

What is Islamic architecture anyway?

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I have been teaching Islamic architecture at MIT for the past twenty-one years. My classes have by and large attracted two types of students. There are those who see Islamic architecture as their heritage: Muslim students from abroad, Muslim-American students, and Arab-American non-Muslims. Then there are the students who imagine Islamic architecture as exotic, mysterious, and aesthetically curious, carrying the whiff of far-distant lands. They have seen it mostly in fiction (*Arabian Nights* for an earlier generation, Disney's *Aladdin* for this one) and they are intrigued and somewhat titillated by that fiction.

These two types of students are but a microcosmic – and perhaps faintly comical – reflection of the status of Islamic architecture within both academia and architectural practice today. The two dominant factions in the field are indeed the aesthetes and the partisans, although neither side would agree to those appellations. Nor would either faction claim total disengagement from each other or exclusive representation of the field. The story of their formation and rise and the trajectories they have followed is another way of presenting the evolution of Islamic architecture as a field of inquiry since the first use of the term 'Islamic architecture' in the early nineteenth century. This is a fascinating story in and of itself. In the present context of a volume dedicated to the historiography of Islamic art and architectural history, tracing the genesis of these two strains in the study and practice of Islamic architecture also allows me to develop my own critical position vis-à-vis the 'unwieldy field' of Islamic art and architecture, to use a recent controversial description.¹

To begin with, the study of the architecture of the Islamic world was a post-Enlightenment European project. It started with architects, artists, and draughtsmen who travelled to the 'Orient' in the wake of the first European interventions there, in search of adventure, employment, and the thrill of fantasy associated with that mysterious land. They visited cities and sites – primarily in Spain, Turkey, the Holy Land, Egypt, and India – where they measured and illustrated buildings and ruins and published impressive catalogues that began to introduce to Europe that rich

* This is a revised version of an essay which originally appeared in the catalogue that accompanied the Aga Khan Museum's travelling exhibition on the theme of Islamic architecture: Nasser Rabbat, 'What is Islamic Architecture?' in Margaret S. Graves and Benoît Junod, eds, *Treasures of the Aga Khan Museum: Architecture in Islamic Arts*, Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2011, 17-29.

¹ Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, 'The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field', *The Art Bulletin*, 85(1), 2003, 152-84. See my critique of the recent tendency to drop the term 'Islamic art' altogether in 'What's in a Name? The New "Islamic Art" Galleries at the Met,' *Artforum* 50(8), January 2012, 75-8 [http://artforum.com/inprint/id=29813 accessed 30.04.2012].

architectural heritage which was hitherto almost totally unknown (figure 1).² But having no model with which to understand and situate the architecture they were studying, they toyed with various Eurocentric terms such as 'Saracenic', 'Mohammedan', 'Moorish', and, of course, 'Oriental', before settling on 'Islamic architecture' sometime around the end of the nineteenth century. Thus was the stage set for the development of an architectural historical discipline that cast Islamic architecture as a formal expression of Islam – which was itself not so homogeneously defined. This was to become the first contentious issue in the self-definition of the field of Islamic architecture.³ It still forms the background of every major debate within the field, or in the larger discipline of art history as it tries to accommodate its structure and epistemological contours to the age of postcolonial criticism and globalization.⁴

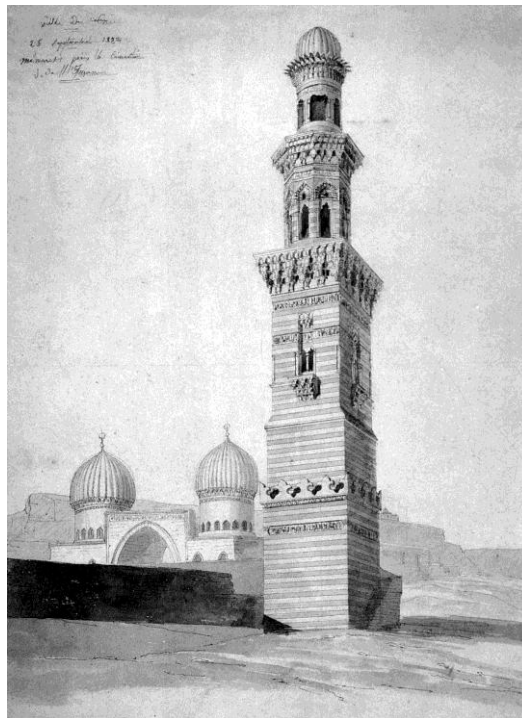


Figure 1. The Minaret of Qawsun, illustration from Pascal-Xavier Coste, *Architecture Arabe ou Monuments du Kaire mesurés et dessinés de 1818 à 1826* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1839).

² The most remarkable among these early studies are Pascal-Xavier Coste, *Architecture Arabe ou Monuments du Kaire mesurés et dessinés de 1818 à 1826*, Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1839; Girault de Prangey, *Souvenirs de Grenade et de l'Alhambra: monuments arabes et moresques de Cordoue, Séville et Grenade, dessinés et mesurés en 1832 et 1833*, Paris: Veith et Hauser, 1837; Girault de Prangey, *Essai sur l'architecture des Arabes et des Mores, en Espagne, en Sicile, et en Barbarie*, Paris: A. Hauser, 1841; Owen Jones and Jules Gourey, *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra from Drawings taken on the Spot in 1834 & 1837*, London: published by Owen Jones, 1852; Prisse d'Avennes, *L'art arabe d'après les monuments du Kaire depuis le VIIe siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe*, Paris: A. Morel, 1877.

