



The Mosque in the Urban Context

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1 Faisal Mosque, aerial view.
Photo: Aga Khan
Documentation Center
at MIT

From the earliest days of Islam, the mosque, or *masjid*, meaning place for prostration, emerged as the site where the *umma*, or community of believers, could come together and discuss matters of state and religion. Thus, it became the social and political center of early Muslim urban settings. In the planned settlements or garrison towns built by the Arabs as they spread the new religion across the Middle East and North Africa, the mosque was centrally located; but in cities they conquered that predated Islam, the mosque had no specific location. At first, Arab Muslim domination did not bring significant modification to the architecture of occupied regions. But, as with any prospering civilization, it did create a variety of new demands that required architectural solutions.

The diversity of conditions within Muslim regions has led many researchers to question the existence of an Islamic architecture with common characteristics.¹ Indeed, the Islamic empire was never a monolithic entity; it encompassed people with different cultures, economic systems, and national heritages; and it included lands with different geographies and climatic conditions. Some have argued against the universality of Islamic architecture in general.² However, few would disagree about the commonality of mosque architecture in particular. The mosque's function and role within the community has been fairly consistent through time and space.

In spite of their social and political importance, early mosques during the Prophet Mohammed's as well as the first four caliphs' time (632–661) were not landmarks. Their locations, external shapes, and material treatments were not meant to herald them as cultural symbols. Although there were exceptions, early mosques did not enjoy the visual emphasis of the sacred structures of other religions.

For instance, the importance of the mosque within the towns of the Muslim world was muted compared to that of the church within the towns of medieval Europe. The absence in Islam of an institutionalized clergy may explain the difference. The mosque as a physical structure was not an essential part of the hierarchy of governance, and as an institution, it did not possess independent power. Instead, it was intended to serve as a place where power could be transmitted and shared, where the supposed equality between ruler and ruled was manifested.³ Therefore, the symbolic significance of the early mosque was not represented in its physical qualities; rather, its importance lay in the role it played within the community, a role deeply rooted in the structure of Islamic society.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

Early Islam did not require a specific place for prayer, for this obligation could be fulfilled anywhere, provided the times and the direction of prayer were correct. Although prayer was an individual communication with God, group prayer on Fridays (the Muslim Sabbath) was considered an essential community obligation. The *masjid jami*, or the congregational mosque, sometimes referred to as the Friday mosque, was thus established during the Umayyad period as the principal site for community prayer in larger cities. It was usually large enough to accommodate the entire adult male population of the city. As the city then expanded, the congregational mosque was enlarged and neighborhood mosques were added. Many of these smaller mosques developed certain specialties and served social, political, and educational functions.

With the expansion of Islam into new regions, existing buildings were used as the first mosques.

2 The Great Mosque, Damascus, 705–15, aerial view showing the mosque in urban context. Photo: Yves Gelle/Corbis, 2015



Starting during the lifetime of the prophet, Arabs did not impose any architectural forms on conquered countries. Instead, they converted existing sanctuaries of other religions to serve the simple requirements of their religion. The most well known is Kaaba originally a pagan pilgrimage site claimed by the prophet for his new religion and named as Masjid al-Haram or Sacred Mosque. Following this, the first mosques were often temples and churches, altered to serve the needs of the new Muslim rulers.

In Syria, where the direction of the qibla is south, Byzantine churches were converted into mosques by turning their western doors into windows and cutting new entrances into their northern walls.⁴ In the city of Damascus, at first, the grounds of a previous pagan temenos (holy precinct) was used for communal prayer. This site had been originally built for the Temple of Jupiter, and then built over for the Cathedral of St. John during the Byzantine era (395–634). The open space outside the church was initially shared between Christians and Muslims. This initial preference suggests the colonizing Arabs were not intent on imposing a brand-new image on the city. Upon the orders of Umayyad caliph al-Walid (r. 705–15), however, the church was demolished and a congregational mosque was built to the south of the temenos using some of the structure, columns, of the church, signaling the power of the Umayyads (Fig. 2).⁵

In Persia, Arabs converted many fire temples and existing buildings into mosques and sometimes used their parts as spolia. The Friday mosque in Istakhr, dating from about 660 and considered to be the earliest mosque in Persia, had round columns with Achaemenid capitals featuring bullheads.⁶ Most famously, and much later, in Constantinople, the famous Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque by the Ottoman Turks following their takeover of the city in 1453; indeed, it became the prototype for many later Ottoman mosques.⁷

The situation was different, however, in cities founded by the Arabs, where new religious structures had to be built. The Great Mosque of Kufa (670), for example, one of the earliest in Iraq, was originally defined only by a ditch. Its qibla portico was an unwalled space of reused marble columns, covered perhaps by a gabled wooden roof. Not far away, the Mosque of Basra was marked only by a fence of reed. In Egypt, the Mosque of Amr (641–2) was a small space containing a structure made of mud brick, with palm-trunk columns supporting a roof of palm fronds and mud. The floor was covered simply with pebbles.

