

Tawhid the fountainhead of Islamic Architecture

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Religion is a driving force in any culture and affects most, if not all, aspects of a community's life. The same is true for Islam, which has infiltrated numerous cultures and has become a part of their identity. These new identities find their roots both in their regional culture and in the religion of Islam to varying degrees. Unlike other religions, Islam has a whole genre of design named after it. Islamic art and architecture have a rich history in all the lands that have hosted the religion. Although it is not odd for a religion to dictate certain principles of design and give birth to new architectural typologies, for it to have an elaborate scheme that overarches art, architecture, and even urban design is incredible, to say the least. In terms of design, "Islamic" is an aesthetic value and design language that reflects in the culture of a people ranging from the tiniest jewelry boxes to the scale of walled cities. With the formative period of the style being long past, Islamic art and architecture now have an established visual language. We accept a certain set of aesthetic features as belonging to the Islamic style without pondering over their beginning and evolution as a representation of the religion that they are named after.

The natural question that comes to mind is: how did a religion translate into an art form? This paper aims to explore the modifications that took place in the design field of art that find their basis in the theology of Islam. What was the effect of Islamic traditions, be it Quranic verses and hadith narrations, on the physical aspects of art and design? To answer this question, it would be helpful to identify the context in which the Islamic style was formalized and became a guideline for future design endeavors.

In recent times, the contemporary aesthetic has found its way into the art and architecture of Muslim societies. There have been attempts to modernize the Islamic style by combining it with the contemporary style, resulting in the amalgamation of art and architecture that receive both praise and critique. The Islamic style is being rebranded in different parts of the world with different features, be it replacement of domes with angular structures or geometric patterns with parametric designs. Time has finally caught up with the Islamic style, for better or for worse. Traditionalists disagree with this change and call for a more culturally sensitive design that stays true to the socio-religious roots of the region and preserves its individual identity. It is relevant in this time to revisit the origin and manifesto of Islamic art to be able to make an informed decision for its future direction. This paper attempts to explore this concern and add to this important debate.

Keywords: Figurative imagery, Islamic geometry, Islamic calligraphy, Art evolution, Muslim culture

Introduction

The notion of *tawhid* is the most important cornerstone in the conceptual framework for Islamic architecture.

The implications of *tawhid* for Islamic architecture are rather ideological. Isma'il al-Faruqi said that the influence the concept of *tawhid* exerts on Islamic civilization is such that it gives the latter its identity impressing it by its own mould. The same is true as far as Islamic architecture is concerned because it is an integral part of Islamic civilization. What is more, Islamic architecture is a container of Islamic civilization, one needing the other for its identification and continued existence. Al-Faruqi observed: “*Al-tawhid* is that which gives Islamic civilization its identity, which binds all its constituents together and thus makes of them an integral, organic body which we call civilization. In binding disparate elements together, the essence of civilization in this case, *al tawhid* – impresses them by its own mould. It recasts them so as to harmonize with and mutually support other elements. Without necessarily changing their natures, the essence transforms the elements making up a civilization, giving them their new character as constitutive of that civilization. The degree of transformation may vary from slight to radical. It is slight when it affects their form, and radical when it affects their function; for it is the latter that constitutes their relevance to the essence.”¹

The idea of *tawhid* gives Islamic architecture its conspicuous identity. It also creates in Muslims an unprecedented *tawhidic* outlook on building activities so that there exists the highest level of compatibility between buildings and their users. *Tawhid* ensures that Islamic architecture and Muslims forge a productive and peaceful alliance. They all originated from the same source and serve the same ontological purpose. The character of Islamic architecture is such that it tries its best to disguise its mundane naturalistic factors and features that may hinder a beholder's focus pointing in turn to a higher order of expression and meaning. The beholder's attention is directed towards the desired end by various ingenious artistic and structural ways and methods that are meant to yield an intuition of the real essence of the Transcendent and its divine infinity and perfection.

Since God is the Creator and Lord of everything, including man, He too is the actual Owner of everything. To God belongs everything in the universe. As far as man is concerned, though being elevated to the degree of God's vicegerent on earth and to whom all things have been subjected, he still possesses nothing. Everything around him has been loaned to him so that he in a responsible and unhindered manner can carry out his duties of vicegerency, no more than that. Even his very self, i.e., his life, man does not own. It belongs to his Creator, and if needed he is to sacrifice it for Him and His cause.

¹ Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: its Implications for Thought and Life*, p. 17.