³ A pioneering study to articulate the contours of this thesis is Louis Massignon, 'Les méthodes de réalisation artistique des peuples de l'Islam', *Syria*, 2(1), 1921, 47-53, and 2(2), 1921, 149-60. See also Jean-Charles Depaule, 'Improbables detachements: l'architecture et les arts dans la culture islamique', *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, 39, 1992, 26-41; and Robert Hillenbrand, 'Studying Islamic Architecture: Challenges and Perspectives', *Architectural History*, 46, 2003, 1-18.

⁴ See Zeynep Çelik, 'Colonialism, Orientalism, and the Canon', *The Art Bulletin*, 78(2), 1996, 202-5.

The second contentious issue in defining Islamic architecture is its time frame.⁵ Two generations ago, scholars viewed Islamic architecture as a tradition of the past that had ceased to be creative with the onset of colonialism and its two concomitant phenomena, Westernization and modernization, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Somehow, a degree of incongruity was accepted between Islamic architecture and modernism, so that when modern architecture (and by this I mean the architecture of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) arrived it immediately eclipsed Islamic architecture and took its place. Consequently, the architecture built under colonialism and after independence was not considered 'Islamic'; it was seen as either modern or culturally hybrid. Studying it was thus the domain of the modernist or the area specialist.⁶ The modernist and the area specialist concurred. But neither of them was particularly interested in the contemporary or near-contemporary architecture built in the various countries of the Islamic world: the modernist because he, and very rarely she, considered such architecture to be too derivative to warrant scholarly attention; the area specialist because the built environment was only the static background upon which the more important events that were truly worthy of study were played out.

So it was that 'Islamic architecture' became the architecture of a vast territory, today encompassing about fifty countries where a Muslim majority live or once lived, and spanning the periods of Islamic ascendance and dominance – roughly the late seventh to the early eighteenth centuries.

But these were only the geographic and historical contours of Islamic architecture. Scholars still needed to develop a set of intrinsic architectural criteria that distinguished Islamic architecture and made it recognizable as such. Those scholars, by and large, looked for common formal qualities. Some, like Georges Marçais, stayed at the impressionistic level, arguing that Islamic art and architecture ought to be readily identifiable by visual means alone.⁷ To prove his point Marçais suggested that an educated person sifting through a large number of photos of buildings from around the world could easily identify the Islamic examples among them. Others, like Ernst Grube in a short but influential essay, aimed at defining Islamic architecture as that which displays a set of architectural and spatial features, such as introspection, that are 'inherent in Islam as a cultural phenomenon'.⁸ Still others opted for a definition that can only be termed operational, or, more precisely, statistical. Although he experimented with a culturalist definition of Islamic architecture all his life, Oleg Grabar was perhaps the most eloquent of these pragmatists, for he argued in more than one place that Islamic architecture is the architecture built by Muslims, for Muslims, or in an Islamic country, or in places where Muslims have an opportunity to express their cultural independence in

⁵ Nasser Rabbat, 'Islamic Architecture as a Field of Historical Inquiry', *AD Architectural Design* (special issue *Islam+Architecture*), 74(6), 2004, 18-23.

⁶ Finbarr Barry Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art', in Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, London: Routledge, 2007, 31-53.

⁷ Georges Marçais, *L'art de l'Islam*, Paris: Larousse, 1946, 5.

⁸ Ernest J. Grube, 'What is Islamic Architecture?', in George Michell, ed., *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1978, 10-4.

architecture.⁹ This of course allowed the study of Islamic architecture to claim vast terrains, artistic traditions, styles, and periods, including the modern and contemporary ones, and sometimes to transcend religious and cultural divisions to acquire an ecumenical patina.

But, despite its acceptance of the designation 'Islamic architecture,' this all-inclusive definition was decidedly not religious. It actually shunned religion as an ontological category or a classificatory measure and instead sought unity in culturally shared approaches to aesthetics and spatial sensitivities (which may or may not have had their origins in religious injunctions) that crossed all denominational, ethnic, and national boundaries within the greater Islamic world and resulted in similar architectural expressions. This became the dominant understanding of Islamic architecture in Western academia, underscoring the rationalist, secular humanist roots of the two disciplines of Orientalism and art history, from whose margins sprang the field of Islamic art and architecture.¹⁰ It worked well for the students of the history of Islamic architecture whose attraction to the field was fundamentally academic or based on connoisseurship; that is, those for whom Islamic architecture was an object to think with or one to aesthetically appreciate, contemplate, or analyze. But it could not satisfy those for whom Islamic architecture is an object to identify with or to build upon, a living tradition with culturally distinct roots.

This inability of the definition to really address the 'Islamic' in Islamic architecture did not become an urgent issue until the 1970s, when two interrelated quests arose almost simultaneously in two separate domains. The first was that of the increasing number of students from the Islamic world studying the history of Islamic architecture in Western institutions, who saw Islamic architecture as their living heritage, uninterrupted and continuously operative up to the present day.¹¹ The second quest was that of architects practising in the Islamic world – many but not all of whom were Muslims – who rediscovered historical and vernacular Islamic architecture and sought to reinsert it into their design repertoire as a foundational body of knowledge, rather than as an occasional formal or decorative reference.¹²

⁹ Grabar refined both culturalist and statistical definitions of Islamic art and architecture for over four decades. See for instance, Oleg Grabar, 'Teaching of Islamic Architecture', *The Yale Architectural Magazine*, 1, 1963, 14-8; Oleg Grabar, 'What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?', *Art and Archaeology Research Papers*, 9, 1976, 1-3; Oleg Grabar, 'Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art', *Muqarnas*, 1, 1983, 1-14; Oleg Grabar, 'What Should One Know about Islamic Art?', *RES*, 43, 2003, 5-11.