By the time Persian Muslims reached India in the twelfth century, however, Islamic building traditions were better established. The Muslims had absorbed and modified many of the building practices of previously conquered places. The first mosques in India thus appear to reflect a more mature building tradition; although conversion of Hindu temples to mosques also occurred.⁸

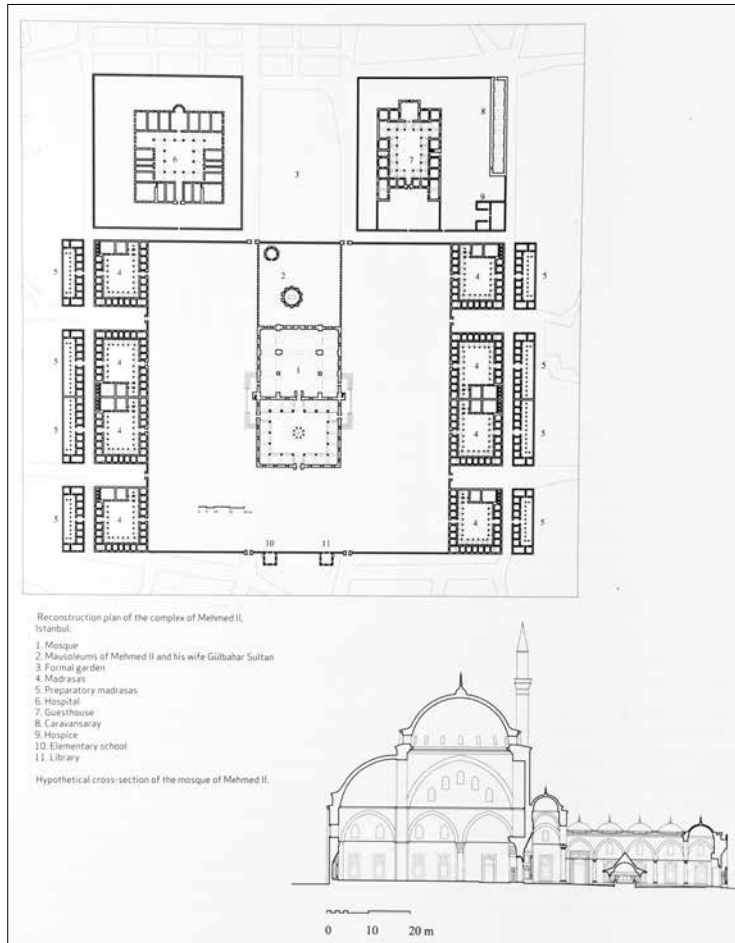
The first three centuries of the Arab era witnessed the development of the highly flexible hypostyle mosque, with columns or piers as the main unit of construction. Hypostyle mosques could expand and contract according to the needs of the community. Cordoba's Great Mosque was first laid out in 784 on the site of a Christian church; it was enlarged several times (in 833–48, 965–6, and 987–8), each phase following the original design, thus achieving stylistic unity in an asymmetrical composition.⁹

MOSQUES AND THE URBAN CONTEXT

Over the past thirteen centuries the general requirements of the mosque have not changed significantly, but its location in relation to other public functions has. Minor changes have

