

SYMBOLS AND SIGNS IN ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

GHASEMZADEH, Behnam¹; FATHEBAGHALI Atefeh²; & TARVIRDINASSAB, Ali³

Abstract

Throughout history, Islamic signs and signification were recognized and appreciated by both Muslim and Non-Muslim scholars. The Islamic style of architecture is not only used in mosques, but also in other Islamic buildings and even in gardens. The architecture encompasses both secular and religious artistic styles. The aim of this study is to contextualize the concept of Islamic architecture. It seeks to make the readers appreciate the heritage of Islamic architecture, and to clarify on misconceptions about Islamic architecture. This study examines various types of Islamic architecture and conducts a semiotic analysis of these works. The study defines the meaning and scope of Islamic architecture. It highlights the qualities and characteristics that make it unique and distinctive from other forms of architecture. It looks into the meanings and characteristics of the structures and explores the decorative styles used. Further, it explores the concept of Islamic architecture and analyses the meaning of some of the signs and significations. The findings indicate that the most common styles are calligraphy, geometry and floral designs. The study also finds that Islamic architecture encompasses both secular and religious artistic styles and has been influential in designing, constructing and decorating buildings in other cultures during both the ancient times and in the present day.

Keywords: Islamic architecture, signs, symbols, signification, forms.

Data de submissão: Junho de 2013 | **Data de publicação:** Setembro de 2013.

¹BEHNAM GHASEMZADEH - Young Researchers And Elite Club, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran. Corresponding Author Email: Behnam.Ghasemzadeh@yahoo.com

² ATEFEH FATHEBAGHALI - M.A Graduated & Architectural Engineering Researcher, Islamic Azad University of Tabriz.

³ ALI TARVIRDINASSAB - M.A in history (Iran's history after Islam).

1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture is used to identify people, cultures and civilizations. It is a unique art through which societies can be identified (AHMAD, 2010). It often shapes their culture and exemplifies their image to the rest of the world. Architecture is among the greatest forms of Islamic art. Islamic architecture is a composition of architectural designs, both secular and religious, that have been developed since the establishment of the Islamic faith and which influence construction works in Muslim culture (AHMAD, 2010). Islamic architecture provides an insight into the beliefs and practices of Muslims throughout history. It adapts and responds to varied cultures and traditional practices upheld by different Islamic generations without interfering with their spirituality.

Muslim architecture is widely recognised for its unique and creative designs. The Islamic architects pegged their creativity on evoking their inner beliefs through the use of abstract forms that produced magnificent works of art. They progressively developed alternate architectural styles that used Islamic art to create unique works. For these artists and architects, the main aim of the art works was to transmit Islamic messages and not to offer aesthetic gratification to the eye.

Islamic architecture evolves with time which brings about diversification in designs. Muslim cities were a reflection of unity portrayed through the sequential arrangement of structures such as the mosque, the palace, the madrasa, and the homesteads (ARNOLD *et al.*, 1931). The symbols and signs used in Islamic buildings did not always carry a religious message or meaning. Some of the forms were unclear and unspecific in meaning. The only design that contained an easily understood message was calligraphy. The symbols used in architectural designs were either an expression of cultural or religious beliefs. Buildings underwent constant repairs and refurbishment that depended on prevailing trends. This means that sometimes the symbols used were just for aesthetic purposes.

Several historical buildings held different meanings at the time of their construction. For example, the Taj Mahal was built by Emperor Shah Jahan to commemorate the death of his third wife who passed away while giving birth to their fourteenth child (ALLEN, 1988). Back then, it was built out of grief but today it holds a

different meaning and significance to the world; that of architectural mastery of ancient architects. It is universally recognized as one of the best Islamic architectural masterpieces.

Although Islamic architecture has undergone several studies over different periods, a majority of mainstream researchers still omit it from their developmental theories on architectural designs. Most of the available literature on Islamic architecture is mainly from sympathisers rather than genuine interested parties. Briggs (1924), a scholar of architectural forms throughout history, refers to it as Muhammedan architecture. Some scholars deliberately keep mum on this topic. For example, Simpson's three volume book which is one of the pioneer books on architectural history fails to cover Muslim architecture. The book overlooks the period between the 6th and 10th centuries during which Islamic architecture was dominant.

