



## ISLAM, MODERN SOCIETY AND ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE: THE THOUGHTS OF HIJJAS KASTURI

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### ABSTRACT

Hijjas Kasturi is probably the most well-known Malay Muslim architect in Malaysia and in Asia. He has been in practice for 50 years and is known for many of his iconic building designs throughout Malaysia and the Muslim world. This paper attempts to provide important insights into Hijjas' ideas of Islam as a religion and its practice in the modern world. With this insight, we can better place his design approach in Islamic architecture as a product of both his modernist ideology bred from his education background and his rootedness into the Malay Muslim social and political contexts. Hijjas has been consistent in his design approach in that he had never given in to the client's request for a more traditional approach which usually means the revivalistic or eclectic design direction. In an era when the Muslim world is struggling between the extremism of traditional Islam and modern life in the social and political arena, it is important to look at design as part and parcel of not only an art of building but also a holistic product of the reinterpretation of the religion in a new and progressive light. This research provides Hijjas own thoughts through an interview of which excerpts from that session are used in this paper.

### KEYWORDS:

Islamic architecture; modernism; Malaysia

### INTRODUCTION

The main intention of this paper is to present the thoughts of the famous Malay architect, Hijjas Kasturi, on the subject of Islam, modern society and Islamic architecture. The ideas of architects on architecture have almost always been a by-product of the architect's own personal view of society and spirituality. For the first time ever, this research unveil the findings about his own personal views about Islam and modern society that has been a subject of much controversial and heated debate in the mass media and the social network in Malaysia as well as in the world. A framework of Islamic architecture must precede a framework of thought about how Islam as a religion can be lived progressively in a modern society and how then the traditional architectural heritage of the past can be reexamined in this contemporary light to produce design that are both meaningful, functional and reflective of the true message of the religion uncluttered by cultural overlays of societal perception.

Most of the writings on Hijjas Kasturi places him as a modernist, expressionist and as a regionalist [1] [2]. There is hardly find literature that discusses his views on Islam and society although there have been some comments he may have made in reference to criticism of some mosque or Islamic buildings in

Malaysia. Paul McGillick [3] in his many interviews and writings with and about Hijjas also fail to unearth this sensitive issue of the religion of his own profession. Even the vast compilations of mosques by Rennata Holod and Hasan-Uddin Khan [4] fail to turn up anything of Hijjas but documents five mosques from Malaysia by Ivor Shipley, Jimmy Lim, Hajeedar and the Malayan Architect Co-Partnership. It is therefore important to ascertain this information in order to structure architectural thoughts in buildings commissioned by Islamic authorities with respect to structures related to certain aspects of the Islamic culture and ritualistic requirement.

### OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

An interview was held at UCSI University, Cheras on the 24th of March 2016. The researcher asked the following four questions to Hijjas Kasturi:

First Question: Do you think the present education methods of Muslims will help them accommodate themselves to the Modern Lifestyle? Do you think Muslim society in the world can live peacefully with other faiths?

Second Question: There has been a rejuvenation of Revivalist Islamic Architecture such as the design of Putra Mosque, Wilayah Mosque and

Sultan Mizan Mosque in Putrajaya. How do you compare these kinds of architecture to that of the Masjid Negara?

Third Question: Modern architecture history and philosophy has many moralistic values such as the Functionalists 'form follows function instead of form following past typology. Then there is also the Rationalists' idea of 'less is more' with emphasis that the construction and structure as part of the aesthetic. There was also the criticism of ornament as mere building decoration and a more integral form of ornament and structure should occur like the Art Nouveau and Art Deco. The Modernist expression of the Jeddah Hajj Terminal by Fazlur Rahman of Skidmore Owings and Merrill is said by many to be one of the best expression of Contemporary and Progressive Islamic Architecture. Do you think Islamic Architecture can derive a new expression based on a similar value construct as the modernists?

Fourth Question: Can you explain your theory, principle or approach of Islamic Architecture as found in the Tabung Haji Building?

The first two questions were framed to elicit Hijias personal view of Islam as he practices it in his life as well as his views about the Malaysian society in relation to Islam as a culture and religion. The last two questions were framed so that his architectural views could be understood within the context of his personal views about Islam and modern society. Two buildings were chosen to illustrate the architectural perspectives and design approaches which are the Al-Faisal University in Saudi Arabia and the Tabung Haji complex in Malaysia.

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The architecture of a national mosque in a Muslim country is the spitting image of the views about Islam and the modern society in the country's political and economic strife to reconcile the modern and traditional ideologies of 'political Islam' [5]. We can find a similar interpretation of these dichotomies between the need of traditionalism and modernity in the work of Hijias Kasturi. In his work Hijias takes the point of reinterpreting spaces, forms and structures in answering the call of conservatism which resulted in exciting new forms and ways of composing important structures to posterity. It is also interesting to know firstly his own perspectives of Muslim's and particularly Malay Muslim's interpretation of the modern life.

