“Does Islamic Architecture Reflect Islam (Faith)?”

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Abstract
Islamic Architecture is well and widely known architectural discipline in modern time. Mostly religious, royal or government buildings are known as Islamic Architecture which was developed over thousands of years in Muslim countries. Some architectural features and decorative styles are very common in those buildings which deemed that might come from some Islamic traditions. How those buildings/features became or known as Islamic is a matter to investigate. What are the relationships between Islamic Architecture and Islam? The core of religion Islam is the submission to one true God, Allah. Simplicity in life, devotion to the Creator, compassion to others, giving the preference to the afterlife, follow the guidance from Quran and Messenger etc. are the basic Islamic thoughts. This religion has particular guidelines for lifestyle; which may have an indirect connection with architecture. What guidelines of the Islamic faith have represented in Islamic Architectures? This paper will search for the relation with Islamic architecture with Islamic beliefs as well as search for the answers to above-mentioned questions. It will take some of those buildings especially religious one as a case study and analyze some major features of Mosque, search its origin, reasons for transformation to Islamic Architecture. And finally, it will try to draw an outline where those buildings or features are parallel or contrast to the faith of Islam.

Keywords: Islamic Architecture, Buildings, Faith, Mosque, Features.

1. Introduction

Islam is the rapid spread religion from last centuries so do Islamic Architectures. Islam started by the hand of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)(\(^1\)) and after His death (632), His successors establish Islamic civilizations known as Caliphate. The prime era of Islamic civilizations are Rashidun Caliphs (632- 661); Umayyad Caliphs (661-750); Abbasid Caliphs (750-1517) and Ottoman Caliphs (1517-1924). Among those Muslim rulers, only “Rashidun Caliphs” are known as “Rightly Guided” by all Muslims. Architectures well-known as Islamic today are started by hands of Umayyad rulers and spreading by Muslim rulers till today. How those buildings become Islamic? The relationship between Islamic faith and Architecture is a matter to investigate and this paper is intended to search for that relation by a theoretical study based on early scripts and relevant researches.

2. Brief Introduction to Islamic Architecture

Important Architectural projects are most of the time constructed not only to fulfill its functional purposes but also the showcase of pride and luxuries. Islam starts to spread by Arab Nomads at early 700CEs to all over the world and they hardly had any permanent settlements to anywhere. The Prophet of Islam,
Muhammad (pbuh) lived a very simple life and encourages his companions to do so. One of His famous quotes to His companions “aren’t you satisfied that for us (believers) is the prosperity of the Hereafter and for them (non-believers) the prosperity of this world” *(2)*. His close companions were strictly followed His lifestyle. They focus on spreading Islam showing less intends to worldly life as well as the establishment of kingdoms.

However in late 700CEs, Muslim had conquered great Roman and Persian emperors. Islam started to expand over a vast territory. Muslim rulers are starting to establish cities, palaces, forts from the influences of Roman and Persian lifestyle. Significant architectural development had done by new Muslim rulers with the help of same architects and masons groups from previous emperors. They played a significant role in the elaboration of Muslim Art and Architecture all over the world. According to Fletcher "Muslims were not blind imitators but were content to adopt each local style that they found, modifying it mainly in distinctive ornamental details, but also introducing several important new features of plan and structure" [3]. Firstly, Umayyad (661-750CE) rulers started establishing the Muslim Kingdom. They adopted the construction techniques of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires [4] and often reused existing buildings. Though they start following Byzantine and Mesopotamian style; they introduce and developed some significant architectural styles and decorations [5], especially in Mosque design which is still followed as a role model. The dome of rock, the great mosque of Kairouan and Damascus are the examples of Islamic Architecture in Umayyad period. Secondly, Abbasid (750-945) rulers inherited Persian and Central Asian architectural style and also evolved distinctive styles of their own. They have a significant contribution to decorative works; three new types of stucco decoration were developed by them and rapidly became popular elsewhere. [5] While the Abbasids lost control of large parts of their empire after 850, their architecture continued to be copied by successor states in Iran, Egypt and North Africa. Great Mosque of Samarra, Abbasid palace in Karbala, Iraq; Dalal Bridge in Zakho, Iraq are the examples of Islamic Architecture in Abbasid period.

3. Mosque According to Islamic Guidelines

The mosque is the center structure of Islam and Islamic Architecture. In holy Quran, Mosque is several times mentioned as the place of worship to the Creator. One should enter Mosque for seeking well-being in Here and Hereafter (2;114 & 5;02). On another place in Quran mention that Mosque should build on piety for the purposes of purifying believers must not build to cause harm or disunion among the believers (9;107). Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) always encourages building mosque, one of his famous quotes “He who built a mosque for Allah, Allah would build a house for him in Paradise”. [6] He discoursed making monumental mosques [7] and encourages making it low in height [8] and also said to keep it clean and perfumed. [9]

Decorations of mosques are also considered as another important part of Islamic Architecture. Though Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) allowed to decorate Mosque [9] in some extent but discourages it most of the time, Prophet (pbuh) said that “it is not convenient for me to enter a home which is decorated excessively.” (Abu Dawud, Salat,12) According to Dr. Spahic Omar “Obviously, due to the mosque’s position in both society and every true believer’s life, the Prophet (pbuh) was concerned about the theme of mosque decoration more than about the other aspects of Islamic built environment. In one of such traditions, he is reported to have said that whenever people’s performance weakens, they then start decorating their mosques. (Sunan Ibn Majah)* [10]

4. Evolution of early Mosques that are the Symbol of Islamic Architecture:

At the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and Rashidun Caliphs, Mosques were a simple structure. But later people added many features in it which later become essential parts of Mosque Architecture. Among them, some early Mosque briefly describes below.
4.1. Dome of the Rock: Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque are the significant religious structure in Islam. Both are located on the Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem. The Dome of Rock was constructed 691 and still stood as the earliest symbol of Islamic Architecture. Raja ibn Haywah and Beit Shean were the Muslim engineers in charge of this masterpiece.[12] Its architecture and mosaics were influenced nearby Byzantine churches and palace.