Islamic architecture is to a large extent associated with mosques, palaces, and castles (CRESWELL, 1958). Hope (1835) provides a brief insight into Islamic architecture, but does not cover a substantial volume on the topic. Modern day publications on Islamic architecture provide a shallow and superficial coverage on the various aspects of the designs, signs and significations associated with the architecture. Kostof (1994), for example, covers Muslim architecture in only eight pages out of his eight hundred page study on architectural forms. This clearly shows how little regard researchers give to Islamic forms of architecture.

In addition, some Western scholars purport that Islamic architecture is a product of imitations from other forms of architecture and borrows heavily from Byzantine and Romanesque architecture (COOMBES, 1998). They argue that the concept of Islamic designs in architecture only served to distinguish their structures from those of other cultures. They support these claims by arguing that Muslims were reluctant to build permanent shelters due to their nomadic lifestyle. Such misconceptions often serve to trivialize the contributions of Islamic designs to mainstream architecture.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of the study is to examine various types of Islamic architecture and conduct a semiotic analysis of these works. The study defines the meaning and scope of Islamic architecture. It also looks at the purpose for which Muslim architecture was developed. It highlights the qualities and characteristics that make it unique and distinctive from other forms of architecture. Finally, it looks into the meanings and characteristics of the structures and explores the decorative styles used as well as the meaning of some of the signs and significations used.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research serves to answer several questions. First, what is the meaning of Islamic architecture? Secondly, is the Islamic form of architecture made to specifically serve a religious function? Did it contribute to mainstream forms of architecture? What are the qualities and characteristics that make it unique and distinctive from other forms of architecture? Finally, what do the symbols, signs and significations used in Islamic architecture mean?

4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

There are a number of hypotheses with regard to the use of symbols and signs in Islamic architecture. First, some of the signs used in these structures were in existence even before the commencement of the Islamic religion. Symbols such as the whirl and the zodiac signs are used up to date. Some of the most common symbols such as earth and water overlap in the secular and religious circles. The existence of these symbols pre-Islamic times creates the notion that they are not original Islamic symbols. However, it is accepted that the symbols are a human creation with a spiritual influence are a bound to borrow from the world.

The second hypothesis recognizes writing as a new theme. The main form of writing employed calligraphy which borrows a lot from geometrical designs. Contrary to popular belief, writings are not only used for ornamentation. They are also used in place of images or to elaborate on the meaning of forms used in architectural design (GULRU *et.al.*, 1995). The third hypothesis is that the low symbolic charge Muslim architecture

made them an easy target for imitation by other cultures. Due to this some of the signs and symbols found on Islamic buildings with religious meanings may appear similar to those used in non-Muslim architecture. This may give a notion that the symbols are secular when in fact they were original Islamic religious symbols.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several studies that look into Islamic architecture but only a few give a detailed and comprehensive insight into this form of artistry. The two main studies that focus expressly on symbols, signs and signification in Islamic culture are Rudi Paret (1958) and Jacques Waardenburg (1974). A more recent study by Oleg Grabar analyses several signs and symbols in Muslim architecture. These studies make a theoretical claim of the wholeness that exists in Islamic architecture. Paret (1958) restricts himself to an observatory role when it comes to deciphering the meaning of symbols in Islam. He states that the limitation of the study to a religious angle makes it more of descriptive rather than interpretative in explaining the meanings of signs and symbols.

Paret (1958) makes a distinction between primary and secondary symbols. Primary symbols are direct expression of the subject or object being symbolized while secondary symbols are intrinsic in meaning and may represent contradictory states such as life and death, or darkness and light. Under mysticism, Paret is influenced by Hellmut Ritter, a German scholar, to go beyond descriptive symbolism and interpret various symbols and signs in Islamic architecture. However, Paret does not discuss the impacts of these architectural signs and symbols on the society.

The study by Jacques Waardenburg (1974), investigates several aspects of Islamic architecture. It questions whether Islam is practiced in an ideological sense or a religious one. However, its methodology in finding appropriate answers for this question lack robustness and fails to come to a reasonable conclusion. Waardenburg (1974) ignores the visual forms of decorative styles used in Islamic architecture yet they carry a lot of meaning and symbolism. The works by Hellmut Ritter are among the most elaborative studies into Islamic architecture. He looks beyond the theological meanings of symbols used and explores the architectural mastery of Muslim architecture.

