

Quran and Hadith- Inspiration for Islamic Art and Architecture

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The term *Islamic art* not only describes the art created specifically in the service of the Muslim faith (for example, a mosque and its furnishings) but also characterizes the art and architecture historically produced in the lands ruled by Muslims, produced for Muslim patrons, or created by Muslim artists. As it is not only a religion but a way of life, Islam fostered the development of a distinctive culture with its own unique artistic language that is reflected in art and architecture throughout the Muslim world.

Traditional architecture across the Muslim world resonates with beauty, geometry, and eloquence. While the physical manifestation has come under a great degree of study and scrutiny by art historians and architects all over the world, the striking question often missed in the conversation is what was the seed for inspiration, what or who was the driver of their creation? The simplest answer is that it was the Holy Quran, the written word of Allah, and the most complex answer is also, that it was the Holy Quran, the speech of Allah, that led to such structures of magnificence. It is narrated in the Quran (17: 85):

"They will question thee concerning the Spirit.

Say: 'The Spirit is of the bidding of my Lord.

*You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little."*¹

This verse reflects upon man's capacity to be aware of some knowledge but not all; it was by using the Quran as the *direct* source and focus of their craft that artisans, artists and architects in Islamic tradition aspired to know more of the soul and unlock the hidden, intricate mysteries. This paper will argue that the Quran inspired architectural structures across the traditional Muslim world, as both a direct inscription on the structures as well as in the decorative elements that cover the structures. The paper will navigate through multiple concepts and adornments, employing the distinction in styles, and embellishments. A short case study of shrine architecture in the Muslim world, as they imbibe these features, will further elucidate the significance.

Studies on religious structures are often framed under exploring the existential purpose or material form, and seldom on the meaning of their visage. Oleg Grabar, a renowned art historian, in his publication on the Dome of the Rock established that inscriptions are central to understanding the political, religious and social significance. Anthony Welch also used the same methods as Grabar to espouse Mughal architecture, and evaluates how great art arises in times of great tensions to provide narratives of ambitions and authority.² However, the focus of this paper remains not on the patronage but on the aspiration of the design and the persona of the decorations.

Role of Tradition

Sacred architecture in mosques and sepulchral structures across the Muslim world reflects the reality of God's creation by the science and techniques it is based on.³ Quran is the tradition and inspiration by which Muslim architects and masons built such splendor that has thrived through ages. By the *barakah* or grace issuing from Quranic revelations, sacred architecture in Islam has associated itself with all aspects of creation, and attributes of the Creator. This tradition can be defined in terms of "immutable principles of heavenly origin" that are applied continuously across various times and spaces.⁴ Hence, it is seen that as Islam spread throughout the world, the traditional man was able to employ the unchanging, ubiquity of the Message contained in the Quran, across centuries and countries.

The tradition, in addition to the quality, is also composed of sacred forms whose meanings are actualized within the existence of man himself. The tradition continues as long as the civilization, which created it, and the people, for whom it was created, continue to exist. However, as per the quality dwelled upon above, even when the earthly presence of the creation embodying the tradition no longer exists, the form still has a celestial home (it does not relinquish its own existence).⁵ That is why as Muslims created structures of such complex beauty, the inspiration survived, and could be emulated, because it had an existence beyond worldly comprehension. Kamil Khan Mumtaz records this observation as well, when he writes on Islamic architecture and the interaction of tradition with modernity, "the outermost layer or level is designed to be immediately and universally appealing, which is what makes it popular and ensures that the message will survive and be transmitted from generation to generation."⁶ Hence, Islamic architecture, across mosques, mausoleums, palaces, and public and private buildings, developed its own rich tradition of regional designs and decorations.

