



EXAMINING THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF AL JABBAR GRAND MOSQUE IN BANDUNG

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the formal and symbolic aesthetic meaning of the Al Jabbar Grand Mosque, a new mosque in Bandung, Indonesia, designed by Ridwan Kamil. Like Ridwan Kamil's previous works, the Al Jabbar mosque in Bandung has a contemporary design. The general concept of the architect in designing this mosque has been published in the mass media, and the public already knows the design idea of the mosque. However, there are still features within the mosque that need to be described and analyzed so that the general public can understand the architect's intention. This paper proposes answers through interpretation methods with a descriptive analysis approach to understand the symbolic meaning of the new features of the mosque. The symbolic aesthetic used in the analysis uses symbolic aesthetics from the culture of the Sundanese people, one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia, which is geographically the cultural background where the mosque was built. The analysis found that the meaning the mosque forms, apart from having a bond of meaning with the mosque, also has a bond of meaning with the local culture. The architect made it differently with the spirit of novelty to enrich Islamic architecture and design treasures.

KEYWORDS:

Symbolic Aesthetic; Symbolic Meaning; Contemporary Mosque Architecture; Al Jabbar Mosque Bandung

INTRODUCTION

Despite its utilitarian purpose, architecture often functions as a reflection of the society from which it originates. As a sacred prayer space for Muslims, the mosque has undergone transformative changes in its design and symbolism over the years, echoing the evolution of cultural, religious, and societal paradigms. The contemporary mosque is a prime example of architectural expression that bridges spirituality and modernity in the modern world, where tradition intersects with innovation. This article embarks on a journey to unravel the intricate symbolism woven into the fabric of these contemporary mosques, investigating how they harmoniously integrate Islamic architecture's timeless principles with today's demands.

The presence of a new mosque in Bandung, Al Jabbar Grand Mosque (Indonesian: Masjid Raya Al Jabbar, MRAJ), has received an extraordinary response from the media and the public. The mosque soon became a new religious tourist destination [1]. The mosque, built on the retention lake's eastern shores, was built on an area of 25,997 hectares in Gedebage Bandung. This area was developed to become a new Central Business District in Bandung, the capital of West Java Province (Figure 1).

The mosque has a capacity of about 30,000 people, with 10,000 people in the praying hall and

20,000 in the plaza area [2]. In this mosque, there are 27 doors symbolizing 27 regencies and cities throughout West Java, which are symbolized by the batik design of each city and regency [3]. This mosque was built to be a provincial-level mosque representing the province of West Java. Al Jabbar Grand Mosque was designed by Ridwan Kamil when he was the Mayor of the City of Bandung.

According to the architect himself, the word Al Jabbar itself is taken from three sources; the first is from one of the names of God, which means Almighty; the second is from the name of a branch of mathematics, namely Aljabar (English: algebra) which the formula is used in the structural design of this mosque and the third is taken from the abbreviation of the name of the province of West Java (Indonesian language: Jabar from Jawa Barat) [3], [4]. In the area below the mosque, a digital museum contains travel material of Islamic civilization in Indonesia, especially West Java [3].

Ridwan Kamil proposed the design to the governor at the time, Ahmad Heryawan, and it was accepted. The construction of this mosque began in 2017 during Governor Ahmad Heryawan's tenure and was stopped due to funding constraints. Ridwan Kamil, the mosque's architect who later became governor, completed it and officially opened it at the end of 2022. The mosque was built, owned and operated by the

West Java Provincial government.

Before designing this mosque, Ridwan Kamil had designed many other mosques spread across various cities in Indonesia and abroad, apart from his other architectural works, such as high-rise office buildings and museums. The mosques designed by Ridwan Kamil are generally contemporary and different from conventional mosques, influenced by the Middle Eastern mosque style with domes as their trademark.