According to Grube (1978), decorations in Islamic buildings do not have a correlation to its structural mechanics, but rather they are part of the Muslim traditional practices in structural design. The decorations are used to bring out a perception of weightlessness. To achieve this, the artists used mosaics and paintings on the walls and pillars of the buildings Grube (1978). The designs used varied in nature from geometrical shapes, floral patterns, abstract shapes, minute inscriptions and calligraphy. The effects produced are usually unique and out of the ordinary. The Alhambra, constructed in Spain during the 14th century is a good example of Islamic architecture that employs multiple decorative styles.

Time	Writer(s)	Title of the research work	Resource	Research model	Review
2010	Mohamad Tajuddin & Mohamad Rasdi	Rethinking Islamic Architecture	Book	Qualitative analysis	The authors conduct a self critique of Islamic architecture. The book looks at Islamic values and how they are expressed by Islamic architecture.
2009	Spahic Omer	Islamic Architecture: Its Philosophy, Spiritual Significance and some Early Developments	Book	Qualitative analysis	This book discusses the spiritual significance of Islamic architecture. It looks at the signs and symbols used in Islamic architecture and decipher their meanings in Islam.
2008	Lucien De Guise.	Divine Inspiration: Principles of Seven Islamic Architecture	Book	Quantitative analysis	The book explores the relationship between Muslims and their beliefs, manifested in their architecture. The book argues that no essential difference exists between religious and secular art in Islam.
2006	Att Petruccioli	Understanding Islamic Architecture	Book	Qualitative analysis	The book covers the current debate among experts on Islamic architecture. It looks at the meanings from three perspectives: faith, history, and contemporary trends.
2005	Bloom Jonathan & Sheila Blair	Islamic Arts	Book	Qualitative and Quantitative analysis	A comprehensive survey Islamic art of several centuries. It highlights the similarities and differences in various works of art over different periods.
2004	John D Hoag	Islamic Architecture	Book	Qualitative analysis	The book is on the history of Islamic architecture from the 7 th to the 17 th century.
2003	Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina	Islamic Art and Architecture, 650–1250	Book	Qualitative analysis	This book provides an overview of Islamic art and architecture from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries with clear illustrations and examples.

Time	Writer(s)	Title of the research work	Resource	Research model	Review
2003	Barakat, Heba Nayel	Between Eden & Earth: Gardens Of The Islamic World	Book	Qualitative analysis	The book explores the aspect of Islamic gardens in various countries such Spain, Morocco, Syria and Egypt.
2000	Clevenot, Dominique & Gerard Degeorge	Ornament And Decoration In Islamic Architecture	Book	Qualitative analysis	It describes and illustrate some of the popular Islamic architectural masterpieces such as the Taj Mahal, Shah Mosque of Isfahan, the Dome of the Rock, and the Alhambra. The book includes an analysis of the decorations in these structures in terms of diversity, the materials, and the themes they uphold.
2000	Malek Chebel	Symbols Of Islam	Book	Qualitative analysis	The book provides a visual synthesis of Islamic symbols.
1999	Hillenbrand, Robert	World Of Art: Islamic Art And Architecture	Book	Qualitative analysis	The book highlights and explains the architectural designs used in Islam and their symbolism.
1997	Lewis, Bernard	World Of Islam, The: Faith, People, Culture	Book	Qualitative analysis	This is an introductory book to the aspects of Islamic belief, history and culture. It covers Islamic arts, architecture, and literature.
1995	George Michell	Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning	Book	The book uses both qualitative and qualitative research methods.	The book highlights and explains the architectural designs used in Islam and their symbolism.
1994	Robert Hillenbrand	Islamic Architecture	Book	Qualitative analysis	The book explores the world of the mausoleum, caravanserai, palace, and mosque. It focuses on architecture in the Middle East and North Africa from the medieval period to 1700. It covers both on religious and secular architectural designs.
2009	Porter, Yves; Gerard Degeorge	Glory Of The Sultans: Islamic Architecture In India	Book		The book discusses the heritage of mosques and monuments from the Mughal period of Indo-Pakistani history.