Everything in tradition possesses a *zahir* (outer, exoteric), and a *batin* (inner, esoteric) self. The same can be witnessed in Islamic architecture, and by the use of symbols in decorations on mosques and shrines. The *zahir* is the tangible, sensible form, which would constitute the shape of the building, form of an ornament, relief work, etc. On the other hand, the *batin* is the qualitative aspect, the essence, the meaning. All the symbols associated with Islamic architecture such as geometric, natural, and abstract, are not random decorations; they seek to explain the highest (spirit) world through the lowest (material) world.⁷

¹ A.J. Arberry, 1996, "The Night Journey," *The Koran Interpreted*, (Simon and Schuster: New York), p. 311-12.

² Anthony Welch, 2008, "The Emperor's Grief: Two Mughal Tombs." *Muqarnas Vol. 25: Frontiers of Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Celebration of Oleg Grabar's Eighty-eighth Birthday*, p 255.

³ Syed Hossein Nasr, 1987, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 44.

⁴ Syed Hossein Nasr, 1973, Foreword in *The Sense of Unity* (by L. Bakhtiar & N. Ardalan), p. xi.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kamil Khan Mumtaz, 1999, *Modernity and Tradition: Contemporary Architecture in Pakistan*, p. 15.

⁷ Laleh Bakhtiar and Nader Ardalan, 1973, *The Sense of Unity*, p. 5.

To understand how Islamic art and architecture are manifestations of the spirit (*ruh*) of the Revelation is not straightforward, or at least not on the plane of establishing a narrative, or repertoire as was seen in the case of earlier Greco-Roman and Hellenistic periods. This is because the Quran does not follow “laws of composition,” or a standardized meter of linking themes.⁸ The contextual rhythm of the Holy Verses is powerful and penetrating, at times maintained like “the beat of a drum... suddenly modify its breadth and pace, shifting its cadence in a manner as unexpected as it is striking.”⁹ The language of the Quran was perceived as the apparent, physical manifestation but in the pursuit of discovering the meanings hidden in each layer, Muslim artists had to traditionally employ complex means of understanding various sciences, especially numerology and cosmology. Moreover, Muslims hold the belief that the Quran possesses an inimitable perfection, it is divine in form, content, letters and ideas; and by being revealed to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in the exact words of God. In the *Cultural Atlas of Islam*, Faruqi and Faruqi, observe that the present arrangement of verses and chapters in the Quran as dictated by God, acts as its *ijaza*, or “power to incapacitate” to effect the cultural influences intervened in the spiritual dimensions of techniques and arrangements.¹⁰

Structures of Divine Inspiration

This tradition then combines with the *tariqah* or the creative way (especially prominent in Sufi doctrine), which infuses the Islamic art and architecture as “externalizations in the world of forms of the realizations of science, possessing their own laws and regulations.”¹¹ The Muslim artist and artisan, apply the conscious, or material, knowledge of his or her craft, to create works that are like arts of nature, “functional, cosmic and imbued with a nobility of expression that seeks the Truth through the Way.”¹² God says in the Quran (56:62):

“*You have known the first growth (creation), so why will you not remember (reflect)?*”¹³

This verse is beautifully elaborated in Nasir Khusraw’s *Ghushayish wa rahayish* (Knowledge and Liberation), found in Grabar’s exposition on Shia art forms, where it says, “He who knows the (power of the) creation of the world, knows the power of his own creation, and he can fashion the form of his soul with the same balance according to which the form of the body has been fashioned.”¹⁴

Cosmology is one of the sciences employed that have fashioned traditional forms of architecture, including Islamic architecture.¹⁵ In Islam, cosmology arises from the specific verses of the Quran such as the *Ayat-ul Kursi* (2:255), and *Ayat-ul Nur* (24: 35), and the Prophet’s (PBUH) hadith that place the Spirit (*ruh*) at the highest and most central point of cosmic existence, in its allegiance to the Divine Command.¹⁶ For example, in Surah Nur (24: 35), it says,

“*God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.*”¹⁷

Cosmology, in addition to the science that it represents also signifies that life is meaningful to a degree beyond the regular existence. The relationship between cosmology and Islamic architecture fits in the larger construction of the Divine print, where man is the microcosm, reflecting the Metacosmic reality.¹⁸

