

The Development of Islamic Architecture

Julia Walker

As with the architecture of the world's other major faiths, Islamic architecture developed from surrounding traditions, with strong roots in the ancient world. Like Christianity, the new religion of Islam found widespread appeal for its message of tolerance and its promise of salvation for all those who believed in its doctrines and practiced its rites. After the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE, Islam spread rapidly throughout the Arabian Desert and expanded to Southwest Asia, Persia, and North Africa. Consequently, Islamic architecture and Christian architecture developed along parallel tracks in the lands of the former Roman Empire. As it developed, therefore, Islamic architecture shared many of the forms and structural concerns of Byzantine, medieval, and Renaissance architecture. However, unlike Christian, Buddhist, or Jewish architecture, the category of Islamic architecture encompasses a range of urban and architectural types that go far beyond the religious realm. In both its sacred and secular expressions, Islamic building treats monumental and quotidian structures alike as worthy of artistic design. To speak of Islamic architecture, then, one must consider mosques, shrines, and other places of worship; expressions of royal authority like palaces, fortifications, and monuments; bridges, roads, caravansaries, markets, and other commercial forms; schools and universities; and a wide range of local and vernacular traditions, including domestic architecture reflective of the structure of the traditional model of the Islamic family. Today, a consideration of the architecture of Islam must also take into account the production of non-Muslim architects and regions in which Islam is not the dominant religion. Thus, the built environment of the Islamic world subsumes a remarkably diverse set of building types, styles, and practices not easily reduced to monolithic conclusions. At the same time, it is possible to reflect on persistent themes and recurring ideas in the history of Islamic architecture.

In fact, one of these themes is the absorption and transformation of local ideas into a clear Islamic form. The architecture of Islamic Spain is emblematic of the way in which Muslim artists and patrons drew from regional ideas to create new, hybrid forms. After the Abbasid massacre of the Umayyads in Syria, the young Abd-al-Rahman I fled to Spain in the 750s. He designated himself the western emir, occupying lands where Islamic groups had overthrown Christian Visigoths in 711. The city of Córdoba offered not only the protection of its inland site, but also a well-established town plan in continuous use since the Roman Empire, with bridges, roads, and sacred precincts already securely in place. Its populace was cosmopolitan and multicultural, made up of Sephardic Jews, Christians, and North African Berbers united under the centralized rule of the emir. The city's most significant work of architecture was the Great Mosque of Córdoba (Figure 8.2-3) (known in Spanish as the *Mezquita*), which displayed the same pluralistic incorporation of traditions and ideas as the population of the city itself. The most unique feature of the mosque was its hypostyle hall, with its arcaded aisles running parallel to the qibla wall. The double-tiered arcade seems to have been inspired by Roman aqueducts, several of which survived in the region. The alternating brick and stone of the voussoirs are enhanced with red paint to intensify the drama of this feat of engineering. The decoration of the mosque is lavish, meant to recreate something of the riches lost to the Umayyad dynasty during its expulsion from Syria. The walls of the

maksura are clad in polychromatic marbles and mosaics, executed by mosaicists brought especially from Constantinople to complete the task.



Figure 8.2-3

The same Byzantine artists ornamented the interior of the dome in front of the *mihrab* chamber, whose crisscrossing ribs and pointed arches are sheathed in mosaics in intricate and varied patterns. The opulent decoration of the Great Mosque served not only as a visual reminder of the authority of the Umayyad caliphate; it also offered the viewer an impression of the treasures that awaited the faithful in paradise. Overall, the mosque is a testament to the way in which the Islamic world developed striking and novel forms from existing ideas. Just as the various architectural traditions in Córdoba influenced the design of the Great Mosque, so did this monumental building impact the architecture of the Christian west; the pointed arch, for example, would become a significant motif in Gothic architecture.

Though the mosque in Córdoba is relatively distinct from the city around it, another Great Mosque, the Masjid-e-Jami in Isfahan, Iran (Figure 12.1-3), is unusual in how it is incorporated into the urban fabric. Positioned at the intersection of several important pedestrian paths, the structure was an important public site as well as a sacred space. Built and remodeled over several centuries starting in the 700s, the mosque bears four *iwans* with an enlarged qibla *iwan* flanked by two minarets—a type that was to become the standard in Iran—and a dome in front of the *mihrab*. Each *iwan* is framed by a pointed arch and embellished with oversized *muqarnas* added in the thirteenth century. The surface of these walls was decorated with elegant tile work arranged in abstract patterns and verses from the Quran. The vivid blues and whites of the tile were meant to have an ethereal quality, suggesting a world of lushness and orderly beauty far beyond the city's walls. Though the interior of the mosque was reserved for the sovereign, these elaborate *iwans* would have been visible to members of the public visiting the royal precinct. At the end of the sixteenth century, Shah Abbas I transferred the Safavid capital from Qazvin to the more centrally located city of Isfahan.