¹⁰ Two recent surveys of the field make this clear: see Stephen Vernoit, 'Islamic Art and Architecture: An Overview of Scholarship and Collecting, c. 1850-c. 1950', in Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic art: scholars, collectors and collections 1850-1950*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000, 1-61; Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, 'The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field', *The Art Bulletin*, 85(1), 2003, 152-84.

¹¹ The cleansing of national culture of all possible Western, and therefore colonial, contamination, and its paradoxical psychological and epistemological consequences, have been insightfully analysed by Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, 1963, especially 'On National Culture', 167-99. For a discussion of the relationship between culture and ideology see Clifford Geertz, 'Ideology as a Cultural System', *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, 193-229. For a brief analysis of the role of culture in architectural education see Samer Akkash, 'The Burden of Difference: Rethinking the Role of Culture in Architectural Education', *Architectural Theory Review*, 5(1), 2000, 61-4.

¹² Gwendolyn Wright, 'Tradition in the Service of Modernity: Architecture and Urbanism in French Colonial Policy, 1900-1930', *Journal of Modern History*, 59(2), 1987, 291-316; Jane M. Jacobs, 'Tradition is

Of course, there were students of Islamic architecture in the Islamic world before 1970. In fact a sizeable number of them flourished in Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, the Soviet Islamic republics, and, to a lesser degree, India, from as early as the 1940s. Many studied in Western institutions, mostly in the European colonial capitals London and Paris, but also in Berlin, Vienna, and Moscow and Leningrad. Others studied with Western scholars living and working in Islamic countries.¹³ Unlike their Western teachers, the local scholars saw Islamic architecture, or regional variations thereof, as their heritage, and felt proud of it. But they tended to concur with the dominant opinion that it was no longer a living heritage. Thus their own work did not differ much from the work of their Western teachers and colleagues in its conceptualization of its domain as strictly historical. Their main contribution was a closer examination of the primary sources in a search for local flavours in the Islamic architecture of their own country or of their ethnic group, which paved the way for paradoxical definitions of regional and national Islamic architecture. The examples are numerous, but the most unmistakably nationalistic histories are the studies of Iranian or Turkish architecture produced mostly in Iran and Turkey by local historians or by Westerners sponsored by national authorities.¹⁴ The regionalist trend was weak, though, within the overall output of the field, and remained obscured by the preponderance of studies that treated Islamic architecture as a unified domain stretching across the Islamic world irrespective of national boundaries.

Different worldviews motivated a group of mystically inclined Western and Western-educated Muslim scholars in the 1960s and 1970s who were searching for an understanding of Islamic art and architecture from within the Islamic Sufi tradition. They adopted an all-encompassing, universalistic, and pan-Islamic stance.

(not) Modern: Deterritorializing Globalization', in Nezar AlSayyad, ed., *The End of Tradition?*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, 29-44.

¹³ Oktay Aslanapa worked with Ernst Diez and translated his book on Turkish architecture before going his own way to become one of the foremost historians of architecture in Turkey: see Oya Pancaroğlu, 'Formalism and the Academic Foundation of Turkish Art in the Early Twentieth Century', *Muqarnas*, 24, 2007, 67-78, esp. 75. Farid Shafi 'i worked with Creswell on his *Muslim Architecture of Egypt* and went on to publish several copious books on Islamic architecture in Egypt, in some of which he challenged the interpretations of his erstwhile teacher: see Farid Shafi 'i, 'The Mashhad al-Juyushi (Archeological Notes and Studies)', in C.L. Geddes *et al.*, eds, *Studies in Islamic Art and Architecture in Honour of Professor K.A.C. Creswell*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1965, 237-52. Khaled Moaz, who was one of the most accomplished students of the Syrian built environment, worked with Jean Sauvaget but, in the words of André Raymond, remained 'in his shadow': see André Raymond, 'The Traditional Arab City', in Youssef M. Choueiri, ed., *A Companion to the History of the Middle East*, Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 207-25, esp. 211.

¹⁴ In Iran, the trend started with the ultra-exclusive series by Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman, eds, *A Survey of Persian Art, from prehistoric times to the present*, 5 vols, 1st ed., London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1938-1939. Other examples include Mohssen Foroughi, *Masterpieces of Iranian Architecture*, Tehran: Society of Iranian Architects, 1980; Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, Chicago: University Press, 1973; Abbas Daneshvari, *Medieval Tomb Towers of Iran, an Iconographic Study*, Lexington, KY: Mazda, 1986; Donald N. Wilber, *The Architecture of Islamic Iran: The Ilkhanid Period*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1969. Turkish examples include Celâl Esad Arseven, *L'art Turc: depuis son origine jusqu'à nos jours*, Istanbul: Devlet basimevi, 1939; Behçet Ünsal, *Turkish Islamic Architecture in Seljuk and Ottoman Times, 1071-1923*, London: A. Tiranti, 1959; Oktay Aslanapa, *Turkish Art and Architecture*, London: Faber and Faber, 1971; Ekrem Akurgal, ed., *The Art and Architecture of Turkey*, New York: Rizzoli, 1980.