These structures of inspiration found through in Islamic philosophy are then prominently reflected in the symbols used and employed in Islamic architecture. While different art historians and philosophers have used two or three basic forms of categorization, Ardalan’s distinction was the most clarifying for the purpose of this research. He explains that Islamic architecture has two distinct types of symbols. One type is the natural and revealed, which is emulated by creating geometric forms. These geometric forms are symmetrical with respect to their center and symbolize *unity within unity*.¹⁹ The second type of symbols is the general and particular form, which is sanctified by different traditions of the world and vary according to the revealed form or language. These symbols are then extensively employed by artists in ornamentation and design, as direct inspiration from the Revelation.

This does not deny that nature is an illusion. In fact, nature is regarded as proof of the Creator’s power. The Quran says:

“*Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and earth, and the alternation of the night and the day, and the [great] ships which sail through the sea with that which benefits people, and what Allah has sent down from the heavens of rain, giving life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness and dispersing therein every [kind of] moving creature, and [His] directing of the winds and the clouds controlled between the heaven and the earth are signs for a people who use reason,*”²⁰

and elsewhere (such as 6:95-99, 10:4-6, etc.) Vegetal and floral motifs inspire the shapes in Islamic Art, but even their spirits reside in a higher science of numbers and qualities of the Divine.

Ornamentation and Design: Nature, Geometry and Arabesque

Islamic architecture marks a unique place by the extensive use of verses from the Quran. The shunning of images in Islamic art and architecture serves two crucial purposes. One reason for getting rid of human, animal-like, identifiable forms, is to emphasize the *negative*; “namely, that of eliminating a ‘presence’ which might set itself up against the Presence- albeit invisible- of God, and which might in addition become a source of error because of the imperfection of all symbols.”²¹ Therefore, to avoid limiting God, in His Infiniteness of Space, Time or Form. The second reason is *positive*, which is to affirm God’s transcendence, as per what He says in the Quran (2:11),

⁸ Titus Bukhardt, 2009, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, p. 16.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ismail R Al Faruqi and Lois Lamy Al Faruqi, 1986, *Cultural Atlas of the Islamic World*, (Macmillan Publishing), p. 169.

¹¹ Bakhtiar and Ardalan, p. 5.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Arberry, “Surah 56: The Terror,” p. 256.

¹⁴ Oleg Grabar, 2015, “Are there Shi’I Forms of Art?” in *People of the Prophet’s House* (edited by Fahmida Suleman), p. 35.

¹⁵ Nasr, *Sense of Unity*, p. xii.

¹⁶ Nasr, 1987, p. 40.

¹⁷ Arberry, “Light,” p. 50-51.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bakhtiar and Ardalan, p 7.

²⁰ <http://quran.com/2>

²¹ Bukhardt, 2002, *Sacred Art of East and West*, p 136.

*"To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God; God is All-embracing, All-knowing."*²²

Hence, Islamic aniconism, by getting rid of this solidification of the Divine Presence in an image, ascertains the spiritual significance of the void (which will be elaborated later) in the Muslim mind. God is not to be associated with a particular plane of time, space or material sold because His Presence is All-encompassing and Ubiquitous.²³

Instead, traditional Islamic architecture uses the role of mathematics, a science whose quality is embedded within the nature of Quranic revelations. The emphasis in the Quran on the characteristic of man's intellect and rationality of numbers combines with geometry, the science of numbers, found in nature's law and structures, to produce the forms in ornamentation and design.²⁴ Bukhardt elucidates this relationship, "If in the sacred architecture of Islam built to celebrate God, mathematical patterns, which correspond to the inner structure of the natural world, serve as ornaments upon the various facades, it is because nature herself participated in the Quranic revelation and was re-sacralized by it in the eyes of that segment of humanity which came to accept the revelation brought by the Blessed Prophet."²⁵ Geometry, derived from nature, is only another representation of the Message, derived from the spiritual form of nature.