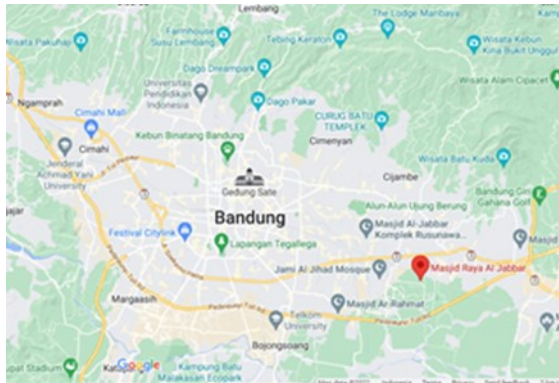


Figure 1. Map of The City of Bandung. The red dot is the location of Al Jabbar Grand Mosque [source google.com/maps]



Figure 2. Aerial View of Masjid Raya Al Jabbar [source Akcdn.detik.com]

As shown in Figure 2, Al Jabbar Grand Mosque (MRAJ) consists of a main building for prayer and four minarets at the four corners of the mosque. The main building is formed from four curved walls in the middle, forming a roof upwards. On each wall which is also the roof, there is an arrangement of windows composed in a certain number, which are getting less and less upward but in increasing size.

The four minarets (towers) are located on the retention lake, off the main building. The shape of the minaret looks like a pointed pillar, and there doesn't appear to be any space at the top, in contrast to the conventional mosque minarets. There are stairs and a wide plaza at the front of the mosque that can be used for prayers when the inside is full. There is a covered corridor with an arched roof on the plaza side. From this plaza, two bridges connect the mosque to the

mainland, between which a garden is composed of small circles resembling flower petals on the edge of the land.

This research aims to explore the symbolic meaning of the architecture of Al Jabbar Grand Mosque. The choice of this case study is because this mosque is intended as a provincial-level mosque, in this case, the province of West Java. Thus, in government and culturally, it represents the Muslim community of West Java.

This paper focuses on efforts to understand the symbolic aspects of the shape and composition of the forms that exist in mosques. The symbolic meaning that will be used to explore the forms in this mosque refers to the meaning of symbolic forms in mosques in general and to the cultural aesthetics of the local community where the mosque is located. Traditionally, West Java Province is the area where the Sundanese live. Under these conditions, the cultural background that will be used to study the meaning of the architectural form of the mosque is the aesthetics of traditional Sundanese culture.

By revealing the meaning behind the shape and composition of the forms in this mosque, it is hoped that the public will be able to appreciate the architect's efforts in creating a place of worship with a contemporary design. Not only admiring the beauty of the mosque's design but also understanding its meaning.

Articles about mosques are, of course, very numerous. For this paper's theme, which focuses on the symbolic interpretation of mosques, only some are chosen to represent the discussion of mosques from a symbolic aspect.

The basis for the discussion of this paper is the description by William White [5] that architecture as a visual form has a meaning or interpretation. The process of understanding a work of architecture is more or less the same as the process of reading, that architecture can be understood by analogy with language. The elements in an architectural work can be understood as a code or the architect's intention in conveying their design concept.

Jale Nejdert Erzen [6] analyzed the mosque using four symbol types. First, the most common and found in all mosques throughout history is a symbol that refers to or represents the meaning of "heavenly". This symbol is based on the general description in society regarding the condition or condition of an ideal place that refers to heaven. All mosque designs—both architectural and interior—strive to evoke a setting that refers to this heavenly idea. As a result, the mosque must be a perfect setting where all tensions, both inside and outside, are brought to a state of harmony and balance. The second symbol, the mosque, is a "heavenly theater". This is closely related to the main function of the mosque, namely, as a place for congregational prayers. In prayer services, all congregations must pay attention to and follow the movements of the imam who leads the prayer. Thus, the inside of the mosque is a space that is empty of

anything because it is a space for prayer activities which are carried out through body movements in prostration and carried out together. From an empty room to a space for prayer activities, this transforms the mosque's interior into a space for ritual performances.