DISCUSSION

The most unique feature in Muslim architecture is the focus on interior decoration as opposed an exterior one (Blair & Bloom, 2003). This is mostly expressed in the interior designs of their structures. Figure 1 shows the interior design of the Mezquita in Córdoba, Spain. The decorations incorporate various designs as shown below.

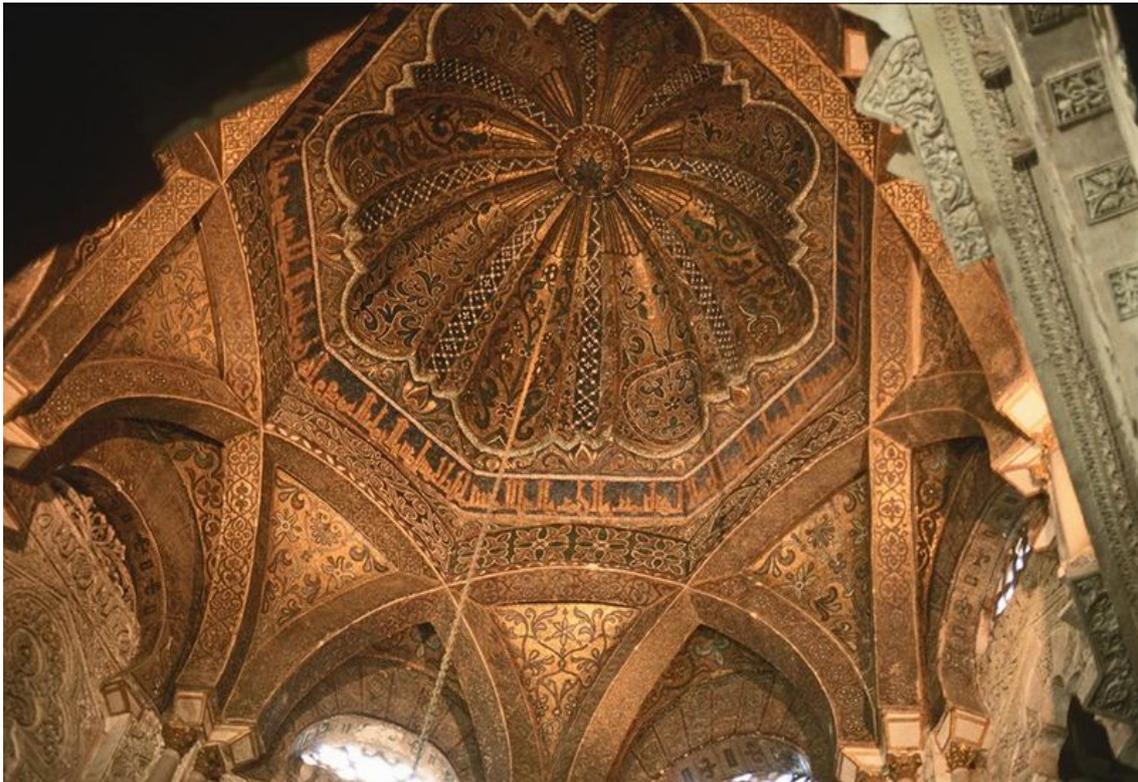


Figure 1: **The interior of the Mezquita in Córdoba, Spain**

Islamic architecture uses arches a lot in the design of entrances and wall pillars. Muslims mastered art of using the arch in construction more than any other cultural group. They inherited previous arch designs from the Romans and the Greeks and created new shapes of the arches such as the horseshoe arch and the pointed arch. Figure 2 shows its use both as a structural and decorative element in their buildings.