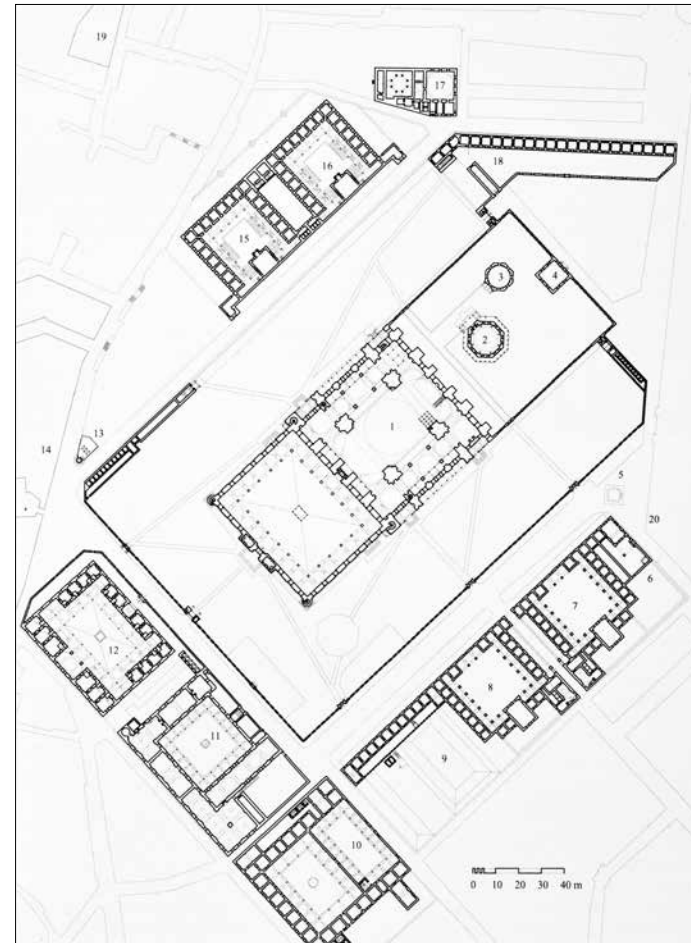
5 Fatih Külliyesi.
Reconstruction plan of the complex, and hypothetical section of the mosque.

Source: Gülru Necipoğlu,
The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire.
 London: Reaktion Books,
 2005, 85



contained a hospital, a medical school, a hospice, a soup kitchen, a primary school, madrasas, shops, and coffee houses.

The mosque complex, as it evolved in Ottoman times, was the culmination of a long process, as a number of functions were added in response to the needs of the community. In different parts of the world, the madrasa (school), *khanaqah* (monastery), and mausoleum also evolved as new categories of sacred buildings.¹³ Other religious structures included the *zawiya* (chapel), a prayer hall along the side streets of busy neighborhoods, and the *kutab*, which was a nursery school where children were taught the fundamentals of religion. In many cases *kutabs* were adjoined by a water fountain.



6 Süleymaniye Külliyesi. Floor plan of the complex, showing:

- (1) mosque, (2) mausoleum of Süleyman,
- (3) mausoleum of Hürrem, (4) Koran recitation school, (5) public fountain, (6) elementary school, (7) first (evvel) madrasa, (8) second (sani) madrasa, (9) remains of medical school, (10) hospital, (11) hospice, (12) guesthouse, (13) Sinan's tomb with domed sabil and empty plot of his endowed school and residence, (14) the janissary agha's residence, (15) third (salis) madrasa, (16) fourth (rabi) madrasa, (17) bathhouse, (18) hadith college, (19) madrasa near the palace of Fatma Sultan and Siyavus Pasa

Arben N. Arapi, 2005, source: Gülru Necipoğlu,
The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire. (London: Reaktion Books, 2005, p. 205).
 Photo: Gülru Necipoğlu

THE MOSQUE IN THE ERA OF THE MODERN NATION-STATE

In the modern era, as many of their former functions have been assumed by state authorities, mosques have restricted their work to religious activities, leading to the “secularization” of public services and spaces, or, alternatively, to the “sacralization of the mosque.”¹⁴ While government authorities now routinely make provision for mosques, schools, hospitals, etc., when planning new communities, the locations of these institutions have become more marginal. Their administration has also become connected, respectively, to directorates of religious affairs, ministries of education, or ministries of health or social welfare.

New types of mosques have also emerged during the twentieth century, in association with new political, demographic, and economic developments. Some of these are more associated with the new unit of the nation-state than with the city. One example is the large state or national mosque, often built in the capital of a newly independent country. In some ways, these state mosques hark back to the great congregational mosques of early Muslim cities or to the subsequent great imperial mosques of Islam. An early example is the National Mosque (1965) of Malaysia, one of the most prominent buildings in Kuala Lumpur, situated among gardens across from the old Kuala Lumpur railway station and surrounded by motorways. Another national mosque from the same period and region is the Independence Mosque (1961–78) in Jakarta, Indonesia. Since the 1970s, such mosques have proliferated throughout the Islamic world, notably in Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Pakistan.