Foremost among them were the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hussein Nasr and the Swiss Muslim scholar Titus Burckhardt, who published an assortment of books that introduced Islamic art and architecture as the symbolic manifestation of a transcendental and rather monolithic and suprahistorical Islam.¹⁵ These universalists, however, did not eschew the particularistic framework that conventional Islamic architectural history inherited from its Western progenitors. On the contrary, they actually reinforced it by essentializing and 'transcendentalizing' it in a way that made it impervious to historical contextualization or criticism.

Islamic architecture in modern practice

The scene was slightly different in the world of architectural practice. The second half of the nineteenth century brought the first Western architects to various imperial Islamic capitals such as Istanbul, Cairo, Delhi, and Tehran, and a little later to smaller capitals such as Rabat, Damascus, and Bukhara.¹⁶ These architects worked mostly for local rulers or for the rising international mercantile class, which operated under the aegis of colonial powers. Some of them introduced the new styles prevalent in Europe, such as Neoclassical, Neo-Baroque, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and even modernist styles, into their designs, probably to assert their own and – more importantly – their patrons' modernity and up-to-dateness (figure 2). Others tried to reference historical architecture in their designs as a way to relate to the culture and history of the places in which they found themselves working. To that end, they borrowed architectural and decorative elements from a number of historic architectural traditions, some pre-Islamic and some Islamic, and incorporated them in a host of neo-styles: neo-Mamluk, neo-Moorish, and neo-Saracenic (or Indo-Saracenic), but also neo-Pharaonic, neo-Sasanian, and neo-Hittite. But those architects, like the scholars with whom they had some contact, saw these architectural traditions, including Islamic architecture, as traditions of the past which somehow did not make the leap to modern times. They thus had to be documented, dissected, and categorized before any of their formal or spatial elements could be incorporated into new stylistic repertoires. This process of architectural analysis followed established Western norms, primarily those of the Beaux-Arts *envois* from Rome and Greece. The resulting 'revivalist' styles were practically indistinguishable from the work of revivalist Western architects except in their 'Islamic' references (figure 3).¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987, and Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, London: World of Islam Festival, 1976.

¹⁶ The Turkish is the best studied case: see Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoğlu, 'The Birth of an Aesthetic Discourse in Ottoman Architecture', *METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture*, 8(2), 1988, 115-22; Ali Uzay Peker, 'Western Influences on the Ottoman Empire and Occidentalism in the Architecture of Istanbul', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 26(3), 2002, 139-63; Sibel Bozdoğan, 'Turkish Architecture between Ottomanism and Modernism, 1873–1931', in Anna Frangoudaki and Çağlar Keyder, eds, *Ways to Modernity in Greece and Turkey: Encounters with Europe, 1850–1950*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, 113-32.

¹⁷ See Mercedes Volait, *Architectes et Architectures de l'Égypte Moderne (1830-1950): Genèse et essor d'une expertise locale*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005, 21-79, for a review of the transformation of architecture in modern Egypt.



Figure 2. Raimondo Tommaso D'Aronco, tomb of Sheikh Zafir, Istanbul, 1905–1906. Photograph by the author.



Figure 3. 'Abd al-Razzaq Malas, headquarters of the Fijeh water company, Damascus, 1937–1942. Photograph by the author.

Some local architects were dissatisfied with borrowing and imitation. They sought to develop an architecture all their own, an architecture that represented their culture, reinvigorated after decades, and in some cases centuries, of exclusion under colonial rule. Their search came at the height of, and was linked to, their countries' struggles to gain independence from European or indeed Ottoman imperialism and to claim their place among modern nations. The emerging discourse on a living and breathing Islamic architecture, along with concurrent discourses on vernacular and regional architecture, offered these architects both an affirmation of an active, pre-colonial traditional architecture that never really withered away, and a foundation for a postcolonial national architecture that would spring out of its fertile soil.¹⁸ Especially valuable were architectural elements commonly attributed to Islamic architecture, such as the courtyard, the wind-catcher, and the pointed dome, which could embody cultural and social specificity and formal continuity. They were recovered from their historical or vernacular retreats in order to be inducted into the service of new architectural expressions of cultural identity and national unity after decolonization and independence.

¹⁸ Anthony D. King, 'Internationalism, Imperialism, Postcolonialism, Globalization: Frameworks for Vernacular Architecture', *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 13(2), 2006/2007, 64-75; Dennis Alan Mann, 'Between Traditionalism and Modernism: Approaches to a Vernacular Architecture', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 39(2), 1985, 10-16; Panayiota Pyla, 'Hassan Fathy Revisited: Postwar Discourses on Science, Development, and Vernacular Architecture', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 60(3), 2007, 28-39.