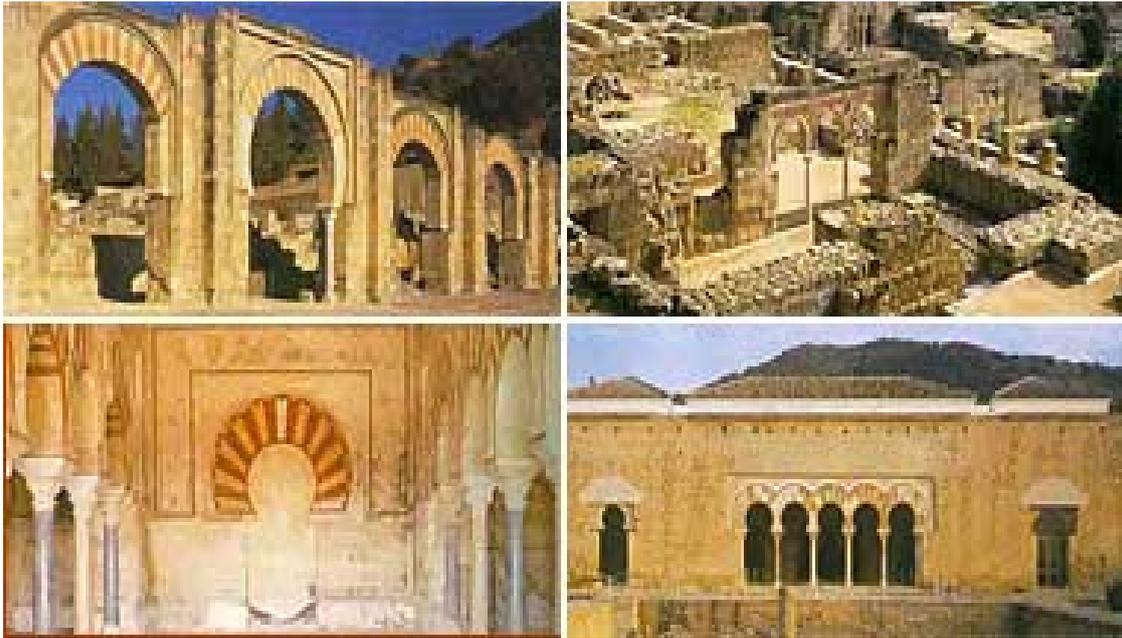


Figure 2: **Arches**

Domes are also an integral part of Islamic architectural designs. Globally recognizable buildings such as the Taj Mahal have several domes as part of their design. The design of the dome is very common in mosques. Figures 3, 4 & 5 give examples on the use of dome designs in Islamic structures.



Figure 3: **The Taj Mahal**



Figure 4: **King Saud Mosque**



Figure 5: **Herat mosque, Afghanistan**

Islamic buildings are highly decorated with different colours. Though the designs include decorations for internal and external sections of the structures, most of the decoration is reserved for the interior sections. In most cases, the only decorated parts on the exterior are the entrances and the dome. Figure 1 shows the decorated interior of a dome. The most common decorative techniques include calligraphy, geometry, animal figures, and floral designs. Geometrical designs are mostly used for religious structures to portray various Islamic symbols.

Calligraphy played an important part in Islam mainly because of its use in writing the Quran. By virtue of this role, it is regarded as one of the most important elements in Muslim art. Calligraphy is used to make superficial inscription on the walls Muslim buildings such as palaces, mosques and domestic houses. The inscriptions often carry religious messages sourced from the Quran or Mohammedan teachings. Scholars link calligraphy to the geometrical style of art that was common with Islamic decorations. The symbols are often inscribed on the main sections of the building whether they are visible to many people. Repetition is often used to produce a pattern on the wall.



Figure 6: Calligraphy

Another architectural element in Islamic architecture is the use of geometrical patterns. The patterns vary in complexity from simple to highly sophisticated designs. This mode of decoration relies heavily on the art of repetition and symmetry to generate patterns. The architects skilfully integrate geometrical shapes to produce unique patterns and symbols used in buildings (See Figure 7 & 9). Geometrical patterns facilitate connectivity between different sections of a building. They also add an aesthetic value to the structure. Geometry is also believed to be the source of calligraphy patterns (VERNOIT, 2000).