Geometry is also described as the personality of the numbers, as the number one forms the point, two points generate a line, and three points, a triangle. Furthermore, as the circle defines the Unity of the unmanifested, the square signifies the unity as manifested. As Ardalan and Bakhtiar describe, "the square, the most externalized form of creation, represents, as earth, the polar condition of quantity, whereas the circle, as heaven, represents quality; the integration of the two is through the triangle, which embodies both aspects. The square of earth is the base upon which the intellect acts in order to reintegrate the earthly into circle of heaven."²⁶ This leads the sensible mind to the intelligible mind, from what is revealed to what is hidden. Nasr describes this phenomena as a journey from the sensible to the spiritual, as he writes, "Know... that the study of sensible geometry leads to skill in all the practical arts while the study of intelligible geometry leads to skill in the intellectual arts, because this science is one of the gates through which we move to the knowledge of the essence of the soul, and is the root of all knowledge and the element of wisdom, and the principle of all practical and intellectual arts."²⁷

The essence of all the basic geometric shapes is their convergence to a central purpose. In any mosque or shrine architecture, it can be witnessed that the surface patterns are composed of designs that linked by harmonious lines, create differentiated patterns. The visual experience of entering such structures is immediately striking in the harmony, as surface designs on roofs grow "by circular, centripetal lines symbolic of the cosmos," as opposed to the lines on walls, that "tend to relate to the resolution of the circle to the square, symbolizing the transcendence of the soul to spirit," and then "the floor is predominately of square patterns symbolic of the earth itself."²⁸

Arabesque is one of the most form of these ornamentation of convergence inside the walls and outside in Islamic architecture. The arabesque is not a substitute for producing art without icons. In fact, it is a proactive effort of diffusing images in the mind, as the recitation of the Quran dissolves the obsession of the mind on an object of desire. It is a live, flowing, rhythmic continuity that eliminate the individual form, so that "at the sight of glittering waves or of leafage trembling in the breeze, the soul detaches itself from its internal objects, from the 'idols' of passion and plunges, vibrant within itself into a pure state of being."²⁹ The repetition of patterns in the architectural designs hints at the infiniteness of God. Islamic art while on one hand fulfills the negative implications of *tauhid* (there is no God but God and there is no one like Him), also asserts the positive dimension which emphasizes not what God is *not*, but what God *is*.³⁰ He is infinite (find verse) in every aspect- justice, knowledge, mercy, love, and kindness. That is also why arabesque is also referred to as "infinity-art."³¹

The arabesque can be deconstructed into two basic elements of interlacement and the plant motif, in relief or incised.³² However, when looked closely an aesthetic exercise of several steps, namely "repetition, beveling, abstract theme, total covering and symmetry."³³ The design consists of unbroken repetitions of curved lines, fused with slits, spirals and other elements. They are *beveled*, which implies that the pattern meets the surface at an angle, giving the wall a plastic quality. The style is abstract not virtue of the lines, notches or planes but in the relationship they have to each other. As the design covers the entire surface, the background has in essence disappeared. Finally, even as the form is abstract, it is not random. The symmetry on the design is evident, though it might vary as the angle of the sight varies.³⁴

Calligraphy, the art of letters, also plays a significant role of establishing proportions in Islamic architecture. As Nasr notes, "while the Quran as a sonoral universe was the sound of the Divine Word which became engraved upon the heard of the Prophet and later through him the Companions and later generations, calligraphy was the echo of and response to this Divine Sound which could not but come later."³⁵ Traditional calligraphy, by its characteristic of shadowing Divine Art, and by being based on an exact science of geometric forms and progression, unites Divine Unity.³⁶ A note also needs to be made that the Arabic script, in its horizontal shifts and vertical reaches, is constructed to be employed best for this technique, and this no chance encounter either.

²² Arberry, "The Cow," p. 42.

²³ Bukhardt, 2002, p. 187.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 49.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Bakhtair and Ardalan, p 27.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, p 43.

²⁹ Bukhardt, 2002, p. 149-151.