God is thus to be acknowledged all the time and in every interest of man as the final end, as the ultimate object of all desire, as the ultimate source of all goodness, of all value. It is God Who makes every other good; He is the highest good for the sake of Whom every good thing is good.²

Allah says on this in the Qur'an: "They say: "Allah has begotten a son". Glory be to Him. Nay, to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: everything renders worship to Him. To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a matter, He says to it: "Be," and it is." (Al-Baqarah, 116, 117)

"Do you not know that Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and that besides Allah you have no guardian or helper?" (Al-Baqarah, 107)

"A revelation from Him Who created the earth and the high heavens. The Beneficent Allah is firm in power. His is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth and what is between them two and what is beneath the ground." (Ta Ha, 4-6)

Allah explicitly says that he is the Creator and thus the Owner of everything including people and whatever they are able to make. People's creations and possessions are in fact Allah's: "And Allah has created you and what you make." (Al-Saffat, 96) The Prophet (pbuh) also said in a tradition: "Indeed, it is Allah Who creates every other creator and his creation."³ This tradition is recorded by al-Bukhari in his "*Sahih*" in a section entitled "The creation of people's deeds".

This philosophy is strikingly clear also in the field of architecture. Whenever an architect embarks on designing an edifice, he carves out the space needed for his project. The Muslim architect, worthy of his profession, will approach space with reverence, not arrogance, as it is God's physical realm: "If it (space) must be cut for man to have a dwelling, such would have to be done in humility and with ease, harboring no might, no self assertion and no defiance. therefore always strive to exhibit The Muslim architect will⁴ through his creativity and skills that the buildings designed by him interact with space, to flow into and become part of general space, instead separating itself from it. Buildings remain connected with the outside space by the open inner courtyard and windows. Toward the same end, the edge of an Islamic building is often crenellated, the skyline sometimes multiplied, and the vertical edges recessed or protruded with broken surfaces designed to lessen the impact of the cut-off in space.⁵

The Muslim architect or the Muslim structural engineer will not regard his edifices as the space(s) appropriated exclusively for man, nor will their owners and users. Rather, the appropriated space will be viewed as something temporarily loaned to man, so as soon as he returns to his Creator nobody but himself alone will be held accountable for what he did to the loan, how he handled it, and what he managed to achieve with it. It stands to reason, therefore, that Islamic architecture, just like any other noble pursuit and craft taken up for the sake of pleasing God, the all-Powerful and all-Knowing Creator and Lord, is but a

²Ibid., p. 46.

³ See: *Mukhtasar Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, (Beirut: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, 1981), vol. 3 p. 185.

⁴ Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam and Architecture*, in *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, edited by M.A.J. Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), p. 105.

⁵ Ibid., p. 106-107.

vehicle for accomplishing the mission of Islam, not a goal itself. It is therefore a form of ‘*ibadah* (worship) and he who practices it will be rewarded accordingly.

As a result of this powerful religious consciousness and zeal inspired and dominated by the concept of *tawhid*, Muslims developed in the field of architecture a culture of covering all surfaces with certain designs aimed at drawing the attention from the upshots of human endeavors to a higher order of expression and meaning. The Muslim architect, thus, intends to humbly demonstrate that he harbors no might, or defiance, or self assertion when it comes to appropriating and acting in space that does not belong to him; it belongs to Allah the Almighty, the rightful Owner of all creation. The Muslim architect, furthermore, tends to depict himself -- as do the users of buildings -- as a servant rather than a “master”, as a trustee rather than an owner, and as a modest mortal rather than a pretentious “creator”.

In Muslim buildings, therefore, mass is literally made invisible. This is achieved by covering it with stucco, tile, wood and other materials that transfigure the mass into something radically and totally new and different.⁶ Buildings simply appear as though enveloped within dissimilar pleasing, dynamic and contemplation-provoking webs of colored decoration. Sometimes when no rich decoration with plentiful motifs and themes could be used on a building surfaces -- due to the lack of, say, materials, expertise, resources, or even interest -- other practical alternatives had to be then conceived instead, so as to satisfy the same Islamic aesthetic taste. Of such alternatives are: wide-ranging brick patterning when brick is a major building material, the clever use of marble and stone in bands of contrasting colors when stone is a major building material,⁷ laying emphasis on ingenious symmetry in design as well as in organization of inner spaces and architectural motifs, etc. When Ibn Khaldun touched on the subject of decoration in Islamic architecture: its techniques, language and materials, he concluded: “Thus, the walls come to look like colorful flower beds.”⁸

Isma’il al-Faruqi concluded that “all the arts of Islam developed in fulfillment of divine transcendence acting as supreme principle of aesthetics. All Islamic arts developed stylization and denaturalization; all were nondevelopmental and nonfigurative; and all did their best to transubstantiate the natural forces of gravity and cohesion, the natural elements of mass, space and light, of water and color, of melody and rhythm, of physiognomy and perceptive – in short of everything natural and creaturely, into floating, air-suspended patterns suggestive of infinity.”⁹

Hence, it follows that the substance of Islamic architecture aims at declaring a big “no” to the corporeality of existence and to its potentially hazardous attractions, and a big “yes” to that which refreshes and rejuvenates the soul which incessantly yearns for the spirit of divinity which the soul feeds on before finally returning to it. However, given that the components of the same corporeal reality have been employed for the production of architecture, than the ultimate appearance of the latter had to be delicately

⁶ Ibid., p. 105-115.