Perhaps the first to consciously and thoughtfully 'go native' was the Egyptian visionary architect Hassan Fathy (1900–89).¹⁹ His adoption of the vernacular had its ideological roots in the struggle against British colonial rule in the 1920s and 1930s and the rise of an Egyptian national identity. He presented his first experiments in the 1940s in a few resort houses for members of the Egyptian intelligentsia, and then in his project for the village of New Gournā as the embodiment of an authentic Egyptian architecture, albeit of an unlikely mix of Mamluk Cairene style and Nubian construction techniques that he admired (figure 4). The design principles he proposed were interpreted as novel expressions of indigenously developed architecture with clear environmental underpinnings and rootedness in place. But the cultural and historical references in Fathy's architecture expanded, and even shifted over time. They went from nationalist to pan-Arabist and finally to Islamic supra-nationalist, following the changing cultural identity of Egypt itself after its independence and espousal of pan-Arabism under Gamal Abdel Nasser, and then the rise of populist Islamism under Anwar al-Sadat.²⁰



Figure 4. Hassan Fathy, New Gournā village, Egypt, 1945–1948.
Photograph: Chant Avedissian/Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Fathy himself used several interpretations of his architecture in his writing from a manifestation of a primeval Egyptian model to an essentially Arab and later an Arab-Islamic one with vague universal applicability. He identified the

¹⁹ For the development of Fathy's ideas, see: Hassan Fathy, *Gournā; a tale of two villages*, Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1969; *Architecture for the Poor*, Chicago: University Press, 1976; *Qissat mashrabiyyah: masrahiyyah dhat arba 'at fusul*, Beirut: Sharikat al-Matbuat lil-Tawzi wa-al-Nashir, 1991; *Yutubia*, Beirut: Sharikat al-Matbu 'at lil-Tawzi ' wal-Nashr, 1991; Hassan Fathy, Walter Shearer and 'Abd al-Rahman Sultan, *Natural energy and vernacular architecture: principles and examples with reference to hot arid climates*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986; Hasan-Uddin Khan, ed., *Hassan Fathy*, Singapore: Concept Media, 1985; James Steele, *The Hassan Fathy Collection: A Catalogue of Visual Documents at The Aga Khan Award for Architecture*, Geneva: The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 1989; James Steele, *An Architecture for the People: The Complete Works of Hassan Fathy*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997.

²⁰ See Nasser Rabbat, 'Hassan Fathy and the Identity Debate', in Gilane Tawadros and Sarah Campbell, eds, *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, London: Institute of International Visual Art, 2003, 196–203. For a more critical analysis of Fathy's class politics see Timothy Mitchell, 'Making the Nation: The Politics of Heritage in Egypt', in Nezar AlSayyad, ed., *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism*, New York: Routledge, 2001, 212–39, esp. 213–22.

'ubiquitous' Arab courtyard house with its architectural adaptation to the harsh desert environment as the model for his own architecture. A few years later, the model became the Arab-Islamic house, and ultimately an all-encompassing Islamic conception of domestic space. References to notions of the serene and protected family life as gleaned from the analogy between the terms *sakina* ('serenity') and the triconsonantal root *sakan* ('abode'), and *harim* (womenfolk, or segregated section of the house) and the root *haram* (protected or forbidden), in addition to a more symbolic index dealing with the perception of the unique God and the images of His promised paradise, were subsequently added to the normative paradigms of Fathy's architectural model. Fathy's numerous disciples continued to use the formal language he devised, but did not build on its socioeconomic and environmental underpinnings. Instead they focused on its cultural and pan-Islamic appeal and brandished it as a kind of native response to both the blandness of Modernism and the Eurocentrism of the nascent Postmodernism, and in some cases exported it as an expressive and historicizing Islamic style.

Islamic architecture and postmodernism

The next significant historical shift in the field of Islamic architecture was the articulation of an ideology that saw 'Islam' as identity. This badly understood and still-evolving process has been promoted by at least two economically, historically, and politically dissimilar, though ultimately mutually reinforcing, phenomena. First was the re-emergence in the 1970s of various Islamic political movements in most Islamic countries, after an apparent dormancy of some thirty years. Coming on the heels of the victorious Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 and perceived as a response to the failures of the national states to stand up to foreign interference and moral decadence, Islamic political movements sought a return to purportedly more authentic foundations for the governance of the Islamic nation. Yet despite their relentless and violent attacks on what they saw as the depravity of all Western cultural imports, these political movements showed surprisingly little interest in the conceptual contours of architecture, including the religious architecture being built in the name of Islamic architecture.²¹

By contrast, the second group to wield a vision of Islam as a framer of identity, the ruling and religious elite of the Gulf region, has had a tremendous impact on the trajectory of architecture in the Islamic world in recent decades. Having lain impoverished on the edge of the desert for so long, and, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Oman, not having achieved independence until the 1960s and even 1970s, these countries had no role in the early developments of modern architecture in the Islamic world. But things began to slowly change in the wake of oil discoveries in the 1940s and, more spectacularly, after the 1970s oil price surge. With this massive cash flow, and its concomitant socioeconomic

²¹ Only a few 'Islamicist' historians of Islamic architecture can be identified: Taha al-Wali, *Al-Masajid fi-l Islam*, Beirut: Dar al- 'Ilm lil-Malayin, 1988; 'Abd al-Baqi Ibrahim, *Al-Manzur al-Islami lil Nazariyya al-Mi 'mariyya*, Cairo: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyya wa-l Mi 'mariyya, 1986; 'Abd al-Baqi Ibrahim and Hazim Muhammad Ibrahim, *Al-Manzur al-Tarikhi lil- 'Imara fi-l Mashriq al- 'Arabi*, Cairo: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyya wa-l Mi 'mariyya, 1993; Hayyan Sidawi, *Al-Islam wa Fiawiyat Tatawwur al- 'Imara al- 'Arabiyya*, Paris and Beirut: Dar al-Mutanabbi, 1992.

empowerment of the region, came the desire to expand and modernize cities and upgrade their infrastructures to serve the growing population of natives and expatriates, and to satisfy their socio-cultural needs and newly acquired tastes. The new wealth of the Gulf patrons, their deeply religious and conservative outlook, and their fervent quest for a distinct political and cultural identity in the sea of competing ideologies around them combined to create a demand for a contemporary yet visually recognizable Islamic architecture. Sincerely at times, but opportunistically at many others, architects responded by incorporating within their designs various historical elements dubbed 'traditional', 'Arabic' or 'Islamic', which they often used as basic diagrams for their plans or splashed on surfaces as ornament.²²



Figure 5. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), the Hajj Terminal, Jeddah, 1982. Photograph: Aga Khan Award for Architecture.