³⁰ Faruqi and Faruqi, 1986, p. 163.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Bukhardt, 2002, p. 147.

³³ Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, 1994, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*, (Yale University Press), p. 104.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Nasr, 1987, p. 27.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 26.

Primordial Nature of Revelation and Man's Spiritual Poverty

Another observation that feeds into our understanding of the intertwining of calligraphy and arabesque, is how it reflects upon the "primordially" of the Quranic revelation, and repeats on the theme of "creation-consciousness."³⁷ "The true Muslim sees every aspect of nature not as phenomena divorced from the noumenal world but as signs of God, the *vestigia Dei*."³⁸ In accordance with the Quranic verse:

*"We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that it is the truth. Suffices it not as to thy Lord, that he is witness over everything? Are they not in doubt touching the encounter with their Lord? Does He nor encompass everything?"*³⁹

This interlacing recalls the association between the Quran and nature. It can be found in several edifices found in the Muslim world, from the Mosque of Cordova to the Gawhar Shad mosque in Mashhad to the Taj Mahal in Agra. Moreover, calligraphy, arabesque, and geometric patterns all direct the beholder's focus to the awareness of the void and the Divine Presence achieved within. It also related to the spiritual attitudes of *faqri* (spiritual poverty), as also narrated in the Quran, which says (47:38), "Who so is niggardly is niggardly only to his own soul. God is the All-sufficient; you are the needy ones (*fuqara*)."⁴⁰

Under the notion of poverty, spiritual poverty has been specifically understood to make religious spaces sacred and specific to certain elements of space. In shrines and mosques, the void (also mentioned briefly above), empty space plays a crucial role. This void is central in establishing the doctrine of *tauhid*, Divine Unity. It enables the Muslim to identify and relate the invisible and unmanifested with the spiritual mind. The Qur'an often refers to '*alam al-ghayb wa'l shahadah*' (the invisible and visible world), where the invisible world is the spiritual world and the visible world is the material world.⁴¹ Secondly, the void signifies the believer's spiritual poverty (*faqr*).⁴² The believer arrives at the House of God or at the last resting place of the *Wali* Allah (Friend of God), to present himself as a beggar, a seeker, a humble presence, before the Majesty, the Mercy, and the Wisdom of God.⁴³

History and Architecture of Shrines

The emergence of shrines in Muslim communities is not particular to one branch or sect. There are sects such as *Wahabism* that strictly forbids such monuments and terms all intercession as a sin (calling it *shirk*, associating another with God). In *Shi'ism* on the other hand, the practice of *ziyara* (visiting the graves of the righteous) is entrenched deeply in the structure and rhythm of religious, cultural everyday. The practice of visiting the graves of saintly figures often, and passing on the practice through generations necessitated solid structures or markers for the grace. Mattson suggests that this practice was "influenced by local pre-Islamic cultures, many people felt that it was only proper to honor a 'saint' with a substantial monument."⁴⁴

In some countries the sites of such graced personalities are state protected, such as the grave of the Holy Prophet's (PBUH) companion Abu Ayyub al-Ansari in Istanbul, which is maintained under official patronage.⁴⁵ The shrine of Shah Nimatallah Wali, a renowned Iranian mystic and poet, located in Mahan, Iran, is one of the oldest historical mausoleums. However, this research does not go into the sociological or theological construction of sainthoods or practices of reverence. Instead, the focus is to comprehend that shrines, the final resting place of the bodily remains of the saint, the seekers of spiritual poverty, have also carved a niche in examining influences of traditional architecture.

First it is important to understand why shrines are sacred. In Islam, the Muslim saint (*wali*) is "(almost) always a contemplative whose state of spiritual perfection finds permanent expression in the teaching bequeathed to his disciples."⁴⁶ It is not a formal, religious institution that assigns saints for a particular time or place, but rather an unprompted veneration of the people (owing to the saint's surrender to doctrines of Islam and shunning of all worldly pursuits) that results in his adoration. He is the *Wali Allah* (Friend of God) by the reach of his spirituality. People believe that his spiritual influence remains active and is somehow linked to the place where their corporal remains lie, and hence his blessings, *barakh*, is sought at his tomb. As the Quran says (2: 154):

"And say not of those slain in God's way, 'They are dead'; rather they are living, but you are not aware."