Fig. 01; Dome of The Rock, Jerusalem; Source: Wikipidia

4.2 The Great Mosque of Kairouan (670 in Tunisia) & The Great Mosque of Damascus: These two Mosques are the best preserved and most significant examples of early Mosques as well as Islamic Architecture. The Mosque of Kairouan is considered the ancestor of all the mosques in the western Islamic world.[13] Basic Architectural features of The Mosque of Kairouan are shown below:

Three-dimensional views of the Great Mosque of Kairouan

In The Great Mosque of Damascus (706-715), Umayyad rulers had developed major architectural components of a modern mosque. Though there is some Roman and Byzantine influence in architectural style; the Umayyad introduce some completely new architectural style as well as elements, they developed mosque main structural following the Prophet’s mosque in Medina and introduce many functional elements such as Minaret, Mihrab, Maksurah, and Dome. Mihrab was first time introduced by them, in the center of the Qibla wall, which indicates the direction of the Kaaba. They add four minarets for the call to prayer (Adhan), which some theories suggest the influence of the Pharaoh’s light towers[14] or from the Church of John the Baptist[15]. Horseshoe and Multifoil arches were also firstly found in Umayyad Mosque[16]. Those elements

are, later on, transmitted to the rest of the Muslim world. The dome over the crossing in the central nave in front of the Mihrab first appeared in the Umayyad Mosque and progressively became a central feature of most Mosques. Decorative arts slowly established by them and they are the founder of calligraphy (Kufic), glass mosaics and vegetal and geometrical abstracts.

![Fig. 03: The great mosque of Damascus; Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umayyad_Mosque](image)

4.3. Great Mosque of Samarra: Abbasid Caliph Al-Mutawakkil builds world largest mosque in Samarra, Iraq in 851. The mosque is significant for its architectural orientation, spiral minarets, and decorative works. The purest arabesque \[^{17}\] type decoration was firstly found in there. Two centered pointed arch and vault was used and also become part of Islamic architecture in Abbasids period.\[^{18}\]

![Fig: 04; Great Mosque of Samarra; Source: http://wikimapia.org/1581161/Great-Mosque-of-Samarra](image)

5. Are all Islamic Architectures Islamic?

Some Muslim rulers were highly influenced by some architectural practice from other religions and regions. Taj Mahal (tomb of Momotaz at Agra, India) considered as one of the icons of Islamic Architecture though it has no relation with Islamic Faith. Building activity over graves is not allowed in Islam. Prophet (pbuh) once ordered "that the elevated and elaborate graves, which had been built out of arrogance or for the purpose of glorifying someone and his status, should be leveled to the ground" \(^{19}\); on another occasion He mentioned that it is forbidden to plaster or construct any things over grave.\(^{20}\)
Mazar is another type of buildings which are constructed over the grave of any pious person. It is very popular in the Indian subcontinent and also other Muslim countries as well. However, in Islam, Mazar related activities are considered as a sinful act. Unfortunately, this culture is flourishing day by day. According to the Prophet (pbuh), “those who make the grave a place of worship are the worse creation before Allah”. (21)

6. Comparative Observations

Some observation can be drawn from above discussion about the correlation of Islamic Faith with Islamic Architectures;

6.1 Mosque should not be monumental and highly decorative. However, not all Mosques follow these guidelines. Some famous mosques like Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi; Vakil Mosque in Shiraz are highly decorative. Faisal Mosque in Pakistan and Cologne central mosque in Germany, are quite monumental. On the other hand, some well-known mosque like Chandgaon Mosque in Bangladesh and Da Chang Muslim Cultural Center in China; are quite impressive architectural design without compromising the faith values.

6.2 Some buildings like Taj Mahal, well known as Islamic Architecture have serious conflict with Islamic faith. Those buildings might be architecturally enriched and significant but calling them Islamic would be
controversial. Some may argue about the Green dome over Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) grave, which was constructed by Sultan Qalibay at 1481[22] and later in 1818 by the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II.[23]

However, in 2007, according to the Independent, a pamphlet published by the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs and endorsed by the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, stated that “the green dome shall be demolished and the three graves flattened in the Prophet's Masjid”. [24]

6.3 Ordinary buildings seem more Islamic than well-known Islamic Architectures; whereas Islam opposes exaggerations in life and living, give preference after worldly life. Therefore, the term “Islamic Architecture” might be more rational to use for ordinary, simple and minimalistic buildings rather than for palace like structures.

7. Conclusion

Architectures are the representation of culture as well as socio-economic conditions of a civilization. Ancient civilizations are known to us mostly their architectural remains. Therefore, it is important to justify and clarify the relations between Islam and Architecture before named them Islamic. Otherwise, people will be misguided about religion through architectures. In some extent, it would be better to call them something else not Islamic as religious guidelines and philosophies are ignored in some of those buildings.

References
1) Omer S. (2009) Islamic Architecture: Its Philosophy, Spiritual Significance, and Some Early Developments; A.S. Noordeen. "pbuh" stands for “peace be upon him” which Muslims are strongly recommended to utter whenever Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.
24) Jerome Taylor (24, September 2011). "Mecca for the rich: Islam’s holiest site ‘turning into Vegas’". The Independent. independent.co.uk.