion and advancement.[4] This is done at all planes of architecture: its perception, visualization, planning, execution and utilization. This is done, furthermore, through inspired and innovative practical plans, designs and structural solutions, which, as a matter of fact, can never be exhausted due to the countless opportunities presented

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[3] Oleg Grabar, *Art and Culture in the Islamic World*, in *"Islam: Art and Architecture,"* edited by Markus Hattstein & Peter Delius, (Cologne: Konemann, 2000), p. 35-43.

[4] Ernst J. Grube, "What is Islamic Architecture?", in *"Architecture of the Muslim World,"* edited by George Michell, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), p. 11-14.

by the integration of the Islamic religion into all of life's segments, or by the unison between the material and spiritual domains, and between the heavens and the earth. Islamic architecture is a style that glorifies God and His revelation. Likewise, it humbles man in his capacity as a worldly creature. At the same time, however, it celebrates man's honorable position as God's vicegerent on earth and his most respectable mission.

The total image of Islamic architecture is thus like everything else that validly bears the title "Islamic," such as the notions of "Islamic city","Islamic arts","Islamic dwelling","Islamic state", "Islamic university" and so on. The projected functions of all these phenomena epitomize, either completely or mainly, the ethos of Islam. In other words, they are microcosms of the Islamic doctrine. The multifaceted roles that such phenomena play in society, though ingenious, modern, dynamic and applicable, always remain in full accordance with the divine inspiration and guidance. Their holistic outlook on countless challenges of life stems from a symbiosis between the Islamic faith and an unprejudiced, pragmatic and courageous approach to life.

Having said this, it follows that it is grossly inappropriate to use the adjective "Islamic" before such entities or phenomena that only partly and superficially represent Islamic doctrine and its value system. Such may lead to confusion and the creations of misconceptions about Islam and its peoples. It is inappropriate, for example, to advance such concepts as "Islamic tiles","Islamic patterns","Islamic costume","Islamic door","Islamic window" and so on.

Islamic architecture as a means, not an end

Islamic architecture exists because of the existence of Islam. Moreover, in so many ways it serves the noble goals of Islam. Islamic architecture additionally serves Muslims in that it aids them to carry out successfully their vicegerency (*khilafah*) mission on earth. Islamic architecture aims to help rather than obstruct Muslims to fulfil that which they have been created for. Islamic architecture is Islam

manifested. Islamic architecture, Islam and Muslims are inseparable. Islamic architecture originated with the advent of Islam on the world scene. It never existed before, even though the peoples that became instrumental in molding and perpetuating its conspicuous identity lived where they were for centuries before embracing Islam and possessed cultures and civilizations of their own. Indeed, studying Islamic architecture by no means can be separated from the total framework of Islam as to its genesis, history, ethos, worldview, doctrines, laws and practices. Any approach by anybody and at any point of time to disconnect Islamic architecture from that which held sway over its conception and formation would result in failure and, worse yet, may lead to a distortion of the real picture of the entire subject matter and with it, the picture of Islam.

While exemplifying Islamic beliefs and teachings through the hierarchy of its diverse roles and functions, Islamic architecture evolved a unique soul. Such a soul is best recognized and appreciated only by those whose own lives are inspired and guided by the same sources as is Islamic architecture. Furthermore, it stands to reason that if one wanted to genuinely understand and value Islamic architecture, one, first and foremost, must possess an intimate knowledge of Islam and the precepts and values it exemplifies. Next, one should disengage himself for a moment and as much as he could from whatever he has formerly perused or has been told about Islamic architecture; exerting himself to experience it in its totality and as if he is one of its users. One is to try hard via hands-on experiences if one wishes to feel the spiritual and sensory aura that Islamic architecture exudes within its realm. Not to one or a few of its aspects, and not to a single and static moment of time, should one's comprehension and appreciation of Islamic architecture be restricted. Rather, one's thoughts and interest are to encompass all of its aspects and dimensions while honoring, in the process, its remarkable spiritedness and dynamism which were conditioned by factors neither of time nor space. Finally, whatever one's approach in studying Islamic architecture might be, one should never try to extricate it from the contexts which governed its commencement, rise, dominance and survival. Islamic architecture ought to be viewed as a revolutionary world phenomenon as universal, omnipresent,

perpetual and revealing as the standards and values that gave rise to it. It was as responsive to the climatic, geographical and cultural requirements as any other architectural tradition. Nevertheless, it never treated these as being separate from the exigencies of a higher order. By means of skills, creativity and imagination, on the one hand, and by its distinctive combination of aesthetic and utilitarian ends, on the other, Islamic architecture never, even by a whisker, separated man's physical, psychological and spiritual needs, treating some sets of needs at the expense of the others.

Due to all of this, 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."[5]

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.[6] The same author further 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... this reply, succinct as it is, would be nonetheless valid, for the art of Islam expresses what its name indicates and it does so without ambiguity."[7]

Afif Bahnassi wrote on the relationship between Islam and Islamic architecture and to what extent the former influences the latter:

> "Islamic faith shaped Islamic architecture both on the artistic and technical planes, and gave it that uniform personality that has characterised it all through the ages. However, the diverse traditions, languages, and cultures

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[5] *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, edited by M.A.J. Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), p. 16 (Introduction).

[6] Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd., 1976), p. 1.