This verse refers to all those who have relinquished this world for the *jihad* and the Holy Prophet (PBUH) himself described the struggle against the passions of the soul as the "greatest holy war" (*al-jihad al-akbar*). Thus, the saints are all those who have sacrificed their lives to the contemplation of God.⁴⁷

To establish the role of tradition as inspiration in shrine architecture, it is also important to provide context of when, and where shrine structures were established. The earliest shrines in Islamic history are the shrines devoted to the descendants of the Prophet. In the twelfth to fourteenth century, as the Seljuks rose to power and there was an increase in princely mausoleums, "the general veneration of the saints, among both people and sovereigns, reached its definitive form with the organization of Sufism- the mysticism of Islam- into orders and brotherhoods each with chain of founding or renovating masters."⁴⁸ Therefore, while the tombs of the Prophet's descendants were already held in reverence, the advent of Sufism added another dimension to realizing the passage to the heavens, through the spaces and structures on earth.

In terms of form, most of the shrines can be broadly categorized as either a straightforward, cubical funeral chamber, with a dome (*qubba*) mounted on top, or a more multifaceted compound with a courtyard, domed tomb chamber, and assembly or prayer halls. The standard elevation in a dome chamber, for example, was tripartite; a zone of transition with squinches bridged the gap

³⁷ Ibid, p. 29.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 41.

³⁹ Arberry, "Distinguished," p. 191.

⁴⁰ Arberry, "Muhammad," p. 224.

⁴¹ Nasr, p. 47.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Acknowledging His Supremacy in all matters of this world and hereafter, praising His attributes, and asking for His Guidance and Forgiveness.

⁴⁴ Ingrid Mattson, 2008, *The Story of the Quran: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*, (Blackwell Publishing), p. 165.

⁴⁵ Official patronage allows a certain enforcement of decorum and solemnity among the visitors. Where no regulation exists, opportunists of all sorts lurk to take advantage of desperate or emotionally vulnerable people.

⁴⁶ Bukhardt, 2009, p. 99.

⁴⁷ Bukhardt, 2009, p. 99.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

from a square or polygonal room to the circular base of a dome. The main façade was usually marked by a *pishtaq*, the high and formal gateway composed of an arch set within a rectangular frame and functioning like a shallow iwan.⁴⁹ The shrine is also referred to as *turba* or *darih* (burial place), *masshad* (place of witnessing), or *mazaar* (place of visitation). Inside the shrine, a cenotaph will indicate the spot where the deceased is buried, and will often be elaborate by the covering of green or black shroud, with names of Allah or the Holy Prophet (PBUH) or the Prophet's family. Within the shrine, there is also a *mihrab*, a niche showing the direction of Mecca, and also placed so that the people do not face the tomb as they pray.⁵⁰ In Shia shrines, four important decorative techniques gained prominence over time. This included the gilding of domes, iwans and minarets; installation of clock towers, addition of platforms as one approached the mausoleums, and as base for the fourth element, porches.⁵¹ High quality baked brick placed in decorative patterns, terracotta and glazed tiles, are prominent decorative materials.⁵²

The repertory of building techniques and materials inherited over successive Muslim dynasties was prominently established through the practice of Islamic Architecture in these years. *Iwans*, barrel-vaulted spaces that open out at one end, sometimes cover the sides of assembly rooms and richly endowed with decoration, so that as one enters, it is not only the dome or the roof that evokes feeling of spiritual uplift but the passage demonstrates fluidity and continuity of the art. A shrine in Kazimayn is the earliest example (1237-1238 AD) with an iwan. Several of the shrines in Iraq, especially those from the Prophet's family, have iwans, which are additions of the sixteenth century Safavid period.⁵³ The arrangement of the four iwans around an open court was introduced for the design of Iranian mosques in the twelfth century and soon spread to Egypt, than Morocco and India. The number four, as the four corners of a square, again established the interpretation in the Quran of natural phenomena such as four seasons.

