

"The contention is that architects, more efficiently than intellectuals and scholars, can resist the devastating violence generated by the confrontation of religion, state and society [Din (religion), Dunya (world), Dawla (state) - the three major concepts developed in classical Arabic thought] at a greater scale than all societies and cultures in history have achieved thus far. This means that all important architectural achievements contribute either to strengthening the dominant ideology in any given historical tradition and political order, or to creating a breakthrough in the inherited, imposed system of values and beliefs." Mohammed Arkoun

Introduction

One of the fastest growing religions today, Islam is projected to be the biggest religion by 2025. With a demographic explosion and an expanding demand for religious buildings, the mosque was posited to become a new space for architectural experimentation and advancement. Yet when it comes to its contemporary architectural manifestation, a paradox reveals itself: though being bottom heavy population (more youth than elders), the mosque is subject to less innovation than the church which represents a top heavy Christianity.

In past Islamic societies, the mosque as a place of worship has always been closely assimilated with the daily life of the Muslim community. The social functions of earlier mosques were numerous and essential; and the mosque's physical integration in the urban fabric made it a place of cultural exchanges and not merely a space of worship.

Religion provided a global unified and unifying system of beliefs for all faiths and the mosque had a clear social and spiritual basis.

Following the decline of the Ottoman Empire (last protector of Islamic dynasty), the Western Colonial project imposed a new secular social and political order in the Middle East. The newly born nation-states soon after established their physical presence with the import and use of western modern aesthetics and ideology. Yet the mosque, when sponsored by the state, became a symbol of the political power, isolated and isolating, less concerned with the spiritual contemplation of the communities it was supposed to serve. The continuous and steady secularization introduced by modernity eroded the role of religion (and consequently the mosque) as a source of meaning for human existence. Unlike the encounter and assimilation of modernity in Western nations, the historical rupture in the Arab and Islamic world did not substitute the decaying of the religious beliefs with an internal meaningful alternative.

Today the loss of legitimacy and unravelling of the Party-Nation-States we witness in the Middle East, fueled by decades of Western support and interventionism, is the natural continuation of this historical phenomenon. The reactionary rise of religious extremism to fill the void (with little interest in religious intellectual thinking) is solely driven by a distorted nostalgia for a distant past. The mosque became a political sanctuary while its role as a place for debating social and religious issues had long dissipated.

In this breakdown of the system of beliefs and the present ideological confusions, the mosque as a building type stands today, to be relevant neither to Muslim tradition, nor to modern life and culture.

To affirm the claim that Islam is inherently unable to separate politics (State) and religion, however, is historically and theologically inaccurate as demonstrated by early Islamic periods. Up to the 11th Century, Humanist pluralist culture (in Science, Art, Literature, Economic systems) had flourished in the Islamic urban milieu of Iraq and Iran, where religions were understood as collection of cultures and not as separate dogmas. This 'modern' way of thinking and the wealth of knowledge it produced eventually fed into the rise of the Humanism of the Renaissance and amplified the reason of the Enlightenment in the western cultures.

Given this rich historical framework and with the ongoing conflicting visions in Muslim societies, a need to re-imagine and reinvent the mosque role and typology becomes ever more important.

The Typology

In Classical Islamic thought there are two opposing concepts that are concerned with the dissemination of religious knowledge: the first is Taqlid (the strict reproduction of orthodox teaching) and the second is Ijtihad (the personal intellectual endeavor to seek new original solutions for new problems). In the Architectural production of mosques, Taqlid had set the ground for a pure imitation of the seminal historical forms of that building type. Ijtihad, less tolerated in the dominant traditional Islamic thinking today, would instead open a space for interpretation and experimentation. The studio is to address the archetype of the mosque within Ijtihad mental framework:

No specific archetype for the mosque was ever dictated in the Islamic Religious texts. The first mosque, that of the Prophet Mohammad in Medina (KSA) in the 7th Century, is assumed to have been a simple rectangular structure, with a palm tree as shade for the worshippers who prayed in parallel lines. The main known components of the mosque (dome, minaret, mihrab, and courtyard) are not intrinsically Islamic (especially if one understands Islamic cultural production as a continuation and a mutation of other cultures and civilizations). Instead these features are arbitrary, sometimes appropriated forms that were made sacred by collective functions over time and hence can be changeable and re-interpreted based on contemporary thoughts. On another level, gender separation for instance, deeply entrenched in the architecture of the mosque (and the Islamic public space), follows a similar devolving history and hence can be challenged as well.

On the Urban level, modern and emerging cities in the Middle East offer a desolate urbanism that lacks the traditional and essential physical cohesion of the mosque to its own surrounding. The mosque today has to adapt and transform this urban dilemma by either rejecting its centrality to a given site and context or accepting its physical autonomy while achieving its extension into the communities it serves by other means.

The Program

Unlike the church, the mosque has historically demonstrated the potential to combine and switch in-between a secular and a religious function without losing its sacred qualities. From the two possible translations of the word Mosque into Arabic (*Jamee* or *Masjid*), a difference is emphasized between the Mosque as a community center (Jamee, place of gathering) and the Mosque as a purely praying facility (*Masjid*, place of prostration). Given the need to reinvent the role of the mosque in contemporary society, students will be asked to research and formulate programs that could be added to its religious function. A new hybrid and contemporary **expanded** understanding of its program should be put forward; one that redefines the mosque beyond its current limitation to liturgical functions to become more attuned to the functional needs and spiritual desires of contemporary societies.

The City

Istanbul was the capital of the last Islamic, Ottoman Empire that spread from Southern Europe to North Africa over a period of six centuries. Following its decline and eventual defeat in WWI, a new state of Turkey emerged as one of the first Muslim societies with a strong secular foundation. For almost a century religion has been rendered invisible by the secular state in its operations – in education, culture, economy etc. Parallel to the 'religious revivalism' in the region, the conservative Islamic class of Turkey – aspiring middle class - is currently becoming more visible. This has produced a shift in the political landscape that still needs to find its proper and critical religious architectural representation.

Geographically, Istanbul is split by the Bosphorous strait into two parts, onto two continents. On the European side peninsula, south of the Golden Horn, stands the hilly old Ottoman city with its majestic silhouette of domes and minarets, yet depressed by the weight of its own history. To the North and the East, the modern city (since the 1950s), is still expanding to absorb the rising middle class, while it continues to struggle to find its own urban identity.

Between the East and the West, tradition and modernity, Secularization and Islam-ization, Istanbul offers itself as an ideal ground for this architectural experiment.

Field Trip: Istanbul

A trip to Istanbul, accompanied by the Critics, will be conducted early in the semester. In addition to visiting seminal selected buildings and mosques, we will conduct a series of meeting with key figures and scholars in collaboration with Studio X, Istanbul. Multiple potential sites have been identified in the city, which will be further examined and selected from, during the trip.

Mosque Suggested Built Up Area: 7500 m² – detailed program to be supplied at a later stage

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