The national mosque of Pakistan – King Faisal Mosque (Fig. 1, 1966–86) (named after the king of Saudi Arabia who partially sponsored it) – was designed by the Turkish architect Vedat Dalokay. It was given a particularly prominent place in the country’s new capital, Islamabad. The city itself was planned (1959–60) by Constantinos Doxiadis on a prominent ancient route connecting capitals in the region. Adjacent to Rawalpindi and away from the “cosmopolitan” port city of Karachi, it was intended catalyze the “imagined community” formed after the 1947 partition of British India

into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India.¹⁵ Doxiadis’s design involved a 2,200-yard grid of self-contained communities, separated by motorways. It had two main axes: one (northeast-southwest) terminating in the Capitol complex, and the other terminating with the King Faisal Mosque at the foot of the Margalla Hills at the city’s northwest border.¹⁶

It is worth mentioning that Dalokay had earlier teamed with another Turkish architect, Nejat Tekelioğlu, to win a competition to design a grand mosque for Ankara. However, after ground was broken for this project in 1967, its modernist aesthetic was shelved, to be replaced by a historicist design by Hüsrev Tayla and Fatin Uluengin that harkened back to sixteenth-century imperial Ottoman mosques. But this decision created enduring controversy, because the new mosque, Kocatepe (1967–87), visually and symbolically competes with Atatürk’s Mausoleum (Anıtkabir, 1944–53), the secular national emblem that crowns the city’s highest hill.¹⁷

The incorporation of mosques into the state apparatus has been paralleled by a rise in the building of privately funded mosques. Some of these have been sponsored by local communities; others have been affiliated with regional or transnational Islamic organizations. In addition, the 1990s witnessed the rise of political Islam across the Muslim world, particularly in places like Egypt, Iraq, and Iran. Even in secular countries like Turkey, local groups have now become key players in the production of built environments with overt formal references to Islamic heritage, so much so that it is possible to talk about a mosque building boom.

Contemporary mosques occupy a new range of sites in the urban context. They can define the urban edge, as in Jeddah’s Corniche, with regularly spaced small mosques – one of them, the Island Mosque (1986) by Egyptian Architect Abdel Wahid El-Wakil (Fig. 6).¹⁸ Or they can appear in places such as university campuses and airports that cater to large numbers of people. One example is the mosque in the middle of the lake at the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in Dhahran; another is the mosque at King Khaled Airport in Riyadh.¹⁹

The strengthening of religious alliances in the past decades has altered how the cityscape is

7 Island Mosque, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1990, designed by Abdel Wahid El-Wakil. View across the harbour. Photo: IAA2020, courtesy of Aga Khan Trust for Culture-Aga Khan Award for Architecture and Christopher Abel



appropriated and transformed by the general public for demonstrations of piety.²⁰ Thus, in many Muslim cities, public squares, and even sidewalks, may today be taken over as a Friday mosque accommodating hundreds of thousands of people. Alternatively, Muslims continue to adopt existing buildings as mosques, as is the case with shop-front mosques in the United States (Fig. 8).²¹ Garages or other small spaces in cities such as Cairo and Beirut have also been turned into small mosques. All of these appropriations enable what may be called the distributed mosque.

Mosques continue to be places mainly for male congregation, although in some countries, such as Egypt, women-only *zawiyas* (chapels) have started to appear. In most contexts, women may only go to mosques that have separate, secondary spaces. One exception involves women in Western Europe and North America, who frequent mosques with their children more often than their counterparts in Muslim-majority countries. The increased involvement of women has potential implications for mosque design.

Whereas elite women have been patrons of mosques through the history of Islam, they have not been involved as designers. One notable exception involved the commission by the Semiha Şakir Foundation of a small charitable mosque, the Şakirin

Mosque in Istanbul, commissioned and designed by Hüsrev Tayla, which was opened close to the entrance of Karacaahmet Cemetery, the oldest and largest Muslim cemetery in the city. It made international news, because Zeynep Fadilloğlu, who was also a great-niece of Semiha Şakir, was part of the interior design team.²²

Despite rising Islamophobia in countries in the West, especially following the September 11, 2001, attacks, more and more mosques are being purpose-designed and built by architects.²³ This may indicate more confidence on the part of Muslim diaspora communities and more acceptance by their Christian-majority countries, controversies notwithstanding.²⁴ Thus, while Swiss voters in 2009 approved a ban on the construction of new minarets in that country,²⁵ more recently, a New York City board approved plans for a mosque near Ground Zero.²⁶

THE MINARET AND THE DOME IN THE CITYSCAPE

Perhaps the visual elements of the mosque that stand out most prominently in the cityscape are the minaret and, to a lesser extent, the dome. Although neither was used during the Prophet's lifetime, they have today become the most distinctive symbols