The *bahw*, a covered gallery, is another architectural element found within shrines, where a series of these may surround a shrine's domes tomb chamber entirely or partially.⁵⁴ The covered galleries of shrine of the Shah Nimatullah Wali, built in the seventeenth century by Shah Abbas, and the *Dar al-Huffaz* in Imam Reza's shrine at Mashhad (today overlaid with mirror work) are magnificent examples.⁵⁵ The use of mirror as reflection of the soul is again inspired by the idea of clarity. The *riwaq*, an arcade or portico, was introduced in shrine architecture to act as a cover for the walkway inside the enclosure walls to provide shade and shelter.⁵⁶ The courtyards are largely empty spaces. This space is not seen as an abstraction Euclidean space as part of form, but the quality of emptiness signifies the nature of the form. The sacred center polarizes the space about it, analogous to the Makkah, the holy city, acts as "the terrestrial point on the axis connecting heaven and earth and is therefore itself the center of the earth," polarizing all space for the worship of the Divine.⁵⁷

The Aspiration for Aesthetics

The cubical dome over the burial chamber is perhaps the single most distinct pattern of Muslim shrines. The dome is regarded as the aspiration to the celestial space, the spherical space a symbol of the Transcendence and Omnipresence of God.⁵⁸ The decoration of the dome using continued and prolific use of Quranic passages, and expressions brings a constant reminder of Divine Unity.⁵⁹ The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is embellished in the similar aniconic style. It instead applies the brilliance of arabesque motifs that multiply and grow infinitely in the circular plane, folding in a geometry that focuses the eye to the intangible center. When the Holy Prophet (PBUH) described his ascent to heaven, he mentioned of a "mother-of-pearl dome resting on a square, with four corner pillars," inscribed with the words "In the Name- of God- the Compassionate and the Merciful."⁶⁰ The dome rested upon a square held apart by an octagon, which symbolized the eight angels, the bearers of the Throne.

The inscription of the Quranic verses on religious structures, such as mosques and shrines especially, emphasizes their architectural prowess. In Shi'a shrines, in fact, epigraphic riches permeate the space, especially those of relatively recent construction, much more than any comparable Sunni monument in the quantity, extent and multiplicity of their inscriptions.⁶¹ James W. Allan narrates his observations on the shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya, which despite its relative small size, is adorned with inscriptural friezes, which crown all exterior walls and completely surround the courtyard. These friezes, by their visual rhythm, recall to the believer, the sound of the Quran. The inner walls are inscribed with cartouches, medallions, vegetal motifs, *muqarnas*, that recall mysticism hidden in the verses of the Quran, comprehensible only to a few.⁶²

The specific use of a certain verse or evocation is also fundamental. In the shrines of the Prophet's descendants there are four main types of inscriptions found in these, Quranic verses, Hadith of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), endowment texts (*waqf*), and Persian evocations (*dua*).⁶³ The use of *Ayat-ul-Kursi* (The Throne verse, 2:255) and *Ayat ul Nur* (the Light verse 24:35) on the outer drum, and inner springing of the dome, respectively, at Sayyida Ruqayya and Sayyida Zaynab's shrine in Damascus (now Syria) are highlighted even more so by the colorful, arabesque tile inlay. Other common short verses such as *Sura al Kauthar* (108) above

⁴⁹ James W. Allan, 2015, "Shi'i Shrines of Iraq" in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expression in Shi'i Islam*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ Bukhardt, 2009, p. 101.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 47.

⁵² Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, 1996, *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 1250-1800*, (Yale University Press), p. 5.

⁵³ James W. Allan, 2015, "Shi'i Shrines of Iraq" in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expression in Shi'i Islam*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 42.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 44.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Nasr, 1973, in *The Sense of Unity*, p. xii.