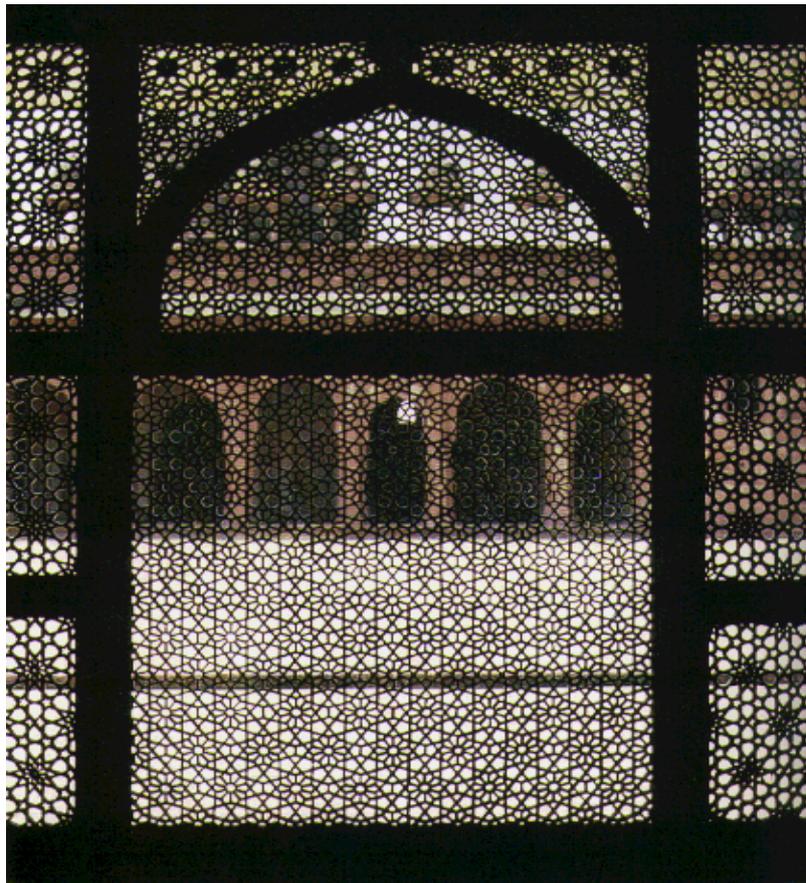


Figure 7: **Geometric design**⁴

Floral patterns are used to represent nature. Muslim artists use flower and tree motifs to decorate clothing, buildings and other items. In ancient India for example, artists took inspiration from floral designs that originated from Europe and Persia (HAVELL, 1913). Figure 9 shows a floral pattern used on a floor. These designs are often carved on white marble in alternating patterns or on precious stones. The arabesque

⁴ Source: Blair and Bloom: "The Art and Architecture of Islam", p. 273

(Figure 9), an ornament designed based on geometrical vegetal shapes, shows the dynamism that can exist in floral patterns (Hillenbrand, 2003). The arabesque displays how lines can be used to define space and to achieve complex designs.



Figure 9: **Floral pattern**



Figure 8: **Mosaic design-Arabesque**

Islam opposes the production of art works and architectural designs that depict figures of animals or human beings. According to Islam, all living creatures with the ability of locomotion fall in the domain of God and should not be replicated in any form such as art (AKKACH, 2005). However, there are a number of figural art works in the Islamic world but they are mostly limited to secular buildings and objects. Sculptures that are decorated with figures are not a common sight in Islam.

6. CONCLUSION

Architecture is among the greatest forms of Islamic art. Islamic signs, symbols and signification are recognized and appreciated by both Muslim and Non-Muslims all over the world. The Islamic style of architecture is not only used in mosques, but also in other Islamic buildings and even in gardens. It is used in both secular and religious artistic styles and has had an influence in the design, construction and decoration of buildings in other cultures. The most common decorative styles in architecture are calligraphy, geometry and floral designs. Islamic architects pegged their creativity on evoking their inner beliefs through the use of abstract forms that produced magnificent works of art (JAIRAZBHOY, 1972). They progressively developed alternate architectural styles that used Islamic art to create unique works. For these artists and architects, the main aim of the art works was to transmit Islamic messages. Islamic architecture provides an insight into the beliefs and practices of Muslims throughout history. It adapts and responds to varied cultures and traditional practices upheld by different Islamic generations (RABBAT, 2004). Its ability to evolve over time brings about diverse designs.

Muslim cities were a reflection of unity portrayed through the sequential arrangement of structures such as the mosque, the palace, the madrassa, and the homesteads. The symbols and signs used in Islamic buildings did not always carry a religious message or meaning. Some of the forms were unclear and unspecific in meaning. The only design that contained a clear message was calligraphy. Generally Islamic architecture is not fully appreciated by many mainstream researchers who continue to omit it when creating their developmental theories on architectural designs. In some cases, some scholars deliberately keep mum on the topic. Most of the available literature on Islamic architecture comes mainly from sympathisers and not genuine interested parties.