[7] Ibid., p. 1.

of the peoples who converted to Islam throughout the world, from China in the East to the Atlantic, in the West, gave variety to the architectural enterprise. While maintaining the principle of functionality. Greeks and Romans, for instance, had a standard style for all kinds of buildings, while Islamic architecture always strove to make the shape of the building fit its function. The architecture of the mosque is different from that of the school, the cemetery, the hospital, or the house, and it is very unlikely that the function of a building would be incongruent with its architectural form. Rather, the value of a building is proportional to its capacity to fulfil the function set for it. A house is perfect when it carries out its mission; that of ensuring protection and peace."[8]

It would also be appropriate to quote Le Corbusier who was very eloquent about the extent architecture can hold sway over our senses, experiences and thoughts:

"The Architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit; by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree and provokes plastic emotions; by the relationships which he creates, he wakes profound echoes in us; he gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and of our understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty."[9]

Although Le Corbusier meant no particular style or school of architectural thought, it is clear he meant that every architectural

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[8] Afif Bahnassi, "The Islamic Architecture and its Specificities in Teaching Curricula", http://www.isesco.org.ma/pub/Eng/Islarch/P2.htm.

[9] Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, translated from the thirteenth French edition with an introduction by Frederick Etchelles, (Oxford: Reed Educational and Professional Publishing Ltd, 1989), p. 1.

representation is pervaded with an ideology, which, through its physical expressions, connects with the users and greatly influences their feelings. It is thus expected that there always exists an intimate relationship between people and their architecture. Consequently, it is said, and rightly so, as reported by John S. Reynolds, that "when people lose their emotional connection to the buildings they occupy, all architecture ends."[10]

Based on the contents of his autobiographical memoirs,[11] Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age—and for many one of the greatest architects in Islamic civilization—is believed to have had an exuberant emotional connection with the buildings he had designed and built, hoping that the people will do the same. He said about his masterpiece, the Suleymaniye Mosque, which still proudly stands and captivates its worshippers and tourists alike in Istanbul:

> "Upon examination, its pleasing arches, like the vault of heaven and the eyebrows of beauties, amazed the eyes of perfect experts. Each of its variegated marbles was renowned to the horizon and came as a token from a (different) land... And each of its artistically fashioned doors and wood-carved fittings filled with ornament and decoration of mother-of-pearl is like a leaf of the *Erjeng* (a famous Persian book containing paintings described as having been unequaled in the subtlety of their art), such that they are admired by the grandees of the time and esteemed by the people of all lands. And that canopy-shaded pulpit and pillared throne is a keepsake of a skillful master that stands as a model to the world. Among the revolving spheres, its like has not been seen nor shall it be seen. And the domes of that noble Friday mosque are ornaments like the bubbles

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[10] John S. Reynolds, *Courtyards: Aesthetic, Social, and Thermal Delight,* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, INC, 2002), p. 41.

[11] *Sinan's Autobiographies, Five Sixteenth-Century Texts,* introductory notes, critical editions and translations by Howard Crane and Esra Akin, edited by Gulru Necipoglu, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2006), p. 53-158.

of the sea of elegance, and its highest dome is like the revolving heavens. And the golden finial shining upon it is like the brilliant, gleaming sun. And the minarets and dome are like the Chosen Beloved (Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)), the canopy of Islam, and of the Four Friends (the four rightly-guided caliphs). And the ornamented windows, which are without like or equal, resemble the winds of Gabriel. When they are illuminated with the sun's radiance, they are like an embellished rose garden of the springtime, and the rays of the azure vault reveal their chameleon-like iridescent designs. Ruby, cinnabar, lapis, and verdigris were lavished on this transcendent exemplar of ornament and design, and beautiful, heart-attracting designs were fashioned, the elegance of which confounds the eyes of those endowed with sight."[12]

Islamic architecture means a process that starts from making an intention, continues with the planning, designing and building stages and ends with achieving the net results and how people make use of and benefit from them. Islamic architecture is a fine blend of all these stages which are interlaced with the tread of the same Islamic worldview and Islamic value system. It is almost impossible to single out a tier in the process and regard it as more important than the rest. It is because of this conspicuous spiritual character of Islamic architecture, coupled with both its educational and societal roles, that the scholars of Islam never shied away from keenly addressing a number of issues pertaining to various dimensions of residential, mosque and communal architecture within the scope of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh islami*). The relevant issues are discussed under different headings such as: legal rulings in connection with neighbours and neighbourhoods (*ahkam al-jiwar*), reconciliation (*al-sulh*) between immediate neighbours and all the people in a neighbourhood, people's individual and collective rights, prohibition of inflicting harm (*darar*), legal rulings pertaining to building (*ahkam al-bina'*), and public services and facilities (*al-marafiq*). All these

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[12] Ibid., p. 123, 124.

issues undoubtedly play a significant role in shaping the identity of Islamic architecture. They are either directly or indirectly related to conceiving, designing, forming and using Islamic architecture. Since architecture is people's art and greatly influences their moods and day-to-day life engagements, the same issues concerning architecture are studied as part of exhaustive encyclopaedic works on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh islami*).