The third symbol relates to urban planning, namely the mosque as a monumental building in a city as an urban sculpture. The size of the large and magnificent building then comes to be one of the city landmarks that gives a distinctive mark to a city. The fourth symbol is the "cosmic spiral", which refers to structures, shapes, and decorations in the Islamic world related to the medieval understanding of space and time. To understand further the differences in the Al Jabbar grand mosque, it is also necessary to make a comparative study with conventional mosque models or those that use Middle Eastern styles.

This Erzen's exposure will be elaborated with interpretations based on aesthetic meanings in local Sundanese culture and/or Indonesia. Apart from having global architectural elements, especially those representing the Islamic world, the architectural design of the mosque also has local aesthetic elements, as stated by Sara Behnamian et al. [7].

METHODS

As William White [5] mentions, using metaphors and other symbols and interpretations in architecture is common. Islamic architecture is replete with numerous examples of structures whose meaning is partially dictated by symbols or representations, much like Western architecture and architectural discourse. To understand the meaning of the shape of the Al Jabbar mosque using the interpretation method of Robert Stecker [8] with a local context approach, namely the symbolic aesthetics of the culture of the people of West Java, especially related to worship buildings such as mosques [9]. Interpretation might take the shape of a symbolic meaning, which describes the mental associations and pictures brought about by an item [10]. The subject matter of symbolic aesthetics is the appreciation of the associational meanings that appear as visual objects in the environment that give people pleasure. That is the main effort of creating delightful products, interiors, architecture, landscape, and townscape [11].

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As outlined at the beginning, this paper focuses on efforts to reveal the symbolic meaning of the form elements present in mosques, namely the mosque building itself and the elements of form or composition of forms in the interior of the prayer hall.

MOSQUE BUILDING: DOME AS A HEAVENLY SYMBOL

Although not a ritual requirement like the mihrab, the dome in mosque architecture is seen as having an important meaning in terms of symbolic meaning. According to Weisbin [12], the dome in the mosque is considered a symbolic representation of

heaven. To get closer to the symbolic meaning of heaven, the dome gets special treatment which is generally decorated with geometric arabesque ornament. For Weisbin [12], the dome is a more detailed form of a symbol of heaven, while Erzen says that the mosque itself symbolizes heaven [6].

Now let us see the shape of the Al Jabbar Grand Mosque building, which resembles the shape of a dome, which is a hemispherical shape (Figure 3). The existence of rows of windows on the dome's surface makes the impression that the shape of the dome cannot be immediately recognized.



Figure 3. The diamond-shaped glass dome of the mosque is partly covered by a canopy roof [1]

When looking for the source of the dome shape, we will easily find it from the roof of conventional mosque models (see Figure 4). As we know, conventional mosques generally have domes on their roofs. As a result, of course, the size of the dome must be large because it must be able to accommodate worshipers. The use of domes as a mosque building, apart from providing a very strong characteristic and element of novelty, also allows this very large mosque to become monumental and will become one of the new icons of the city of Bandung. When the dome becomes the shape of the mosque building itself, then the mosque has a heavenly meaning, as stated by Erzen [6]. The dome is a symbol of heaven, as mentioned by Weisbin [12]. In this mosque, the two symbols - the mosque and the dome as symbols of heaven - become a unified whole.

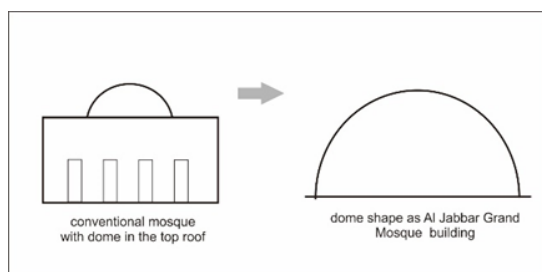


Figure 4. The Dome shape of the MRAJ building is a symbol of heavenly

MIHRAB: DIRECTION TO QIBLA, WORSHIP TO ALLAH

The direction of mosque buildings worldwide is towards the Qibla in Mecca. In Indonesia, mosques generally face west with a slope of several degrees to the northwest, according to the location of the Haram mosque in Mecca, where the Qibla is located. Likewise, the MRAJ building and its mihrab are in the middle of the western wall of the mosque's room. The location of this Mihrab is in the middle of the west wall, flanked by a row of doors. The doors at the front are part of the range of doors spread across the four MRAJ walls. As mentioned above, there are 27 doors on the four walls of the MRAJ, representing the 27 regencies and cities in West Java Province. Each door representing a district or city is decorated with batik from that region.