8 Ar-Rahman Mosque, entrance.

Photo: Maryam Eskandari, 2010, courtesy of the Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT

This case also shows how the slender, tall Ottoman minaret and its accompanying broad dome have evolved into the typical marker of the mosque in cityscapes across the world. This has especially been a condition of the modern era. However, the minaret's significance has been defined culturally, not religiously.²⁹ Its significance lies not in its shape but in the fact that it serves an Islamic function and identity. By contrast, using ideas from Islamic philosophy, some scholars have introduced broader interpretations of different elements of the mosque. The minaret is thus seen as connecting the sky to the earth. Its verticality represents the Muslim desire to reach the upper skies, where God is sitting. The dome is seen as simulating the universe. Its geometry establishes a greater contact with the earth, a symbolism that serves to remind Muslims of their earthly duties.³⁰

Functionally, the minaret is no longer needed as a place to make the call for prayer. This is instead done with loudspeakers and, in many cases, a recorded call to prayer, the *azzan*. In spite of this change, most clients for mosques today still insist that architects include minarets in their designs. Apparently, their acquired symbolic value has

of Islam; and their outlines are frequently used in political illustrations. For example, the ban on new minarets in Switzerland was the result of a referendum advocated by a far-right group, the campaign for which featured a striking poster that showed minarets on a Swiss flag, standing erect like missiles, and a woman wearing a *burqa*. In a country with 150 mosques, of which only four have minarets, the ban came after only two more minarets were proposed. This is not the first instance of minarets being opposed in European countries. In Cologne, Germany – a city whose main landmark is a medieval cathedral – another mosque project was opposed by right-wing activists largely because it included two, fifty-five-meter minarets.²⁷

The new intolerance against multiculturalism and Islam in Europe has emerged out of fear of the spread of Muslim fundamentalism, but it seems to confuse the spatial forms of Islam with ideological extremism. The competition brief for the Cologne Mosque had required the two minarets, and the winning architect, Paul Böhm, reportedly said in an interview: “This is a mosque, and it should clearly and consciously present itself as such. Muslims should not try to hide.”²⁸ This statement confirms the power of historic visual symbols as a source of community association and pride.

9 Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem.

Photo: Kathryn Blair Moore



become inseparable from the traditional image of the mosque. However, in cultures with no tradition of minarets, other important elements have acquired symbolic significance, and these alternative forms have often been privileged in the design process. Building within contemporary societies challenges architects to identify and create forms that are new but still familiar in the sense of conveying a specific Muslim identity. The designer of a mosque has a responsibility to provide a building that is identifiable for what it is. The design should display an understanding of the mosque's role, history, and symbolic significance. The major task of the architect thus seems to be the creation of a building that is representative of both the spiritual aspirations and social reality of Muslim society.

Domes have had a considerable presence in Islamic architecture. The Dome of the Rock (c. 691–2) was the first monumental construction of Islam (Fig. 9).³¹ In early instances, the dome was often added in the middle or at the end of the transept of a mosque in order to emphasize the mihrab and accentuate the orientation toward Mecca. In other words, it was used for ceremonial purposes as part of a larger architectural composition. Only later did the dome transform into a unifying and constructional element with a presence in the cityscape, especially as it developed in Ottoman architecture based on the prototype of Hagia Sophia. Although the dome is no longer necessary to span large spaces, and although the function of the minaret may have been superseded in an age of recordings and loudspeakers, both of these elements recur in contemporary mosque design around the world.

REFLECTIONS

A comparative survey of major mosques indicates the existence of a definite language of Islamic visual expression that possesses both a vocabulary and a grammar. The vocabulary deals with the aesthetic models underlying the different components of the mosque. It concerns such issues as constituent forms, surface patterns, colors, and materials. The grammar relates the various systems of organizing these parts into a coherent whole.

While this is true for most examples, scholars have debated the validity of this generalization, arguing that many aspects of this visual language exist in a multiplicity of dialects and are bound to specific cultural regions within the Muslim world. The dome, for instance, received important visual emphasis in the Persian and Turkish regions but was rather unimportant in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

The absence of an element in a particular region does not nullify the existence of a language of visual expression. Whether this language can be considered uniquely Islamic or a product of an Islamic identity will always remain debatable. What is important is that the vocabulary and grammar of mosque architecture appear to have achieved certain symbolic meanings upon which there are general societal agreements within the Muslim world.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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