In addition, there are more than a few works also on Islamic jurisprudence written by famous jurists but which are dedicated solely to the issues that are pertinent one way or another to building. Among others, two of the most famous titles from these works are: "*Explaining the Rules of Building,*" by Abu Abdullah Ibn al-Rami (d. 1334), and "*The Book of Walls*" by Husamuddin 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Bukhari (d. 1141). Both books are on Islamic jurisprudence exclusively focusing on legal rulings that are directly or indirectly related to building, public services and facilities.

The referred to encyclopaedic works on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh islami*) discuss virtually everything that Muslims might do, including matters about building, thus giving them a clear life orientation and guidance. This way a powerful message is given, that is, neither from the Islamic spirituality nor from the people's actual life challenges and problems can Islamic architecture be separated, with one side existing in one world and the other existing in another completely different world. What's more, Islamic architecture is to be alive, real and dynamic by playing an active role in overcoming social challenges and solving their problems. Architecture is not solely for society's elite serving a limited spectrum of interests. It must belong to all strata of society and attend to their vast and diverse interests and needs. Architects and structural engineers, it goes without saying, are the humble servants of society. They must be completely and exclusively answerable to their people. The people, in turn, are to function as the best judges on weather their architecture is good or bad, effective and conducive to their life activities or not, functional and friendly or otherwise. And architects must listen if they are to retain their professional credibility and social standing. Doing otherwise will be tantamount to betraying the profession of architecture as well as the community's trust in architects. It follows

that a very close and responsible relationship should exist between architects and the community due to this close relationship between them. This entitles people in the community to play an active and participative, rather than a passive or indifferent or acquiescent role when it comes to architecture, for they are its immediate customers and clients.

For all these reasons, surely, some vital issues concerning several dimensions of Islamic architecture are often discussed within the compass of the *hisbah* institution as well.[13] This institution is both religious and social in nature, and aims to protect the interests of the members of society, regardless of weather such interests are connected to pure religious matters or to some other worldly concern. The *hisbah* is an institution "under the authority of the state that appoints people to carry out the responsibility of enjoining what is right whenever people start to neglect it, and forbidding what is wrong whenever people start to engage in it. The purpose of this is to safeguard society from deviance, protect the faith, and ensure the welfare of the people in both religious and worldly manners according to the Law of Allah. Allah has made it obligatory upon all Muslims to enjoin good and forbid wrongdoing to the extent of their knowledge and abilities.[14]

Islamic architecture accepts no rigidity, formalism and literal symbolism, especially in relation to its structural domains. If the religion of Islam presents Muslims with a conceptual framework for architecture, which encompasses the Islamic worldview and Islamic fundamental teachings and principles, such in no way implies that the creativity and design freedom of Muslims are thus killed off at worst or stifled at best. On the contrary, they are very much stirred and encouraged to thrive through the same means, with the only difference that certain divine precepts now preside over their development and use lest some people's imagination and enthusiasm, at some point, become disoriented and misleading, hence perilous to man's well-being.

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[13] Walid Abdullah al-Munis, *Al-Hisbah 'ala al-Mudun wa al-'Umran*, (Kuwait University, Kuwait: 1995), p. 65-108.

[14] *Hisbah Institution*, http://islamic-world.net/economics/hisbah.htm.

What makes an architecture Islamic are some invisible aspects of buildings, which may or may not completely translate themselves onto the physical plane of built environment. The substance of Islamic architecture is always the same, due to the permanence of the philosophy and cosmic values that gave rise to it. What changes are the ways and means with which people internalize and put into operation such philosophy and values as regards their own natural and man-generated circumstances. Such changes or developments could simply be regarded as the most practical "solutions" to the challenges people face. For example, the mosques that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) built carried the same meaning and essence as the mosques that were built in history and that we build today, despite the major differences in form. The spirit of the housing schemes that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) carried out was likewise the spirit of any other Islamic housing scheme implemented at any point of history and in any part of the world, despite their vast differences in terms of sophistication and building technology and engineering. The same can be said about any other aspect of Islamic built environment.

Stefano Bianca remarked on the extent to which Islamic spirituality influences Islamic architecture:

> "Compared with other religious traditions, the distinctive feature of Islam is that it has given birth to a comprehensive and integrated cultural system by totally embedding the religious practice in the daily life of the individual and the society. While Islam did not prescribe formal architectural concepts, it molded the whole way of life by providing a matrix of behavioral archetypes which, by necessity, generated correlated physical patterns. Therefore, the religious and social universe of Islam must be addressed before engaging in the analysis of architectural structures."[15]

Islamic architecture thus promotes unity in diversity, that is, the unity of message and purpose, and the diversity of styles,

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[15] Stefano Bianca, *Urban Form in the Arab World*, p. 22-23.

methods and solutions. Certainly, this renders Islamic architecture so relevant and dynamic, and so consistent and adaptable. It is such a fascinating subject to study because it is not about sheer art and architecture. It is far more than that: it is about beholding the Islamic ideology and creed at work. It is about witnessing a microcosm of Islamic society, civilization and culture. Islamic architecture is about Islam taking up a manifest form.