⁵⁸ Faruqi and Faruqi, p.176.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 173.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Allan, p. 58.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Yasser Tabbaa, 2015, "Glorifying the Imamate: architecture and ritual in the Shi'i shrines of Syria," in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expression in Shi'i Islam* p. 59.

the Shrine's main entrance, *Surah Ahzab* (33:33), and *Surah Sajdah* (32:24) all derive the energy of the space.⁶⁴ In the Sufi shrine of Data Ganj Baksh in Lahore, verses from the Holy Quran, in praise of the Holy Prophet and Data Sahib, in the *nastaliq* and *thuluth* script, decorate the 185, pure white marble arches.⁶⁵ *Surah Rahman* is inscribed in the façade of the mosque in the Lower Mall.

The artist, besides using geometry (spatial unity) and arabesque (rhythmic progression) uses light to demonstrate the unity of reality.⁶⁶ In the Quran (24:35), God says:

“*God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth... It is the Divine Light which brings out from the Darkness of Nothing.*”

The application of this verse also signifies the role of light in architecture. Light (*nur*) is in itself indivisible, whereby its nature is not altered by the degrees of darkness or clarity in form.⁶⁷ The quality of light then allows for other decorative techniques to be applied. The stalactites or *muqarnas* has on the outer level, the practical function of supporting the roof but on the inner layer, symbolizes the descent of light into the material world, as “rays of light cast from the world of the supernal Sun toward the abode of earthly opacity.”⁶⁸

Further Research and Conclusion

The discussion in this research reveals the many shades of deciphering Islamic architecture, but all coming from the source of the Holy Quran. The inspiration derived from the Divine Message, is not only in the tangible form of the words themselves, but in the celestial undercurrent. Islamic architecture as embodied through cosmology, nature and science of numbers, guides the traditional Muslim artist to the way of such geometric and arabesque patterns that can only be viewed in awe, and seem no less than a work worthy of His Praise. In Islam, the concept driving architectural creations is that it should be space, not shape. This paper has sought to establish that the constructions of Islamic architecture is not a random, but a calculate process of evoking Divine Presence, through God's Words in the Quran, and establishing the reality of those words, by identifying their infinite spiritual presence. The discussion on role of tradition, symbols and decorations, shrine architecture as a tangible manifestation, are all meant to converge to this argument.

There is still a vast amount of research that can be carried out to strengthen this link and bring out other shades. One possible question to inquire next is why the designs in specific regional contexts, in different times, from the Sassanid period to the Mughals to the Fatimid period, are structured as they are. This will necessitate taking literature from architectural techniques, historical contexts, and critical theological inquiry. Another proposition is to study the specific inscriptions on Shia shrines, especially in Syria, to find an epigraphic program that can be compared in significance and intent to the iconographic programs of Christian architecture.⁶⁹ Additionally, it is not only shrines and sepulchral structures, in addition to mosques, that have demonstrated layers of Quranic inspiration. Gardens, inspired in the form of Paradise from Quranic verses are also worth investigating.⁷⁰

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⁶⁴ Yasser Tabbaa, “Glorifying the Imamate: architecture and ritual in the Shi’I shrines of Syria,” in *People of the Prophet’s House: Artistic and Ritual Expression in Shi’I Islam* p. 59.

⁶⁵ Data Darbar, <http://paknetmag.blogspot.com/2009/07/completion-of-data-darbar-complex.htmls>

⁶⁶ Bukhardt, 2009, p. 80.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Nasr, p. 53.

⁶⁹ Tabbaa, p 58.

⁷⁰ Sajjad Kausar, 2005, “Meaning of Mughal Landscape,” Paper Presented at the Forum *UNESCO University and Heritage 10th International Seminar* “Cultural Landscapes in the 21st Century” Newcastle-upon-Tyne, April 11-16, 2005, <http://conferences.ncl.ac.uk/unescolandscapes/files/KAUSARSajjad.pdf>.

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