As the place where the imam leads the prayer, the mihrab design is specially made and stands out in front of the prayer room. The main shape of the mihrab is the same as the door's shape, namely a triangle with one corner facing up. Forming a triangle is not a straight line but a curved line. The size of the triangle is enlarged with a different design from the door design to clarify its function as a mihrab (Figure 5). The question arises: why is the shape of a triangle with one side facing up?

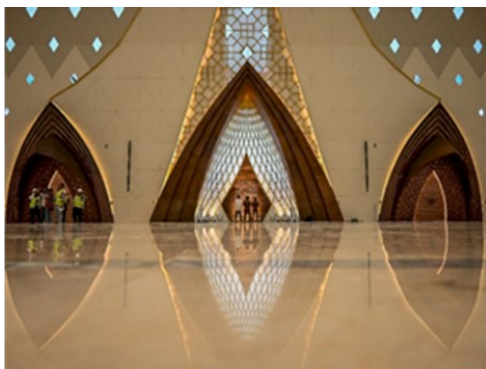


Figure 5. The Mihrab is triangular with one point pointed upwards [source Indozone.com]

To understand the symbolic meaning of the triangular shape associated with a place of worship, you can use local cultural knowledge of where the mosque is located, namely Indonesian culture in general and Sundanese culture in particular. J. Jamaludin and Purnama Salura [9] explained that in the concept of Sundanese aesthetics, The three basic shapes, namely square, triangle, and circle, have the meaning of perfection. A triangle is interpreted as a place of perfection or a holy place. In Sundanese proverbs, there is the term *bale nyuncung* (sharp roof), a tropical pyramid roof also found in various places in Indonesia, especially in Java [13]. The roof of the pyramid consists of four triangles connected from four sides. This triangular shape comes from mountains in nature, traditionally used as sacred and sacred places, including in the form of tombs [14].

According to Claire Holt [15], mountain peaks in Indonesia are believed to be the abode of ancestral

spirits and gods. In addition, the mountain is also considered to be the binder of the universe and a symbol of the highest power [16]. Traditional mosque architecture in Indonesia generally has three roofs stacked three as a symbol of the shape of a mountain [9]. Figure 6 shows the transformation of the triangular shape from the mountain to the traditional mosque roof and then the MRAJ mihrab.

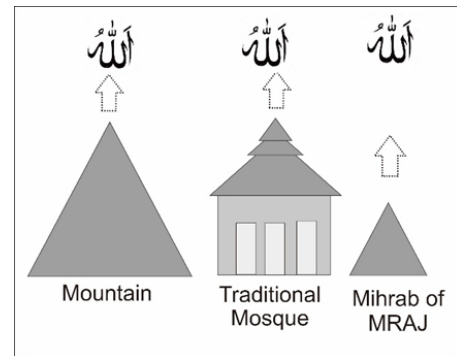


Figure 6. The Mihrab is triangular with one point pointed upwards [the author]

Mountains are considered a bridge between the upper world (God) and the underworld (humans and other creatures). Thus, holy or sacred places, including ancient sites, are generally built on high ground or made to imitate the shape of mountains as a transcendental bridge between the underworld and the upper world. This view relatively did not change when Islam entered because the aspect of the view of God remained the same, namely, an Almighty substance that is far higher and far more powerful than humans and overall life in the world.

The delineation of the direction or ultimate goal of praying to Allah SWT in the MRAJ prayer room is not finished by simply making a triangular mihrab. In Figure 7, it can be seen that there is a vertical line from the top of the mihrab in the form of decorative glass with Arabesque ornaments, which then curves towards the center of the ceiling, which has Allah's calligraphy.