The identity and vocabulary of Islamic architecture evolved as a means for the fulfilment of the concerns of Muslim societies. Islamic architecture was never an end in itself. It was the container of Islamic culture and civilization reflecting cultural identity and respective levels of creative and aesthetic Muslim consciousness. Architecture, in general, should always be in service to people. It is never to be the other way round, that is to say, that architecture should evolve into a hobby or adventure in the process of imposing itself on society while forsaking or taking lightly people's identities, cultures and the demands of their daily struggles. Architecture, first and foremost, should remain associated with functionality. It should not deviate from its authentic character and stray into the world of excessive invention and abstraction.[16]

Finally, when asked what architecture is, Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the most famous American architects during the first half of the 20th century somewhat echoed the Islamic notion of architecture, i.e., to be relevant, pragmatic and both people and environment friendly. Architecture is life; it is life taking up a form. Frank Lloyd Wright's perception of architecture was epitomized in his words:

"What is architecture anyway? Is it the vast collection of the various buildings which have been built to please the varying taste of the various lords of mankind? I think not. No, I know that architecture is life; or at least it is life itself taking form and therefore it is the truest record of life as it was lived in the world yesterday, as it is lived today or ever will be lived. So architecture I know to be a Great Spirit.... Architecture is that

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[16] Ibid.

great living creative spirit which from generation to generation, from age to age, proceeds, persists, creates, according to the nature of man, and his circumstances as they change. That is really architecture."[17]

Two examples: the Islamic house and the mosque

To clarify further the previous points, we shall briefly discuss the examples of the Islamic house and the mosque.

The house

Islam did not instruct Muslims how to build houses, but it did instruct them how to carry out a number of tasks directly or indirectly associated with the house and housing phenomena. Some such tasks are: privacy protection against the outside world, among family members, between family members and visitors, respect for the rights of guests and visitors, respect for the rights of neighbours, the relationship between men and women, the implications of carrying out religious obligations, cleanliness, peaceful coexistence with the natural environment, safety, security, recreation, modesty, Islam's aim to preserve the life, religion, mental and psychological strength, and its descendants and wealth of its people.

The net result of this strategy is that there are many types of Islamic houses, such as those in the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent, Turkey, Iran, the Islamic West (*al-maghrib al-Islami*), etc., but the soul and fundamental nature of all those housing types are always the same and are easily recognizable by those familiar with the character of Islam and the character of its civilization. What those different-yet-same, or same-yet-different houses represent is, in fact, solutions for the challenges of living their family's lives in line with their religious guidelines while, at the same time, complying with the requirements of the climate, geography, traditions, economy and building technology of the places where they live. While creating

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[17] *What is Architecture?*, http://architecture.about.com/library/blarchitecture.htm.

Islamic architecture, Muslims betray neither their religion nor their living conditions. This challenge Muslims see as a source of motivation, ingenuity and strength. They do not see it as a problem, hindrance or an impediment. They see it as a service to Islam, society, and mankind as a whole.

Eventually, what came to be known as the language of Islamic residential architecture, such as the courtyard, partly or fully screened windows, raising windows above the eye level, bent entrances, double circulations inside houses, inward looking designs, guest rooms near main entrances and away from the core of the house, certain decorative systems, etc., such must be seen as sets of the best solutions that evolved over centuries. They are to be seen as no more than that. Such structural solutions must not be seen as the prescribed language of Islamic residential architecture that cannot be revised, enriched, improved, altered and even abandoned to a certain extent, or completely so if necessary and in favour of some other equally or more viable solution presented by advances made by science and technology, and generally by the implications of time and space factors. Likewise, such structural solutions are not to be held as religious symbols with some ontological significance.

However, there is only one thing that must be honoured at all times and that cannot be compromised under any circumstances in housing, that is, the sanctified functions of the house which renders it a place to rest, relax the body and mind, enjoy legitimate worldly delights, worship, teach, learn and propagate the message of Islam; and which makes the house a restricted sanctuary where privacy, protection, safety and security are ensured. In other words, the house is to function as an institution with a potential to take up the role of an educational and training center able to produce, in concert with other societal establishments, individuals capable of transforming the whole communities they belong to. If the family is the basic and most important societal unit, then the same can be said about the house which is the physical locus of the former. Indeed, without the two, the total realization of the divine purpose on earth becomes impossible.

The mosque

Another example concerns the mosque institution, by far the most easily identifiable element of Islamic architecture. Islam did not instruct the Muslims how to build mosques, but it did instruct them to build mosques and to make them function as places of collective worship as well as community development centres. The Prophet (pbuh) built quite a number of mosques in Madinah, which was the prototype Islamic city and played the role firstly, as the city-state, and later, as the capital of the ever-expanding Muslim state. The functions performed by mosques built by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), particularly his mosque in Madinah, were so powerful that they epitomized the multifaceted societal dimensions of Islam. The primary aim of all mosques built afterwards was to emulate the Prophet's example in this regard.

Nevertheless, the form of the mosques built during the Prophet's era was very simple. His mosque in Madinah, for example, at first consisted of an enclosure with walls made of mud bricks and an arcade on the *qiblah* side (towards Makkah) made of palm-trunks used as columns to support a roof of palm-leaves and mud. There were initially three entrances in the east, west and southern walls. The fourth, i.e., the northern wall, was the *qiblah* side facing the al-Masjid al-Aqsa, the first *qiblah* which lasted about one year and a few months. However, as the *qiblah* was changed to face south towards Makkah, the southern entrance was subsequently bricked up and a new one on the northern side constructed. Before the *qiblah* changed, there was, in all likelihood, no roofed area in the mosque, but after it, an arcade on the southern side facing Makkah was created.