From a family that cannot be described as conservative with an international family structure, Hijias represents a view badly needed to reinstate Islam as a moderate and progressive religion rather than subjugated to the whims of so called scholars that call for a darker and more sinister form of the faith:

*'All Malays proclaim they are Muslims whether they follow the teachings or not they still insist they are Muslims and when the chips are down, they would fight tooth and nail for what they consider a holy cause and yet they do not follow truly the teachings of Islam. That was how I was taught in the religious school. But when I*

*went to Australia I was amazed to find a mosque in Australia. I went to the mosque and was shocked to find all kinds of people especially Europeans are Muslims! When I was young I never thought that there would be a European Muslim. The difference between us in Muslims in Malaysia and in Australia is that there we mixed and socialize with different cultures and we know better from finding many subtle differences. In a way those Muslims in Australia are more tolerant as they find many different groups over there. You have to learn about all the differences and learn to accept that and that was what changed in me with respect to looking at others. But the rest of Muslims in Malaysia are still conservative as there were not taught to be tolerant. Malays are a very kind and soft spoken lot but they are not tolerant and they think they are the only right one in religion. The Malays consider others who are non-Muslims as heathen and that attitude has not changed until today. I'll give you another incident to illustrate this point.'*

The most interesting point that he made in this interview was that Muslims are not taught to be tolerant. It is a simple observation and has absolutely far reaching implication. Was the Prophet Muhammad an intolerant man to other faiths and race? The historical evidence shows he was most tolerant especially when he re-entered and liberated Mecca at the height of his power but there was no record of him extracting vengeance on old foes. The incident of his torturous effort in Taif could also have resulted in a total eradication of human lives in that village but he never laid a finger on those who pelted stones at him without mercy. Thus, where does Muslim and Malay intolerance come from. Hijias answers simply that Malays are ignorant of history and seems to think that they and only they are the mainstream Islam and that others, even Muslim groups, are not on the right path. The religious scholars have not emphasized the values of intercultural communication that was displayed by the Prophet himself and replaced them with so much lessons of rituals to the point that the rituals seem to be an end by itself and not a means to attain spiritual piety. Malays and Muslims seem to think that fulfilling rituals equals success in life and that values of tolerance are a periphery matter meant only as a social decorum not to be taken too seriously.

*'I run an art residency with emphasis on performance art and fine arts. When I went to Bali, I brought back the Gamelan instruments and set the school up in my kampong. My daughter, being a choreographer also taught the Balinese dance. I invited the villagers' children to attend and appreciate as well as learn the Gamelan music as well as the dances. At first and for the first few months there were many attendees. But later on I found that the children were missing the classes and soon there were but a few left. I asked them why they did not come and they said that their fathers or parents forbade them as the gamelan was a Hindu music. When I asked the parents themselves they confirmed the children's answers and thought that it was improper for us to teach Hindu music which they consider haram. I told them that Malays use the violin*

*and the piano and other musical instruments that were not from the Arab Muslim culture. The gamelan is only music and is not about going into another religion. It is just appreciating another culture's heritage.'*

The Bali Musical incident illustrates the simple idea of accepting and appreciating a cultural product innocent in itself. The idea that the Malay culture and language themselves is a product of multiple influences of Hindu, Buddhist, Sanskrit, Chinese heritage is forgotten or not understood by Malays as a blessing of God and not a hindrance to development. This intolerance can be seen in the inability of religious scholars who sit in committees to determine the shape of mosques where anything other than the traditional domes and arches must be made a dogmatic principle without question. Even the heritage of the Malays in the Masjid Kampung Laut and Masjid Kampung Tuan fail to impress the educated Malays.

*'I feel sad about the fact that Muslims who feel themselves as orthodox are so conservative while the religion encourages you to seek knowledge even to China. We seem to be narrow-minded. We do not study history and see what happened to the Christian world. The Inquisition was a terrible part of historical Christianity and so are the bloody wars of the Catholics against the Protestant. Muslims should learn from this and avoid narrowness in thinking about Sunnism and Shiism. In a sense the fighting is about social justice which what we are all fighting for. But some do so in the name of religion and turn it into a bigger problem of cultural intolerance. The Christians used to think that they are the preferred of God and the Righteous and that all others are heathens! Now it is the Muslims who are proclaiming this idea! Muslims are bigoted and intolerant because they think they are the Righteous ones. As long as it goes on like this it will never change. It is funny to me that some universities in Malaysia are stopping students from learning communism when you have Google who will open everything at the touch of your fingers! There was a time in Malaysia we were against Communism and how many thousands died in that war against an ideology. But now we have trade and can visit Russia and China! What was all of it for?'*