Figure 12.1-3

Therefore, despite its monumentality and splendor, the mosque became only one building in a complex of structures needed to carry out royal functions in the city. A new royal palace was thus fronted with a sweeping *maydan* for public ceremonies, including imperial rituals that were revived by the Safavids from ancient models in order to legitimize their authority. For example, the king made a public performance of playing *chovgan* (a team sport played on horseback, somewhat resembling polo) in front of hundreds of subjects, a practice that linked his sovereignty both to past dynasties and to divine ordination. A garden district for royal use abutted one end of the complex, with fragrant flowers and plants serving as an analogue for paradise, which the Quran describes as a luxurious garden. Within these gardens, flowing water and ample shade provided a serene respite from the hot sunlight of the rest of the city. As with the tile cladding of the *iwans* at the Great Mosque, the gardens reinforced the a set of binaries that were key to Islamic life in Isfahan, drawing parallels between the hubbub of city life and the tranquility of the paradise to come.

In contrast to the highly decorative quality of the surfaces in Isfahan, other significant Islamic structures express monumentality by other means. For example, the Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali (Figure 9.3-9), originally constructed in the fourteenth

century and rebuilt in 1907, achieves extraordinary sculptural effects without recourse to this rich language of ornament.



Figure 9.3-9

The largest mud construction in the world, the mosque depends on the abundant sunlight of the region not only for its structure, but also for its visual impact. The mosque is made up of thousands of bricks, which are formed by skilled masons and then baked in the sun for durability. Timber beams run through the building to increase the stability of the stacked mud bricks, extending through the walls at roof level to act as decorative elements. These wooden beams not only create an interesting echinated effect on the exterior; they also produce a play of dark shadows along the smooth walls of the structure that changes throughout the day. This sense of endless variation continues on the interior of the building. The main hall of the mosque contains a forest of columns supporting the roof, a West African Islamic tradition descended (as with the Great Mosque of Córdoba) from Egyptian hypostyle halls. Skylights set into the thick ceiling admit light into the interior, but the hall's proliferation of interim supports means that this light maintains a highly specific character. Rather than flooding the interior with a diffuse glow, the light in the Great Mosque is atomized in small, intense pockets, and changes with the position of the sun throughout the day. The effect is complex and mysterious, heightening the sacred quality of the building. In fact, this theme of mutability permeates virtually every aspect of the mosque's structure. The use of mud brick requires that all building surfaces be re-plastered annually to protect the building's integrity, a task that is accomplished via a week-long community festival. Consequently, the shape of the building changes slightly from year to year. In an urban landscape mainly comprising small adobe residential buildings, the mosque has remained a strong visual statement and a node of civic activity for many centuries.

In recent years, Islamic architecture has come to encompass the complex concerns of the many parts of the world in which Muslims now live. The French architect Jean Nouvel, among others, has continually identified Islamic architecture as one of his most important influences. In the Institute du Monde Arabe (Figure 20.2-4), which opened in Paris in 1986, 240 light-sensitive apertures automatically open and close to control the amount of sunlight entering the building.



Figure 20.2-4

Though these lenses irresistibly suggest the workings of a camera, the real source, for Nouvel, is in the Islamic latticed window known as the *mashrabiya*. The building thus synthesizes traditional climate-oriented strategies with up-to-date technology to create a structure that is remarkably subtle in its Islamic references. Similarly, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai (Figure 20.2-24), completed in 2010, has attracted most interest for its participation in the global rivalry over “supertall” buildings; at a height of nearly half a mile, it has remained the tallest building in the world, despite heated competition from other structures. Given these staggering statistics, it is no surprise that the skyscraper’s virtuoso structural engineering has overshadowed the way in which its architecture is distinctly Islamic. Designed by the American architect Adrian Smith for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the structure attempts to contextualize the international form of the skyscraper in Dubai by referencing local traditions; for example, the triple lobes clustered around a central core are reminiscent of the hymenocallis flower that grows in the region of the Persian Gulf. Smith’s telescoping skyscraper is also meant to evoke the gently tapering form of the spiral minaret and to provide a similar visual function, marking a nexus of Islamic identity that is visible from miles around in the flat desert landscape. Though Nouvel and Smith are both non-Muslim architects, these examples reveal the nature of contemporary architectural practice, in which the global and the local attain a curious (and delicate) synthesis.



Figure 20.2-24

For Further Reading

Babaie, Sussan. *Isfahan and its Palaces: Statecraft, Shi'ism and the Architecture of Conviviality in Early Modern Iran*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

Bloom, Jonathan, and Sheila Blair. *Islamic Arts*. London: Phaidon Press, 1997.

Elleh, Nnamdi. *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.

Holod, Renata and Hasan-Uddin Khan. *The Contemporary Mosque: Architects, Clients, and Designs since the 1950s*. New York: Rizzoli, 1997.

Michell, George, ed. *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995.