The Prophet's mosque had a few rudimentary facilities. However, before the Prophet's death and as the Madinah community and its needs considerably grew, the shape of the mosque underwent more than a few notable structural modifications, such as its enlargement, the introduction of the pulpit (*minbar*) and the illumination of the mosque with oil lamps. Thus, the impact that changes in human living conditions can have on the form of architecture has duly been recognized. This causal relationship between the evolution of the language of mosque architecture and

Islamic architecture, in general, and the improvement of the living standards of Muslims went on till Islamic civilization attained its apogee and with it, the language of Islamic architecture achieved its conspicuous sophistication and excellence.

However, when the rich and versatile language of mosque architecture evolved, the new developments signified people's answers and solutions to the challenge of maintaining mosques to function as the centres of Islamic collective worship and centres for community development, while, at the same time, conforming to the requirements of the climate, geography, traditions, economy and building technology of the places where they lived. The net result of this approach is that there are many ways of building mosques, such as those in the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent, Turkey, Iran, Morocco, Malaysia, China, etc., but the soul and fundamental nature of all these mosque types are always the same and are easily recognizable by those familiar with the character of Islamic worship and the character of Islamic cultures and civilization.

Eventually, what became to be known as the language of mosque architecture, such as the minaret, courtyards, the *minbar* (pulpit), the *mihrab* (praying niche), domes, arches, *iwans*, certain decorative styles, etc., must be seen as the best solutions and facilities that people have evolved over centuries for themselves so that the projected roles of mosques are ensured. Such solutions and facilities must not be seen as religious symbols containing some ontological bearing. Nor are they to be held as the prescribed language of mosque architecture that cannot be revised, enriched, improved and adjusted, thus accommodating provisions presented by advances made in science and technology, and generally by the implications of time and space factors. After all, what matters most is making the mosque institution with its demanding civilizational mission as effective, dynamic, relevant and attractive as possible through various means and methods. This is exactly what Muslims were up to while evolving the rich and colourful language of mosque architecture, in particular, and Islamic art and architecture in general.

Pragmatism and Islamic architecture

Islam is a complete way of life. Its values and teachings, together with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), whose primary task was to explain to mankind and put into practice the precepts of Islam, are universal and timeless. The significance of Islamic architecture is universal and permanent too, in that the philosophy it embodies is Islamic. However, such is the nature of Islamic architecture that it is receptive to both advances in science and technology and the dictates of people's living conditions.

It is imperative that Muslim architects always remember this verity while trying to revive and sustain the concept of Islamic architecture. In so doing, Muslim architects are bidden to firstly, identify the general Islamic guidelines and principles pertaining to the enterprise of building. Next, they must be fully aware of the implications contained within the dilemmas and challenges of their time and the diverse regions in which they live. They cannot be trapped in a historical episode, overly romanticizing it and attempting to emulate the architectural solutions which Muslims of that particular period successfully evolved. If something was the norm during a period and in a particular ecological setting, such by no means can be the same in each subsequent period and different ecological setting. Technological advancements rapidly change; and demands of different eras fluctuate even under the same ecological conditions; in addition climate exigencies must be painstakingly heeded and lastly, human psychology also changes with time and space posing a number of exigencies of its own. No architectural plan and design that served as a solution for another age and place can be simply "parachuted" to the present age and place without proper modifications according to rigorous environmental and socio-cultural requirements. To do otherwise is to betray the dynamic spirit of both common sense and the perpetual message of Islam. Blind and ignorant imitations and mimicry, even in sheer religious matters, are categorically rebuked by Islam.

While taking hold of the general Islamic guidelines and principles with reference to creating Islamic architecture, on the one hand, and while studying the needs of different times and situations

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so that the former can be accurately understood and applied on the other, Muslim architects in reality perform a degree of *ijtihad*, i.e., forming an independent opinion or judgment within the framework of an available text. In doing so, if one excels one receives two rewards from God, but if one for whatever reason fails to deliver, after he had tried his best, one is bound to receive one reward from God, as propounded by the Prophet (pbuh) in one of his traditions.[18] Based on this tradition, in no way can a serious, enlightened, accountable and willing person be a loser as far as the execution of matters ordained by God is concerned. Verily, this divine assurance should serve Muslim architects and designers as a starting point to look carefully and critically at the state of architecture and how buildings in the Muslim world are planned and designed, as well as to start contemplating the prospects of finding much better solutions which will be inspired by and infused with the values of Islam, and will be also responsive to the exigencies of different times and regions.

At the start, Muslim architects ought not to be bound by a single historical structural model, device or solution. The past is to be viewed all the time as such, i.e., the past. It is to be neither excessively venerated nor idealized or completely disregarded. The past must be put in its true perspective with such notions as wisdom, pragmatism and practicality leading the way. In their daunting search for contemporary Islamic architecture, Muslim architects and designers must be driven by a clear principled vision, a free spirit and an insatiable thirst for ingenuity, which must be shrouded in strong determination, self-belief and the quest for excellence. However, should some modern structural devices or solutions appear to bear a resemblance, partly or totally, to the ones used in the past, one is not to shy away from reviving them within existing contexts. The history of Islamic architecture is not to be looked down at as entirely outmoded and worthless. As we are against blind and ignorant imitation of the past, we are likewise against disengaging ourselves from it and completely ignoring the numerous lessons that we can learn from there. Indeed, much can be learned from history because

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[18] Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-I'tisam bi al-Kitab wa al-Sunnah, HAdith No. 6805.

the protagonists of any historical era while solving their problems also possessed the same vision and objectives as we do today while solving the problems of our own. On the other hand, however, we have to be extremely mindful and selective as to how and by what we can exactly benefit from history, and in which areas and how far we are to emulate our predecessors. This is because most of their problems were the product of circumstances under which they operated, whereas our problems are the product of circumstances under which we operate. Hence, seldom will their solutions be utterly ours.