⁷ Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 108, 146, 201.

⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, Translated from Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1967), vol. 2 p. 361.

⁹ Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam and Architecture*, in *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, p. 25.

transfigured and denaturalized in order that the refined requirements of Islamic aesthetics are duly met. It is feared that without recourse to both transfiguration and denaturalization, the spiritual purpose of erecting buildings might be harder to attain. Thus, the role of Islamic decoration in Islamic architecture is a principal and essential one, not a secondary or an auxiliary one. Decoration stands at the heart of the identity of Islamic architecture.

Finally, Islamic architecture came into existence in order to meet the requirements of the Islamic notion of *tawhid*. Human personal ambitions and roles in fathoming and creating Islamic architecture are rather relative and limited, remaining forever inferior and subservient to the commanding influence of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* is at the core of God's holy Being, as well as at the core of His holy Attributes and Actions. It is likewise at the core of the whole of God's creation of which man is a constitutive part. Hence, it stands to reason that all the actions of man, including architecture, are expected to reflect and exude the same *tawhidic* spirit. Moreover, they are to serve as an extension of the existing paradigms of life. They are to exemplify, sustain and further advance the latter.

In the same vein, Islamic architecture is formed in order to answer the demands of the notion of *'ibadah* (worship) which man, God's vicegerent on earth, is required to actualize in all of his lifelong actions so that his relationship with his Creator and Lord is maintained perpetually strong and sound. To Muslims, Islamic architecture is a field for the implementation of the idea of universal worship in Islam. It is thus a kind of *masjid* or mosque, in the sense that it is a place for both direct and indirect worship activities.

It goes without saying that Islamic architecture is such a noble enterprise charged with the highest level of spirituality. There can be no distinction between the spiritual and secular realms in Islamic architecture, just as separation between the spiritual and secular spheres is foreign to Islam as an ideology and a comprehensive way of life. Islam is life and life, in turn, is worship. The only purpose for the creation of man, the main protagonist in life, is that he worships his Creator and Lord, i.e., that he submits to God's will and word while on earth carrying out his honorable assignments. In Islam, everything is to be viewed against the backdrop of this code. The code applies to architecture certainly more than to many other life pursuits on account of architecture being a framework or container for human lives. Islamic architecture is both a means and sets of facilities to Muslims so that their earthly tasks are facilitated and made easier. Islamic architecture with its ideas, ethos, creators and users is the religion of Islam translated in a space and a moment of time.

Certainly, it is for this *tawhidic* dimension that Islamic architecture entails that Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, called architecture an "estimable calling" and then said that whosoever is engaged in it must be, first of all, righteous and pious.¹⁰ This means that those who are intent on creating Islamic architecture must, first and foremost, embody the message of *tawhid* in their thoughts,

¹⁰ *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. 66. John Freely and Augusto Romano Burelli, *Sinan*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996) p. 11.

words and actions. Only from such a mentality and lifestyle can Islamic architecture originate and survive. Islamic architecture cannot be formed in milieus and contexts alien to the concept of *tawhid*, and by men whose intentions, concerns and objectives are alien to, or at odds with, the same concept at either conceptual or technical planes.

The same man, Sinan, is also reported to have said, in all likelihood, lest he becomes carried away by his illustrious achievements and the status he acquired: “Thanks be to God! He made manifest (His) favor. When the universe was nonexistent, He caused it to exist. He built the earth upon water, and layered the seven heavenly spheres without columns. He caused these nine domes to stand, and hung suspended the solar sphere. He kneaded clay with (His) hand of power and constructed Adam’s body. Eyes and mouth, ear and tongue gave He. He made us noble human beings.”¹¹