The young Malaysian Malays who are Muslims must take into consideration that what they have been hearing is nothing more than one or two versions of Islam interpreted within a narrow-minded framework. The young ones must come forth to question these 'realities' and make sense of themselves what the new and more pragmatic realities could be in relation to being a Muslim in a multi-racial country and also interacting actively in politics, economics and spirituality in a global family of mankind. The leaders of Malaysia must make it possible for these new thoughts to germinate and mature so that it would reveal the progressive nature of Islam that has survived by adapting to the many cultures and knowledge of the times in the past history. As the dome and the arch was an accidental part of Islam's history so are many of our understanding of the faith becoming a product of layering of culture, superstition and individual agendas

that does not reflect the original message of the religion.

With a new and more pragmatic approach to Islam as a way of modern life, Malaysia was poised in the 60's to be a progressive nation imbued with the industrial spirit and harmonious strength of her people. The Masjid Negara came at a time when the question of a new identity of the nation was being mooted. The most unique form of a modern and functional architecture was a stark contrast to the populist notion of domes and arches in the Middle East. The Masjid Negara represents the ideals of a society well entrenched in their religious and traditional culture but with the vision to be modern, progressive and dynamic.

*'In the early days of independence it was exciting to ask what we can contribute to build this nation. What would be the new kind of architecture for a new sovereign country. However, the strange thing is that the one who can interpret better about architecture and ideas like Islam and so forth are... I am sorry to say... the non-Malays or non-Malaysians. They can see wider and have a far-reaching mind unlike the Malays and Malaysians who have already been conditioned in their minds about such thing and such thing. The good books written about Malaysia are by foreign scholars. So, the National Mosque was originally a product of the mind of an Englishman. It was only later that the local Muslim architects came to finish the job using their own interpretation of rituals and Islamic concepts. But the original concept was entirely not Malay or Muslim. This is what I mean. Many Muslims cannot think beyond the dome or the arch. In fact the dome and the arch came about just by accident, nothing to do with Islam at all.'*

However, this new fervor of progressive Islam had given way to a more conservative approach as time passes where more and more mosques were designed with the literal interpretation of populist Islamic architecture compete with domes, arches and Ottoman minarets. How did this come about? What did the profession do or did not do? The answer lies again in the clash of political idealism. The more progressive political elements had to cater to the conservative opposition and orthodox mind sets of the Malays who still viewed Islamism as something Arabic and Middle Eastern. They fail to take cognizance of the fact that the message and values that made Islam a humanist religion were the ones that needed to be addressed seriously. Forms were taken to be more of a priority than essence. Thus, the populist and literalistic imagery was perpetuated. The architecture profession in turn was then filled with people of low academic integrity who knows only how to follow the client's demands literally. Creativity and critical design interpretation had become the exception and not the norm. The fact that Islam was a dynamic force as represented by the many different regional forms the mosque had taken in various countries and region fail to make a positive impression on the architects, the citizenry, the academics and the leadership of the country.

*'If you go to Africa, the mosque do not look like*

these arches and dome structures that you find mostly in Malaysia. It is of mud or adobe architecture construction. Even in Melaka of old, the mosque look like Chinese temples of timber structure, not domes or arches! So today we have gone backwards and the educated even think that these domes and arches are symbols of Islam. They do not look at history and they do not look at others. The true way in fact to build mosques is to look at the available material and technology like in Africa where they use mud and straw. Then you put in the culture because although all are Muslims but the culture is still unique and this would give various differences in space, form and expression. Only then architecture becomes organic and authentic and also excitingly unique.'

Hijjas' idea of Islamic architecture is reflective of his pragmatic outlook in life. Form in Islamic architecture is a product of the basic functional needs of climate, function and technology that is interpreted within the values of the culture. In his design of the Al-Faisal University he was confronted with a dilemma of providing spaces for a completely orthodox and conservative Arab society where intermingling of the sexes was strictly prohibited. His answer was the epitome of his professional career in dealing with a conservatism that was turned inside out into a progressive solution. He separated the two sexes by different floor levels but created the faculties into a composition that looked toward a single center. He used the shopping mall analogy in the design to bring the students to mix with other students in different faculties as well as with the academics. This gesture

showed him to be a man who believed in a democratic and critical education as opposed to the public universities in Malaysia that believes in the separation and isolation of knowledge in their siting of different faculties.

