

“Islamic Architecture” and the Profession

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The term ‘Islamic architecture’ often evokes domed and sumptuously decorated monuments, preferably with minarets and lots of arches. Reductive and exotic, these images are nonetheless quite popular both in the West and in the Islamic world. Even the specialized literature on Islamic architecture, erudite and extensive as it is, still falls for a similar, though less fantastic, kind of historicism. Most surveys of Islamic architecture begin with the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built in 692, and end with the Taj Mahal in Agra, completed in 1654, as the first and last instances of an architectural tradition comprised mostly of mosques, shrines, palaces, and castles, with its best creative days behind it. So pervasive was this restrictive historical construct that Islamic architecture had a very hard time making the transition into the modern world of design. Even today, with many architects around the world using the vocabulary of Islamic architecture in their design mainly in response to passionate requests from their clients, the notion of ‘Islamic architecture’ sits uneasily within both the practice of design and the field of architectural history, where its name, scope, and claim to specificity are constantly questioned.

Why is it so? How has Islamic architecture as a body of knowledge interacted with the practice of design? And is the uncertainty with which architectural historians treat Islamic architecture related to the expediency and frivolity with which many architects respond to requests of incorporating ‘Islamic architecture’

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in their design? Here, I will try to chart a few venues for tackling these questions, which are of course interrelated. I hope that my brief historical analysis of the relationship between Islamic architecture and the profession will stir some critical reactions, reactions that will push this politicized and ideologized debate out of the realm of polemics and into the broadest scholarly and professional context.

The ambiguity about Islamic architecture goes back to the turn of the nineteenth century when the term was first coined. Before that date, Islamic architecture was simply the architecture of the land of Islam, and it would be difficult to imagine premodern Islamic designers fretting about its representativeness. It was their architecture, encapsulating their history, aesthetic sensibilities, and understanding of the constraints of their environment. It was, to them, architecture *tout court*. But when the first European architects and draftsmen arrived to the ‘Orient’ in the wake of the first European military interventions, they had a difficult time understanding, situating, and naming the architecture they encountered. Because of its apparent strangeness, they had to differentiate it from the architecture they knew, while at the same time they had no choice but to define it by using concepts borrowed from that same familiar architecture, which was per force Classical and European. Thus, ‘Islamic architecture’, from the moment of its inception as a category, was simultaneously and paradoxically hitched to the conceptual contours of another, well-studied architectural history and resolutely separated from its established chronological structure. Constructed

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against a stratified and linear Western architectural historiography with its roots in ancient Greece and its triumphal telos in modern, industrial Europe, Islamic architecture was, over time, confined to the domain of medieval architecture with no connection to the present.

That notion of interruption, or more precisely of withering away in the premodern period, was one of the main reasons for which Islamic architecture entered the world of modern design primarily through the revivalist portal. European architects active in the major Islamic cities at the height of the colonial age devised numerous revivalist styles that borrowed motifs from the varied repertoires of the past and blended them with eclectic Western stylistic modes. Thus we see neo-Islamic, neo-Mamluk, Indo-Saracenic, neo-Moorish and other neo styles dominating the civic architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But the identity confusion caused by mixed terminology and stylistic dependency on Western categories amplified the historical discontinuity, so that the neo styles, many of which were sincerely meant as national styles for modern times, never managed to bridge the gap with the historical periods to which they formally referred. Instead, a sense of alienation pervaded their examples, which, though innovative and aesthetically elegant, were treated as formalist exercises and kept outside the sanctioned narrative of architecture in the Islamic world.

The postmodern solution to the conundrum of authenticity and continuity was to revert to selective copying from venerated historical models unmediated by stylistic reinterpretation. This suited the mood

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of the time in many Islamic countries, several of which had belatedly gained their independence from colonial rule and were eager to establish a visual identity with solid roots in the past. The available academic presentation of ‘Islamic architecture’, consisting essentially of catalogs of grand monuments, offered a streamlined package of images for contemporary architects looking for recognizable historical anchors to their designs. They ‘sampled’ celebrated historical models, chief among them the Alhambra and imperial Ottoman mosques, to compose variations on these archetypes cherished by a new class of wealthy and culturally traditionalist patrons.