There is no such thing as a standardized Islamic architecture that can be reproduced anytime and anywhere. If truth be told, there is no such thing in the entire body of the Islamic built environment. Therefore, Muslim architects and designers should not hesitate to unleash their burning Islamic spirit, desire, imagination and creativity in order to conceive and create such an architectural tradition that will be compatible with the requirements of both the religious message and modernity. Undoubtedly, the given solutions will have to vary from one region to another, somewhere more and somewhere less. But the essence of all the possible designs, including those adopted as the best solutions in history, will remain one, because of the same worldview and the same religious spirit and foundation that underpins the presence of Muslims and binds all Muslim peoples regardless of their different geographical locations, cultures and historical appearances. Whatever conception and form are eventually given to such an architecture, the same is absolutely qualified to be branded as "Islamic." On account of its location, sheer exterior, or association with a historical moment, no building can be more Islamic than others. What matters imperatively is the total function and utility that a building is imbued with: i.e., the soul and purity of Islam that stands for an embodiment of Islamic values and principles insofar as it fulfils the building's functions and roles.

The authors of the internet website *www.islamicart.com* wrote, relying on an essay, *"Building in the Middle East Today – in Search of a Direction,"* written by Garry Martin, that:

"Islamic architecture was in harmony with the people, their environment and their Creator. Yet no strict rules were applied to govern Islamic architecture. The great mosques of Cordoba, Edirne and Shah Jahan each used local geometry, local materials, local building methods to express in their own ways the order, harmony and unity of Islamic architecture...But in the 20th century, the Islamic concepts of unity, harmony and continuity often are forgotten in the rush for industrial development. Martin lists three directions contemporary Islamic architecture has taken:

1. Explored the nature of geometrical and arabeseque patterns the past and produce Western-oriented architecture that ignores the Islamic spirit and undermines traditional culture.
2. The opposite approach involves a retreat, at least superficially, to the Islamic architectural past. This can result in hybrid buildings where traditional facades of arches and domes are grafted onto modern high-rises.
3. A third approach, Martin notes, is to understand the essence of Islamic architecture and to allow modern building technology to be a tool in the expression of this essence. Writes Martin, 'Architects working today can take advantage of opportunities that new materials and mass production techniques offer. They have an opportunity to explore and transform the possibilities of the machine age for the enrichment of architecture in the same way that craftsmen explored the nature of geometrical and arabesque patterns...'

The forms that would evolve from this approach, adds Martin, would have a regional identity, a stylistic evolution and a relevance to the eternal principles of Islam."[19]

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[19] *The Future of Islamic Architecture*, http://www.islamicart.com/main/architecture/future.html

In an extremely frank manner, Mahbub ul Haq wrote about pragmatism in Islamic architecture and how it must serve its people. He rightly argues that Islamic architecture must not be seen as an elitist enterprise. It is a pursuit that aims to ensure the welfare of all Muslims in the process reflecting the essential spirit and universal value system of Islam. Islamic architecture must be practical in the sense that it is affordable, accessible, functional and tackles the issues and problems concerning all Muslims, many of whom are unfortunately poor today. Thus, a form of Islamic architecture that we aim to revive today must not be discriminatory, elitist, impractical, fanciful and utopian. Mahbub ul Haq reflects:

> "If Islamic architecture is to become a living reality in modern times, it must respond to the needs of the poor people who are the overwhelming reality in the Muslim world. It cannot afford to become an elitist concept. Islamic architecture must be unlinked from the popular image of kings' palaces and old castles and overflowing gardens and ornamental monuments. It can certainly borrow its essential designs, concepts, indigenous technology, functional features of drainage and cooling systems, etc., from the past, but it must translate them into a wholly new architecture which reflects the essential spirit and value system of Islam: equality, accessibility, mass participation and cost-effectiveness.
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> In other words, there are two fairly clear choices. We can proceed from a study of architecture to the needs of the people; or we can reverse the relationship and proceed from the needs of the people to the relevance of Islamic architecture to those needs... I do not believe in art for the sake of art; I believe that art must be for the sake of life. And I certainly do not believe in Islamic architecture merely for the sake of Islamic architecture; I believe that a revival of Islamic architecture must correspond to the needs of the poor people of Islam... It should be possible to engineer a happy blend, a proper

fusion between the functional needs of our poor people
and the aesthetic needs of an architecture which truly
reflects our Islamic culture, traditions and history."[20]

Thus, perceiving and creating Islamic architecture is a very
serious task. It is about giving people some of their fundamental
rights, executing a religious obligation, and contributing to an
appropriate implementation of the message of Islam. The corollary
of all this is that Muslim architects, and all other professionals in
the field of construction at large, must enhance considerably their
knowledge of Islam: its *Sharia'h* and worldview. This may appear
as a daunting task to many, however, needless to say it is incumbent
upon every Muslim, male and female, to know the rulings of Islam
pertaining to the obligations and teachings they have to adhere to in
their life.