Figure 6. I.M. Pei, the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar, 2009. Photograph ©Anne de Henning/Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

Thus, the 1980s became the decade of readily identifiable Islamicized postmodern architecture everywhere in the Islamic world. There were the post-traditionalists who, like Hassan Fathy before them, looked for inspiration in the vernacular architecture of the region, such as the *badgir*, or wind-catcher. There were also the free, and often arbitrary, *mélanges* of diverse historical forms and patterns drawn from a wide range of Islamic styles. Somewhat more colourful is the work of those architects who dip into the exuberance of Postmodernism to produce loud formalist compositions. This trend culminated with the grand structures produced by large international firms working in the Gulf. These foreign designers re-interpreted visual symbols and historical motifs and used them in otherwise ultra-sleek designs, such as the gigantic Hajj Terminal in Jeddah by SOM (1982), inspired by the Bedouin tent (figure 5), or the Kuwait National Assembly Complex by Jørn Utzon (1982), which evokes the sail of the traditional *dhow* in a gesture not too dissimilar to Utzon's earlier iconic project in Sydney, Australia. More recently, the

²² Sharon Nagy, 'Dressing Up Downtown: Urban Development and Government Public Image in Qatar', *City & Society*, 12(1), 2000, 125-47; Khaled Adham, 'Cairo's Urban *déjà-vu*: Globalization and Colonial Fantasies', in Yasser Elsheshtawy, ed., *Planning Middle Eastern Cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope*, London: Routledge, 2004, 134-68; Khaled Adham, 'Rediscovering the Island: Doha's Urbanity from Pearls to Spectacle', in Yasser Elsheshtawy, ed., *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity, and Urban Development*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, 218-57; Hassan-Uddin Khan, 'Identity, Globalization, and the Contemporary Islamic City', in Renata Holod, Attilio Petruccioli and André Raymond, eds, *The City in the Islamic World*, Leiden: Brill, 2008, 1035-62; Yasser Elsheshtawy, 'Redrawing Boundaries: Dubai, the Emergence of a Global City', in Yasser Elsheshtawy, ed., *Planning the Middle East City: An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalizing World*, New York: Routledge, 2004, 169-99.

Qatar Islamic Museum by I.M. Pei (2009) claims an inspiration from the bold and simple domed fountain of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo as the basis of its cubic design (figure 6).

Islamic architecture and academia

The two proponents of Islamic architecture, the academic and the practice-based worlds, though aware of each other, did not come together in an academically articulated way until the founding of the Aga Khan Award for Islamic Architecture (AKAA) in 1977, which was shortly followed by the establishment of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1978. AKAA had a straightforward mission: to identify, evaluate, and award outstanding architecture in the Islamic world. But since identifying contemporary 'Islamic' architecture, let alone judging it, was a controversial issue at best, AKAA had to set up and continuously revise and modify the criteria for definition and evaluation in a conciliatory way that accommodated the various trends of thought concerned with Islamic architecture. This has meant that for the last thirty years AKAA has been a key promoter of a syncretic and expansive 'Islamic architecture' that was not limited only to traditionally recognized Islamic building types, but also included urban and landscape design, environmentally and socioeconomically sensitive projects, and conservation and rehabilitation interventions.²³

AKPIA, on the other hand, was the first academic programme exclusively devoted to the study of Islamic architecture, situated in two of the most prestigious institutions of architectural education in the world, with all the advantages of established cultures and pedagogical methods that such institutions would bring.²⁴ The siting of AKPIA itself was implicitly intended to negate the polarizing dichotomy between the discipline of architecture (derived from Western architectural history and praxis) and Islamic architecture, which is routinely relegated to its own special area within art history departments.

The foremost academic to lead that effort, and ultimately to legitimize Islamic architecture both as a field of historical inquiry and of contemporary creativity, was Oleg Grabar (1929–2011), the first Aga Khan Professor at Harvard University. His influential book, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (1973, 2nd ed. 1987), was a strongly historicizing study of Islamic art and architecture in the first three centuries Hegira and their relationship to the art of Byzantium and Sasanian Iran.²⁵ The book investigated the means by which an Islamic tradition acquired and disseminated distinct forms and meanings in conjunction with its cultural, social, and ideological contexts. This conceptual framework had a strong role in setting the tone for a whole generation of historians of Islamic art and architecture, who began to reassess the geographic, historical, religious, and cultural boundaries of their discipline and to develop its methods and theoretical contours. As such, *The*

²³ Sibel Bozdoğan, 'The Aga Khan Award for Architecture: A Philosophy of Reconciliation', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 45(3), 1992, 182-8.