Islamic architecture is an art that uses decorative techniques in a unique manner to produce magnificent structures. The fact that buildings to be decorated are not limited to any single form of decorative style means that artists can explore their creativity to the fullest. Islamic architecture shows the high degree of complexity in architecture that Muslims achieved over the years. Whether it is in the construction of a palace, mosque or house, Islamic architects designed their buildings in accordance to the teachings of Islam. Some of the signs and symbols used today in the secular world are borrowed from Islamic architecture. A lot of gratitude should be shown towards the Muslim architects without whom some of the monuments that exist today would not be there.

REFERENCES

- AḤMAD, H. (2010) *Hassan Fathy and Continuity in Islamic Architecture: The Birth of a New Modern*. The American University in Cairo Press.
- ARNOLD, T. *et al.* (1931). *The Legacy of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 155-179.
- AKKACH, S. (2005). *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- ALLEN, T. (1988). *Five Essays in Islamic Architecture: Arabesque and the Bevelled Style*. Sebastopol, California: Solipsist Press.
- BLAIR, S. S., & BLOOM, J. M. (2003). The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field," *The Art Bulletin* 152-84.
- BHABHA, H. (2007). *Architecture and Thought, Intervention Architecture: Building for Change*. New York: I.B. Tauris.
- BURTON-PAGE, J. & MICHELL, G. (2008). Indian Islamic Architecture: Forms and Typologies, Sites and Monuments. *Journal of Islamic Studies*. 20 (3): 461-462.
- CRESWELL K.A.C. (1958). *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*. Penguin Books, London.
- COOMBES, A, (1998). Inventing the 'Postcolonial:' Hybridity and Constituency in Contemporary Curating," in Donald Preziosi,ed. *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FLETCHER, B (1961), *A History of Architecture: On the Comparative Method*. The Athlone Press, London, 17th edition.
- FLOOD, B. F. (2007). *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.

- GRUBE, E. J. (1978). "What is Islamic Architecture," in: ed. G. Michell, *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*. London.
- GULRU, N. et.al. (1995). *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture*. Geny Research Institute.
- HAVELL, E. B. (1913). *Indian Architecture: Its Psychology, Structure and History. From the First Muhammadan Invasion to the Present Day*. London: J. Murray.
- HILL, D. (1993). *Islamic Science and Engineering*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- HILLENBRAND, R. (2003). *Studying Islamic Architecture: Challenges and Perspectives. Architectural History*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- IRWIN, R. (1850-1950). "Louis Massignon and the esoteric interpretation of Islamic art," in S.Vernoit, ed. *Discovering Islamic art: scholars, collectors and collections 1850- 1950*.
- JAIRAZBHOY, R. A. (1972). *An Outline of Islamic Architecture*. Bombay/London /New York: Asia Publishing House. Meen, V. B. and Tushingam. Reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- KOSTOF, S. (1994), *A History of World Architecture*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- KOSTOF, S., NORBERG-SCHULZ, C., ARKOUN, M. (1986). "Approaches to Education," in Ahmet Evin, ed. *Architecture Education in the Islamic World* (Aga Khan Award for Architecture).
- LETHABY, W.R. (1904). *Medieval and Co*. London, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, vol.4.
- NASR, S. H. (1987). *The principle of Unity and the Sacred Architecture of Islam: Islamic Art and Spirituality*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- NECIPOGLU, G. (1995). *The Topkapi scroll : geometry and ornament in Islamic architecture*. Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities.

PARET, R. (1958). *Symbolik des Islam*. Stuttgart.

RABBAT, N. (2003). *The Dialogic Dimension in Umayyad Art*.

RABBAT, N. (2004). *Islamic Architecture as a Field of Historical Inquiry, AD Architectural Design*. Special Issue *Islam+Architecture*.

RICHMOND, E. T. (1926). *Moslem Architecture 623-1516: Some Causes and Consequences*. London: The Royal Asiatic Society.

RIVOIRA, G. T. (1914). *Moslem Architecture: Its Origins and Development*. London-Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press/H. Milford.

VERNOIT, S. (2000). "Islamic Art and Architecture: An Overview of Scholarship and Collecting, c. 1850-c. 1950," in Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic art: scholars, collectors and collections 1850-1950*. London: I. B. Tauris.

JACQUES, W. (1974). *Islam Studied as a Symbol and Signification System*.