'I had an opportunity to change some thinking of this gender separation when I got to design the Al-Faisal University. The Arab client insisted that the men and women be separated and it used to be that the lecturers have to give two lectures, one to men and one to women. Some of the Saudis were quite open and asked me to design a building that later on could be adapted when Saudi Arabia become more open minded. So, I thought of an architecture that would still preserve the conservative value but also present an opportunity of transition to a different future. In a way many universities like in Malaysia are doing the wrong thing in educating the graduates. They always design each faculty in isolation to the point that the students of each faculty seldom mix with others and this became a lost opportunity to see things differently. In the al-Faisal University I positioned the faculties in a circle (figure 1). I also designed the lecture halls in a way that the women are in the upper gallery and the men in the lower floor. In the Arab Muslim culture, Women can look at men but men cannot look at women. Thus, the lecturer can give a single lecture. After lectures, the women and men congregate in the center of the circle separately each on separate floors. I designed the university in a way like a shopping center with shops and food stalls so that the students can meet with faculty members and interact with each other from different faculties.'



Figure 1. Al-Faisal University by Hijjas

For Islam to be contributive to Malaysia and the global human society, it must be interpreted within a wider framework of human dignity and tolerance. In a way, the Prophet had already embedded in his exemplary life such tolerance of other faith, culture and intellectual heritage but conservative elements that were educated in a restricted environment tend to

pull Islam away from the middle path. Islamic architecture can put a symbolic dome or a ventilation functioning dome atop the buildings of Islamic worship. The decision depends entirely on those wielding the powers of society to take either a wider perspective or a completely narrow one.

The Menara Tabung Haji idea was first initiated

by Lembaga Tabung Haji back in 1980, when the government initiated Islamic financial institution for local Muslim planning their pilgrimage or Haj to Mecca, have decided to have a dedicated building for the organization, whilst investing in the Kuala Lumpur booming property market back then. As much as Tabung Haji was exceptionally amped up about the building, the design brief was outlined for Hijjas to explore new ideas for Islamic architecture in a contemporary maxim and to symbolize the Haj itself (figure 2). The site was given by the Malaysian Government in Jalan Tun Razak which was then a remote territory, now a noteworthy Kuala Lumpur commercial triangle.

Tabung Haji Tower was constructed on the higher platform of the site which in Hijjas vision that this was to symbolize the beginning of the pilgrim's journey should the building was approached from the street, which then continues across the dome of the separately sunken mosque which was built externally. The most distinctive Islamic tower in Kuala Lumpur (well at least according to Hijjas himself), Tabung Haji Tower has 38 levels, eight of which are circular ramped parking above the entrance lobby. Hijjas has maximized the usable areas at the larger base of the tower, parking and traffic circulation at the lower levels and multiple sizes of office units at the upper 28 floor level. The basement level of the tower comprises shops, banking facilities, cafes, travel agencies and auditorium.



Figure 2. The Menara Tabung Haji

Having been inspired by the idea of oneness of God, simplicity and the minaret that best characterized an Islamic architecture, Hijjas has considered the round shape as the most simple and efficient of forms and chose the shape with a central core as structure and services. Although the circular core did limit corridor wastage, later he did admit that round floor plate does present other design problems. One of the distinctive and iconic features of Tabung Haji Tower is the curved and tapered elevation which was rare during at that time.

Pursuing his intention not to have columns interrupting the spaces, he proposed five peripheral columns and as to symbolized the five pillars of Islam

which performing Haj is included. Beside performing structural role these columns also house the air handling units. mullion columns were also implemented to highlight the five peripheral columns. These mullions columns load was carefully transferred to five great arches which was inclined inwards so that only the five columns were evident. To modulate the verticality and minimize the bulkiness of the building, Hijjas has painted these mullions and columns to stand in contrast to the darker glass facade. The integration between symbolism and pure function was taken further by the articulated hexagon patterned 'crown' on the seventh floor that conceals the gantry machinery for external maintenance. The gantry and gondolas were raised and lowered on tracks that was fixed to the window mullions so it can follow the building curved profile.

The ramped forecourt is a prelude to the building form and the act of walking up the slope was actually to simulate the beginning of the Haj's journey. The molded repeated Islamic geometric stalactite ceiling forms above the entrance hall resonates the reinterpreted version of Muqarnas in its literal form but was beautifully made by using concrete and integrated with the modern lighting system instead.

## CONCLUSION

Though simplistic in its expression of Islamic values, Hijjas work remain as an example of modernist ideas reinterpreted within the ritualistic and thought structure of the Muslim way of life. His progressive ideas of Islam as a rational religion not to be confused with the ideas brought by traditional scholars find much needed direction in the ongoing clash of civilization, not between Islam and the West, but between the ideas of Islam in the traditional past and Islam in the modern world of different social, political and economic contexts.

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