While Islamizing the notion of architecture in both theory and
practice, Muslim architects and engineers can draw on their own
familiarity with the rulings of Islam, provided the same is adequate.
Otherwise, trustworthy religious scholars, who are both qualified
and broad-minded, should be consulted and engaged as many times
as needed. It goes without saying that unremitting inter and cross-
professional studies and research activities appear to be inevitable.
This is bound to lead gradually to narrowing down the glaring gap
separating the religious scholars and their fields of interest from
that of the secular and their own fields of interest. This way, every
scholar will become aware as to his/her role in society and his/her
obligations toward society, nature and God. Certainly, the religious
scholars will have to widen their interests and concerns, becoming
what they are actually always meant to be: the guardians of societies.
But to secure that accolade they ought to reevaluate themselves and
their undertakings by striving to be more practical, approachable,
people-friendly, and less dogmatic and idealistic. Whereas secular
scholars will have to think of Islamizing their knowledge wherever

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[20] 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.

there is a conflict of interests and as much as possible, realigning their scientific goals and aspirations with those goals and aspirations of the Muslim community to which they belong.

Certainly, it is a high time that a serious and scientific initiative of integrating the Islamic worldview and value system into architecture takes off in the Muslim world. However, such a scheme ought to constitute but a segment of a broad Islamization project aimed at bringing about a total harmonization between the education systems of Muslims and the teachings of Islam. It is not only that architecture should be targeted by the scheme, but also the whole of built environment professions. This process of integration will yield its best results if it proceeds gradually after people become convinced of its relevance and urgency.

In universities and colleges where students undertake architecture programs, those in-depth and deemed 'most needed' programs on Islamic studies can be taught. Lecturers and tutors must be well-educated, well-trained and must lead by example. Their role is critical. The mission of Islamization is a massive and complex one so students will always look up at their teachers for inspiration and guidance. The programs can be taught independently or they can be integrated into the syllabus of other courses. The latter option is an excellent one, as it is spontaneous and natural, hence more effective. Due to the obvious relevance and applicability of the integrated subject matter, the students will have little or no reasons to develop any aversion to what they are subjected to. The former option, however, if applied alone is not really a helpful one, as it is suggestive, nominally though, of perpetuating the existing rift between the religious and architectural sciences. At best, the same can be seen as just an addendum to the existing curriculum, to which students are bound to develop much indifference. Definitely, the best and most workable solution would be a feasible combination of both options. In the process, either option can be given more emphasis at the expense of the other, subject to the dictates of different situations. However, no matter what model is eventually developed, this aspect of Islamization can become effective only if students are constantly urged to incorporate what they have learned in the classroom into their practical work in studios and laboratories. Above all this, intensive

workshops, seminars and trainings can be periodically organized for those who have already graduated and are actively involved in construction sector professions, so that continuity is ensured and if considered necessary with some professionals, that enthusiasm for the mission is also renewed.

It would be even better if Muslim education systems are such that all students come to colleges and universities with a reasonable amount of knowledge about Islam and its culture and history obtained beforehand at lower levels of study. What would then transpire in colleges and universities is that no time will be wasted on clarifying basic concepts and on dealing with introductory issues. Rather, right from the beginning the core issues could be seriously approached from perspectives that suite the level of students' study, aptitude and interests. It could be then hoped that within the prescribed timeframe that students spend in colleges and universities, a significant set of objectives with respect to Islamization and the integration of knowledge can be successfully achieved. Then, the whole enterprise will in due time become a serious, sought-after and productive scientific project, rather than a superficial, superfluous and decorative diversion.

At any rate, it all boils down to the systems of education that a community adopts, and to what extent that same community is ready and willing to embrace whatever is best for the preservation of its identity and the reinvigoration of its cultural and civilizational prospects. Indeed, it is essential that people start realizing that by creating buildings a framework for the lives of people is also created. To a large extent, people's lives are thus directed and influenced. Hence, the two, i.e., the framework with its character and services and the exigencies of people's lives must be compatible. It is only then that people's welfare will be ensured, and that architecture will become more than just a process of designing and erecting buildings. This indicates within the context of Islam and Islamic architecture, that it is very difficult to live delightfully applying the values of Islam in an architectural world that is alien to the same values and its divine philosophy.

Towards the revival of Islamic architecture

Islamic architecture is a fine blend of many conceptual and practical factors interwoven with the treads of the belief system, teachings and values of Islam. In order to expedite and give more sense to the process of reviving, revitalizing and Islamizing the architecture of Muslims today, the following observations and suggestions could be taken into account:

- Reviving Islamic architecture is an extremely serious and demanding task. It requires major contributions and high-spirited concerted efforts of many parties from across the wide spectrum of society: government, educators, practitioners, professional bodies, NGOs, members of the business community, students and the general public. Certainly, relevant governmental departments, colleges and universities, private architectural firms and institutions are identified as the most relevant agencies and their people as the most important protagonists in spearheading and managing the Islamization of the architecture project. The responsibilities of these parties are the greatest on account of their roles in society. It follows that in case of failure, especially if such happens due to deliberate mediocrity, lack of interest and apathy, their share of blame will be the biggest one as well.
- Defining and clarifying the necessary concepts and terminology such as "Islamic architecture", "Muslim architect", "Islamic aesthetics", "Islamic built environment", "Islam and building", "the Qur'an and the Prophet's *sunnah* as the sources of Islamic architecture", "Islam and the environment", "*ihsan, itqan* or excellence", "man as *khalifah* or the vicegerent on earth", "Islam as a comprehensive way of life", "Islam as the final and universal revelation", "Islam and culture", "Islam and civilization", "Islam and society", "Islam and history", etc.
- Developing a comprehensive code of conduct for Muslim architects based on general Islamic ethics and teachings. It can be called "Islamic architectural ethics".
- Expounding   and   invalidating   popular   errors   and

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misconceptions about all the aspects of Islamic architecture. The causes of such errors and misconceptions to be carefully investigated so that the conditions conducive to breeding confusion and misunderstanding towards Islamic architecture are forever wiped out.

- The history of Islamic architecture, commencing with the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to the present is to be critically surveyed and examined. This is so because in order to properly diagnose the present predicaments plaguing Islamic architecture in order to chart a better future with regard to the same, Muslims must be acquainted with the history of their Islamic societies in general and the history of Islamic architecture in particular. The history of Islamic architecture is to be neither excessively venerated nor totally discarded. A middle path is thus to be pursued and adopted. History is to serve as a source for shaping a better present and for forecasting a better future. Ignorance about history means ignorance about the presence and a doubt and insecurity about the future.

- Developing and advancing Islamic architectural theory based on the most authentic sources of Islam: the Qur'an and *sunnah*, i.e., revelation.

- Studying and paying due respect and appreciation to all Muslims who excelled in architecture from the dawn of Islam till the present. The roles, reputations and contributions of those persons to society are to be at the core of these studies.

- Comparative studies between Islamic architecture and other architectural systems and theories is to be undertaken. Unifying and diverging points to be clearly spelled out and scrutinized.

- Since the religion of Islam is the foundation and moral fiber of Islamic culture and civilization, including architecture, Islam likewise is to be the foundation and moral fiber of Muslim educational systems. It is only with a genuine Islamic mindset, passion and purpose that Islamic culture and civilization, including architecture, can be revitalized and restored. Thus, Muslim educational systems must aim to produce generations whose members will be acquainted with, feel affection for,

practice, care and live for Islam: its ideology, peoples, history, culture and civilization. Only in such a dynamic, conducive and engaging intellectual environment can genuine Islamic architecture be taught and learned.

- Encouraging, facilitating and supervising a research culture on various issues in relation to the theme of Islamic architecture. This is in order to significantly enrich libraries and bookshops with genuine references on the subject in question so that propagating, teaching and practicing Islamic architecture becomes a viable proposition.
- Promoting architecture as a multidisciplinary branch of learning and a profession much wider than routinely held.
- Encouraging and promoting creative, critical, global, unbiased, unprejudiced and tolerant thinking.
- Advocating strict following in religion and unbound inventiveness in architecture.
- Promoting a culture of comprehensive excellence in Muslim architectural education and practice.
- Muslim colleges and universities should integrate the Islamic worldview, the belief system, teachings and values of Islam into the architecture curriculum. The integration is to be executed in a spontaneous and natural way at both theoretical and practical levels. The religious and architectural technical components are to be viewed as the equivalent parts of a whole with no clear demarcation lines separating them. This way, students will have little or no reason whatsoever to develop any aversion to the notion of integration between the religion of Islam and architecture. Religious components if properly integrated will not be deemed as an addendum to the existing curriculum, or as an extra burden imposed on students. Both religion and architecture will thus be seen in their true light.
- As regards the implementation of any Islamization of architecture project, policy-makers in particular need to prepare measures and mechanisms for such implementation and develop indicators of performance.

Conclusion

Islamic architecture is not concerned about the form of buildings only. Islamic architecture signifies a process where all phases and aspects are equally important. It is almost impossible to identify a phase or an aspect in this process and consider it more important than others. The Islamic architecture process starts with having a proper understanding and vision which leads to making a right intention. It continues with the planning, designing and building stages, and ends with attaining net results and how people can make use of and benefit from them. Islamic architecture is a subtle balance of all these factors which are interwoven with the threads of the belief system, principles, teachings and values of Islam.

At the core of Islamic architecture lies function with all of its dimensions: corporeal, cerebral and spiritual. The role of the form is an important one too, but only inasmuch as it supplements and enhances function. Islamic architecture must embody the teachings, values and principles of Islam as a way of life, because it functions as the physical locus for human activities, facilitating and promoting them. It must be man-oriented, upholding his dignity and facilitating his spiritual progression while in this world. Architecture is a means, not an end. It goes without saying, therefore, that without Islam there can be no Islamic architecture. Likewise, without true Muslims, who in their thoughts, actions and words epitomize the total message of Islam, there can be no Islamic architecture either. Islamic architecture is a framework for the implementation of Islam, a framework which exists in order to facilitate, encourage and promote such an implementation. Indeed, virtually every epistemological attempt or method that defies this very principle in relation to conceiving, practicing and teaching Islamic architecture is bound to end in failure generating in the process sets of errors and misconceptions. The existing studies on Islamic architecture are an excellent testimony to this.