Figure 7. From the top of the mihrab, a white line with Arabic ornaments flows towards the calligraphy of Allah in the middle of the prayer room [the author]

The central part of a conventional mosque is generally in the shape of a dome [12], while the MRAJ is in the form of a dangling box with Allah's calligraphy written in Arabic letters. Lines can be interpreted as directions that clearly show prayer's meaning, namely worshipping Allah. Even though the direction of prayer of all Muslims around the world is towards the Qibla of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the worship of Muslims is only to Allah (Figure 8). Qibla is just a guide so that all Muslims go in the same direction in prayer. From a symbolic reading, this seems very clear. Even though the direction of prayer is towards the Kaaba in Mecca, Muslims worship Allah the Most Merciful. Reading from aesthetic principles, the location of Allah's calligraphy in the upper center creates radial symmetry, a symmetry centered towards the center. Radial symmetry creates a sense of harmony and order. This design seems logical and reasonable, and Allah is the center of everything. Allah is above all and protects all.

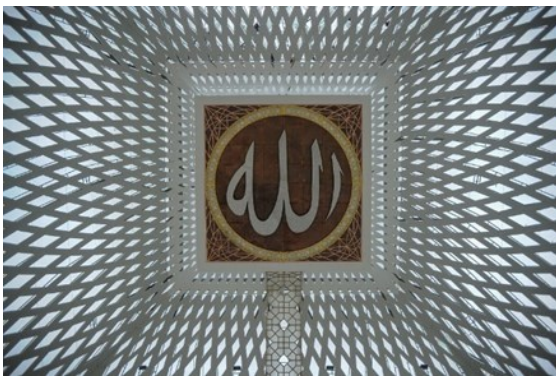


Figure 8. Allah's calligraphy in the center above the interior of the mosque [2]

WINDOWS: KITE AND DIAMOND SHAPE, AN ETERNAL FAITH

On the outside, the Great Al Jabbar Mosque has openings in the form of diamond-shaped glass windows arranged in groups of window openings resembling kites under the canopy (Figure 9). The presence of diamond-shaped glass and kite windows looks dominant, which means they are an important part of the architect's design. Thus, it is necessary to look for its meaning contextually, connected with the mosque as a place of worship.

The array of windows, like kites of various sizes, can be read symbolically about kites. The symbolic meaning of a kite can vary across different cultures and contexts, but let's take some common interpretations. Kites are often associated with a sense of freedom and liberation as they soar high in the sky, unrestricted by earthly constraints. Flying a kite can represent the pursuit of personal freedom or the release of burdens and limitations. In some spiritual traditions, kites are seen as a symbol of connecting with higher realms or spiritual transcendence. Flying a kite can be interpreted as an expression of reaching out to the divine or expanding one's consciousness. Kites are often associated with childhood and playfulness,

representing the imaginative and creative spirit. Flying a kite can symbolize tapping into one's creativity, embracing a sense of wonder, and exploring new possibilities [17].

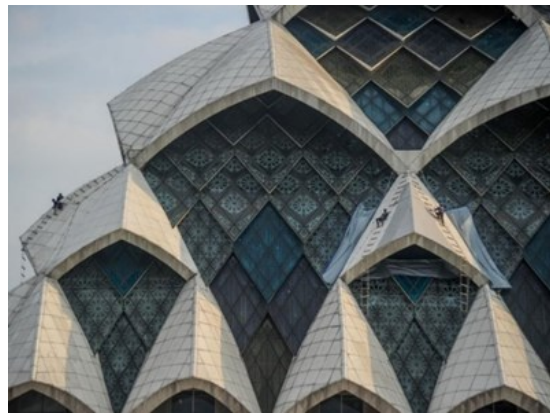


Figure 9. The canopy roof covering part of the dome is composed of diamond-shaped decorative glass modules, creating a kite-shaped window [2]

The shape of the diamond can be searched for its symbolic meaning, especially those related to religious or spiritual elements. In some spiritual traditions, diamonds are believed to help facilitate spiritual awakening and evolution and represent spiritual enlightenment and divine energy [18]. Diamonds also symbolize or are associated with purity and innocence and are used in many cultures to symbolize the unblemished, untarnished, and uncorrupted aspects of the human spirit [19]. Diamonds are the hardest substance on earth, and as such, they symbolize endurance, resilience, and strength. Diamonds are known for their brilliance and clarity, and as such, they symbolize enlightenment, awareness, and truth. Diamonds are millions of years old and have endured the test of time, making them a symbol of eternity, continuity, and immortality.