²⁴ Spiro Kostof, Christian Norberg-Schulz and Mohammed Arkoun, 'Approaches to Education', in Ahmet Evlin, ed., *Architecture Education in the Islamic World*, Singapore: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1986, 1-21.

²⁵ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973, 2nd ed. 1987.

Formation of Islamic Art became the foundation upon which most historical interpretations in the field have depended until now.

But the limitations imposed by the burdensome and politically biased scholarly lineage of Islamic architecture were not seriously challenged until the 1980s. Empowered by developments in critical and postcolonial studies, especially after the publication of Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism* in 1978, students of Islamic architecture began to question the received methods and conceptual structures of their discipline and to extend their domain of inquiry, reaching back in time to points of convergence between Islamic architecture and the architecture of other cultures, and forward to the modern and contemporary scenes of revivalist efforts and inventive continuities. The notions of uniformity, introversion, and cultural and religious particularism that long dominated the study of Islamic architecture began to be truly challenged as more and more scholars turned to cultural theories in their inquiry.²⁶ Some began to pry open the intracultural spaces – that is, zones within a given society at a given time that are shared by its diverse constituent cultural groups – to critical inquiry. Thus, the contributions of the various Islamic sects and esoteric religious orders, Christian and Jewish denominations, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Hindus, and others have started to be analysed as both instrumental components of a shared architectural language and as distinct expressions that link Islamic architecture to other traditions. Others focused on the intercultural development of Islamic architecture, with its substantial connections to Late Antique, South Arabian, Mediterranean, Iranian, and Hindu-Buddhist cultures in the early periods, and European, Asian, and African cultures in recent times, although the bulk of studies is of course concentrated on links to Western architecture.²⁷

The relationship with Western architecture is indeed the main problem that Islamic architecture has still to resolve in order to acquire its rightful place as an active and contributive component of world architecture.²⁸ Until at least the 1980s, the chronology of Western architecture, from its presumed Classical origins to its triumphant culmination in modern times, constituted the living core of architectural discourse and relegated the architecture of other cultures to marginal places in its prescribed hierarchy.²⁹ Furthermore, because of its venerable legacy and

²⁶ Cf. the special issue of the journal *RES*, 43, 2003, subtitled *Islamic Arts* (in the plural).

²⁷ The list is becoming quite long. For a selection of the variety of approaches and areas, see: R.A. Jairazbhoy, 'The Taj Mahal in the Context of East and West: Study in the Comparative Method', *Journal of the Warburg Courtauld Institute*, 24, 1961, 59-88; Patrick Connor, *Oriental Architecture in the West*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1979; Gülru Necipoğlu, 'Suleyman the Magnificent and the Representation of Power in the Context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-Papal Rivalry', *The Art Bulletin*, 71(3), 1989, 401-27; Sibel Bozdoğan, 'Journey to the East: Ways of Looking at the Orient and the Question of Representation', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 41(4), 1988, 38-45.

²⁸ This was the conceptual framework advocated by Marshall Hodgson, the author of the magisterial *The Venture of Islam*, when he wrote 'We must leave behind the Westward pattern of history and the "East and West" dichotomy in studying the development of the oikoumenic configuration; and we must free our theorizing of the turns of thought which arise from assuming the Westward pattern'. See *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, Edmund Burke III, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 292.

²⁹ Gülsüm Baydar, 'Toward Postcolonial Openings: Rereading Sir Banister Fletcher's "History of Architecture"', *Assemblage*, 35, 1998, 6-17; Erika Naginski, 'Riegl, Archaeology, and the Periodization of Culture', *RES*, 40, 2001, 115-32. For a specific example of how Islamic architecture was confined to a premodern status in Dutch scholarship, see the discussion in Eric Roose, *The Architectural Representation*

institutional power, the authoritative historiography of Western architecture (usually called Architecture *tout court*) promoted, and even required, the study of other architectural traditions to be confined within clearly proscribed and exclusive times, spaces, and cultures. Islamic architecture, like many other non-Western architectural traditions (and the term itself amply illustrates the classificatory predicament of these traditions)³⁰ was thus cast as the opposite of Western architecture: conservative where Western architecture is progressive; its formal categories static, as compared to the self-evolving ones of Western architecture; and reflecting cultural imperatives rather than the creative individual subjectivity ascribed to Western architecture. But, first and foremost, Islamic architecture was seen as a tradition whose agency was collective and in which creativity in design was rarely assigned, except for the few celebrated cases such as the great Ottoman master architect Sinan (1489–1588).³¹ It was therefore an architecture that was difficult to study along the conceptual lines of Western architecture; yet no other methodological perspective was developed enough to accommodate its particular trajectory or internal cohesiveness while accounting for its regional, ethnic, or national diversity.³²

Ubi sumus?

So where do we stand today? And is there an agreement on what Islamic architecture is? Of course the answer is no. In fact, although the number of students of Islamic architecture has multiplied many times over, and many more universities in the West and the Islamic world have added chairs for the study of Islamic architecture, and although the majority of new major projects in various countries of the Islamic world require their designers to respect or adapt the principles of Islamic architecture, questions still abound in academia and in the world of practice about whether there is an Islamic architecture or not in the first place. Some of those who doubt the validity of the term 'Islamic architecture' raise the following rhetorical challenge: what is Christian about European architecture? And the ready – and correct – answer is usually, 'very little, except for the architecture of churches'. The parallel conclusion for Islamic architecture thus becomes, 'Islamic architecture is mosque architecture'.