Indeed, it is not by a chance that Sinan began each of his autobiographical memoirs with the same *tawhidic* message as the one mentioned above. Before talking about his self, his life and accomplishments as the state’s chief architect, Sinan thus felt compelled to record his due appreciation, recognition, acknowledgment and gratitude to the only real Creator, Sustainer and Master. Sinan knew very well that it was due to Allah’s will, munificence and kindness that he was in a position to do what he did. Hence, in all his words he appeared to be duty bound to endorse his faith, modesty and humbleness, on the one hand, and Allah’s endless power, sovereignty and authority, on the other. Sinan thus wrote at the beginning of one of his memoirs using a plain and straightforward language: “Boundless thanks to that Architect (Allah) of the palace of nine vaults, who, without measure or plumb line, without rule or compass, by His hand of creation, made firm its arched canopy. And endless thanks to that Master of the seven-storied workshop, who, with His hand of power, kneaded the clay of Adam and in him displayed His art and novelty. And endless blessings upon that Self-Existent One, whose munificence, like the waves of the sea, brought forth humankind into the plain of existence from the hidden world of nonbeing...”¹²

Powered by the *tawhidic* spirit, Sinan regarded his enormous talent as a gift from God, which he strove to perfect for no other reason except to serve God. He erected so many buildings of different types only that they be used for glorifying the Holy Being, and that they become a tangible proof of God’s *tawhid*, greatness, infinity and permanence, and of man’s and built environment’s inconsequentiality, impermanence and relativity. Sinan thus wrote: “Thanks be to God, to this humble servant it became an art to serve in so many a house of God... I looked upon all creation as a lesson, and completely understood it has no permanence. I laid the foundations of many buildings. (Doomed to) annihilation, man does not endure. The pavilion of my body began to crumble. I suffered pain in its fetters. The sorrows of fortune my beard turned gray. My body trembles from fear of God. Think not that my bended form is an arch. It is a bridge of passage to grief and sorrow. Brother, in order to pass to the next world, to this vault of fate’s

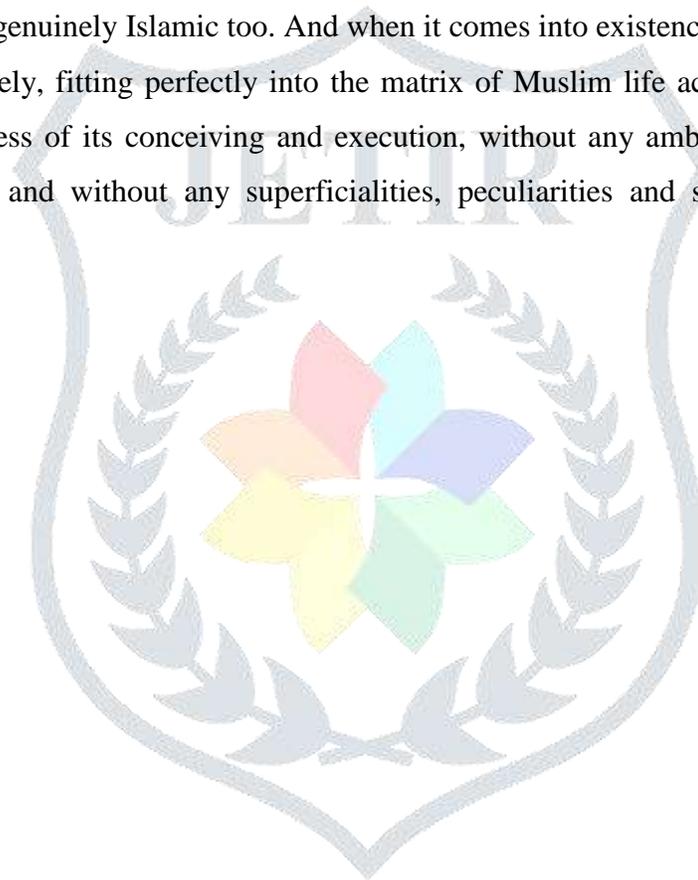
¹¹ *Sinan’s Autobiographies, Five Sixteenth-Century Texts*, p. 88.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

pavilion I bowed my head. Thanks be to God that I am a righteous man! In my art, I am upright and firm.”¹³

Conclusion

It has become clear that knowing and absorbing the conceptual framework for Islamic architecture, Muslim architects, and practitioners in built environment in general, will possess a solid base on which restoring and advancing the phenomenon of Islamic architecture will be easily and confidently established. If the tenets on which the conceptual framework for Islamic architecture rests, permeates an architect's or an engineer's thinking and behaving paradigms, the total behavior that originates from such a mentality is bound to be in agreement with Islamic values and belief system. An architecture that stems from such a mentality is bound to be genuinely Islamic too. And when it comes into existence, it does so spontaneously, unassumingly and sincerely, fitting perfectly into the matrix of Muslim life activities. It does so without any ado during the process of its conceiving and execution, without any ambiguities or confusion in its substance and function, and without any superficialities, peculiarities and showiness in its style and appearance.



¹³ Ibid., p. 89.