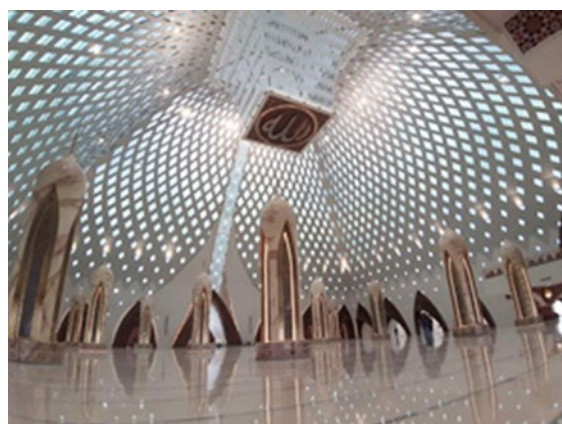


Figure 10. Arched walls decorated with diamond-shaped openings [source jpnn.com]

CONCLUSION

The design of a mosque is not merely an aesthetic endeavor but a spiritual one, aiming to create an atmosphere conducive to worship, reflection, and communal engagement. Traditional mosques have been characterized by domes, minarets, and intricate geometric patterns that signify unity, transcendence, and divine order. However, as societies have evolved and cities have transformed, so have the needs and aspirations of their inhabitants. Contemporary mosques, often emerging as architectural masterpieces, are now responsible for encapsulating Islam's essence while resonating with the urban landscape they inhabit.

One fundamental aspect of contemporary mosque architecture is its fusion of tradition and innovation. Architects today reinterpret historical motifs, materials, and forms, infusing them with cutting-edge technology and sustainable practices. These modern mosques become living embodiments of a faith deeply rooted in history but firmly poised to embrace the future. Contemporary mosques underscore Islam's inherent connection with environmental stewardship by employing sustainable building materials, energy-efficient design, and advanced construction techniques.

The symbolism of contemporary mosques extends beyond the physical realm, encompassing Islam's spiritual and cultural dimensions. Through their architecture, these spaces offer narratives of inclusivity, community, and interfaith dialogue. Many modern mosques prioritize open and inviting designs, facilitating interaction and exchange among Muslims and visitors from diverse backgrounds. By breaking down physical and metaphorical barriers, these mosques symbolize the universal values of Islam, emphasizing hospitality, tolerance, and shared humanity.

In addition to their communal function, contemporary mosques explore the individual's spiritual journey. Modern architects delve into the interplay of light, space, and acoustics to create a transcendental experience for worshipers. Using natural light, innovative interior layouts and acoustic design principles amplify the holy atmosphere, allowing individuals to connect with the divine personally. These design choices reflect the spirituality embedded within Islamic teachings, where self-reflection and communion with the divine are paramount.

Furthermore, contemporary mosque architecture often resonates with the sociopolitical contexts of their surroundings. Architects navigate the delicate balance between asserting a distinct Islamic identity and fostering harmonious coexistence in regions marked by cultural diversity or historical tensions. These mosques convey unity, resilience, and cultural pride through thoughtful design. They stand as symbols of a thriving, adaptable, yet unwavering faith in its core values.

Contemporary mosques are more than just architectural marvels; they are living symbols that encapsulate the modern Muslim world's spiritual, cultural, and societal aspirations. As they blend tradition and innovation, sustainability and spirituality, these mosques redefine what it means to create sacred spaces in an ever-changing global landscape.

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