But if we change the tense in the first question and ask, 'what *was* Christian about European architecture?' the answer is bound to be, 'a lot'. Medieval Christianity indeed heavily contributed in shaping not only faith and rituals but also various patterns of life in Europe: gender relations and family hierarchy, private and public behaviour of individuals and corporate groups, and relationships

of Islam: Muslim-Commissioned Mosque Design in the Netherlands, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009, 9-11 and notes.

³⁰ A recent challenge to this division is Dana Arnold, 'Beyond a Boundary: Towards an Architectural History of the Non-East', in Dana Arnold, Elvan Altan Ergut and Belgin Turan Özkaya, eds, *Rethinking Architectural Historiography*, London: Routledge, 2006, 229-45.

³¹ See Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, 127-52.

³² See Nasser Rabbat, 'The Pedigreed Domain of Architecture: A View from the Cultural Margin', *Perspecta*, 44, 2011, 6-11, for a critique of the way architecture is classified in both the profession and the discipline today.

between religious and profane authorities in ruling country and city. These, and other cultural, social, and political attributes, were predicated on religion, among other factors, just as they were in the Islamic world. They also had architectural manifestations in the forms and functions of church, convent, house, palace, and city; again, like the Islamic world. Things began to change first with the Renaissance but especially with the rise of Enlightenment values, not because European architecture rejected the burdensome influence of religion, but because European polity and European mores and even European epistemology broke away from Christianity.³³ Architecture predictably absorbed these cultural transformations and began to reflect the new secularism, first in consciously returning to Classical, pre-Christian forms, and later in responding to the aesthetic and civic values of the Enlightenment and then the Industrial Revolution with its accelerated technological progress.

The Islamic world, on the other hand, never experienced a total break with religion, nor did it undergo an Enlightenment or an Industrial Revolution of its own. Its experience of secular modernism was late, imported wholesale from Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, and lacked the local intellectual roots that would have ensured its full and easy adoption. In fact, the majority of thinkers in the Islamic world resisted secular modernism. Some rejected it outright, but many worked hard at adapting it through the prism of religion. And that is how it was absorbed in the local cultures, a moderated modernism stripped of many of its secular underpinnings and endowed with qualities that are acceptable to the religious inclinations of the majority of Muslims.

On the other hand, Islam came out of its encounter with modernism changed but not defeated. It has remained a major force not only in dictating the ethics and beliefs of Muslims today, but also in shaping their social relations, their individual behaviour, and their collective polity and imaginary, even if its adherents had to adapt modern means and methods. Religious motives, interpretations, and inhibitions still transpire in the Islamic world in many aspects of modern life that have gone totally secular in the West, to the point where their enactment often causes puzzlement and misunderstanding among Western observers and commentators.³⁴ This is not a value judgment; it is simply a historical fact. To understand and explain the mixed, and perhaps paradoxical, but definitely dynamic character of the cultures of the Islamic world today, it is thus necessary to take into account the ways in which religion interacts with and modifies the effect of Western, secular modernism on those cultures and vice versa. This is also how we can understand the role of the modifier 'Islamic' in framing the term 'Islamic architecture' at present.³⁵ It is not necessarily the formal or stylistic attributes that

³³ This epistemological shift affected even the way we study history so that religion's role is conceptually diminished even when it was still palpable and effective: see Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, esp. 'Making History: Problems of Method and Meaning', 19-55.

³⁴ I am reminded here of the confusion caused by the common phrase, *tawakkaltu 'ala allah* ('I put my trust in God') repeated on the recorder that was recovered from the wreckage of EgyptAir's fatal Flight 990. See Christopher S. Wren, 'The Crash of Egyptair: The Statement; Arabic Speakers Dispute Inquiry's Interpretation of Pilot's Words', *The New York Times*, 18 November 1999.

³⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, 'Muslim Character: The Essential and the Changeable', in *A Rising Edifice: Contributions Towards a Better Understanding of Architectural Excellence in the Muslim World*, Geneva: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1989, 208-12.

Islam produces, especially not those that cloak themselves in the cover of tradition and grand historical examples; it is rather the persistence of religion in defining many aspects of life in the Islamic world, either in competition or in harmony with modernity and other major socio-cultural contemporary forces.

To me then, Islamic architecture is of course the architecture of those cultures, regions, or societies that have directly or via some intermediary processes accepted Islam as an integral component of their epistemological and socio-cultural makeup.³⁶ From that perspective, the term 'Islamic architecture' is still a valid designation for architecture being built today because Islam has never ceased being that constitutive component, even though the ways in which it expresses itself have drastically changed over time and space. The actual architectural forms that those expressions take, important as they are in identifying Islamic architecture, are tangential in understanding it. It is the impact – legal, spiritual, symbolic, social, political, functional, behavioural, and yes formal – of Islam on architecture as seen and used by the people that gives that architecture its Islamic designation, even though it has always had to coexist with other powerful and effective universal phenomena, such as competing world religions and more advanced cultures in its formative stages, and modernity, secularism, capitalism, and globally networked tastes and techniques of representation today.

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³⁶ This is what a historian of religion such as Juan Eduardo Campo in *The Other Sides of Paradise: Explorations into the Religious Meanings of Domestic Space in Islam* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) tried to do, even though he focused on the religious and did not pay much attention to the syncretic product of the religion's interaction with other cultural forces.

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