Consequently, most of the ‘Islamic architecture’ of the 1970s and 1980s, and sometime even later decades, was postmodern in spirit and appearance, even when it was cloaked in environmental or technological rhetorical arguments.

Thus, notwithstanding the brief rationalist attempts to learn from ‘Islamic architecture’ throughout the twentieth century, the two major moments of engagement with its legacy, the revivalist and the postmodern, were essentially formalist and historicist. Instead of challenging the effects of the Eurocentric art-historical paradigm of cultural autonomy, these more recent examples reinforced the prevalent view of Islamic architecture as ornamental, historicist, and insular, even though they never managed to enter its canon. They floated without an acknowledged genealogy, having been absorbed neither into the history of Islamic architecture, whose academic purview stopped at the end of the eighteenth century, nor in modern

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architectural discourse, because they were dubbed derivative and latecomers. This made the late-twentieth century efforts to define Islamic architecture more broadly and to uncover in it universal architectural values a more onerous task. Not only was a revision of the ways through which historical Islamic architecture was presented and interpreted necessary, but so too was a re-education of the design professionals to wean them from the facile appropriation of forms and ornamental patterns as a convenient means to incorporate ‘Islamic architecture’ in their design. Several corrective approaches have been tried. None has been totally successful in breaking out of the particularism trap, although in their sum they have at least created a true dialogue on Islamic architecture with an active global audience and many salient concerns and propositions.

At least two of these approaches contribute more consciously to the question of the relationship of Islamic architecture to the design discourse today. The first is the architectural enterprise of the Aga Khan, which began in the mid-1970s with an international award program, The Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA), and is still unfolding today with many more institutional forays into all aspects of architecture from academe to urban and landscape conservation and a whole array of developmental projects. The AKAA, wide-ranging and long-term as an initiative, is rather pragmatic in determining its intellectual trajectory. Over more than thirty years, it has striven to project itself as inclusive of all geographies and all genres of architecture and as intentionally evolving to reflect the changing

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conditions of architecture in the Islamic world as well as, and perhaps more importantly, the shifting theorization of architecture worldwide, but especially in the West. In fact, a cursory review of the almost hundred projects it has rewarded thus far reveals both a sensitivity to criticism and a desire for inclusion in the global architectural field coupled with a steady move towards the recognition of a more humane and more environmentally responsive architecture.

The second endeavor is more introspective but also intellectually introverted. It can be called ‘fundamentalist’ in the sense that its proponents seek to find in the Islamic intellectual heritage a framework for the understanding of Islamic architecture and to extend that understanding to the practice of design today. This approach arose in the 1970s and 1980s through two distinct venues. The first aimed to recover a conceptual basis for architecture in the specialized literature of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), a vast and thoroughly deductive body of knowledge that covers all aspect of Islamic social life. The second derived its interpretive basis from the enormous repertory of mystical Sufi writing, and saw art and architecture as symbolic manifestations of a transcendental Islam. Both discourses predicated their argument on the inability of Western theories to explain Islamic architecture, thus rejecting the Western theories’ claim of universality. But instead of falling back on the cultural autonomy paradigm of the colonial period, they emphasized instead a more radical belief in epistemological independence.

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The two approaches of the AKAA and the ‘fundamentalists’, the one accepting of the universality of Western theory and the other insisting on epistemological rupture, represent two poles in the debate on the role of Islamic architecture in the design profession today. They are not, however, autonomously constructed. Each embodies a major current in an older, much deeper, and almost existential debate that started when the Islamic world awoke to the reality of the modern age at the turn of the nineteenth century. Recognizing that the Islamic world lost the civilizational competition to modern Europe, the two sides of the debate differed on how to redress the imbalance. One side insisted on the adoption of Western modernity, wholesale or selectively, as the surest road to parity with the West. The other proclaimed the solution in a return to the authentic Islamic ways and a refusal of Western modernity. The debate waxed and waned, but never died down. It is in fact at its sharpest stance in decades these days. Can the debate on Islamic architecture contribute insight to that larger debate?