CONTEXTUALISM IN MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE: BRIDGING THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

The expression of architecture in mosques in the non-Muslim worlds may have added to the problem of alienization of Muslims to the host community. The Muslim community has misunderstood the idea of 'sacredness' of form in allowing revivalistic foreign traditional architectural language to be part of the mosque architectural language. This sets up the mosque being totally not in context with the surrounding urban fabric. This paper outlines the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad about the importance of being part of a larger society of man and even to love all man regardless of their faith. Hence, this paper puts forward the position that mosque designers must rethink their design ideas towards the values of inclusivity in Islam.

KEYWORDS:
Mosque; contextualism; Islam

INTRODUCTION

The architecture of the mosque, in the modern times, has always been framed within a restricted communal and political framework of Muslim perspectives and totally ignores the feelings and concerns of other religious cultures and traditions. This is actually in contradiction to the traditional architecture of the mosque in various regions of Muslim dominated countries or where Muslims are in the minority. For instance, the traditional mosque in Southeast Asia carries the typology of the pyramidal timber roof similar to the religious edifices of the Buddhist Pagoda and palaces of Indonesia (figure 1). The Mosque in Africa or Egypt contains the language of mud bricks and seldom sport a dome (figure 2). Obviously, these architecture languages that imitate the vernacular styles of each location was done simply out of technological necessity of materials, construction and structure, but they do point out the fact that Islam is a religion of tolerance and has the capability of assimilating the host culture. The history of the spread of Islam in Indonesia by a series of Wali Songo records how these private missionaries adopted the songs, rituals and traditions of the indigenous cultures and used them in the Islamic frameworks.

Although this research is mainly about architecture, its larger intention is set within the framework of political and communal inclusion brought about by the writings and thoughts of Tariq Ramadhan [1], Rashid Ghanouchi and Farouk Musa [2].

All three personalities are accomplished academics and contribute a large portion of their lives to propagating the idea that Muslims must respect the host culture and accept them if they, the Muslims, want to be accepted by the host nation. In Europe, Tariq Ramadhan has written and given many talks and seminars where he explains that the message of the Qur'an and the traditions, even if interpreted within the traditional academic and religious framework, advocates that Muslims are encouraged to blend in the host culture of the country that they have immigrated to within the limits of the value system set by the Syari'ah. The Syari'ah, according to him, has given wide spaces for interpretation in this manner. The Muslims should not live in exclusivity in the manner of their country of origin, and set themselves apart from the culture of the host country [1]. In Malaysia, Farouk Musa, who heads the Islamic Renaissance Front is greatly active in providing a platform of interpretation that encourages the Muslims to be more respectful of the cultures of the non-Muslims which numbers about 40% of the country in order to create a more harmonious citizenry [2].

MOSQUES IN THEIR TRADITIONAL CONTEXTS

The issue of mosque contextualism barely existed in the traditional times. Mosques, as with any structures was built using traditional materials like timber, masonry, adobe brick and construction material of clay, mud, straw and many others. The scale of these mosques depended entirely on traditional technology and without an authoritarian regime such as the Pharoah, the buildings tend to be modest n scale. The palaces of monarchs and Rajas dwarfed these buildings with their grand scale and ornamental opulence. The mosque then was more in

tune with the surrounding people as there were not many religious institutions to govern certain rules and regulations. Everything went under the simple purview of respect for the rules and behavioral conduct of the religious teacher or scholar and those of his students. The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims were probably less estranged as they were today and we can see Muslims and non-Muslims living side by side and entering mosques and temples without due concern. Indeed, this was the experience of many past lives before the advent of the television and the internet that shook the foundation of social relation by news in another unrelated province being imposed on another that had no issue to begin with. Actions of self-interested leaders who seek political dominance and survival, the television and the internet have succeeded to isolate Muslims more and more from the rest of the world.

Figure 1. Kampung Hulu Mosque in Melaka, 17th century

Figure 2. A mud mosque in Mali that contains no stereotype elements of domes, minarets or onion arches

In modern times, architects can design buildings according to almost any language but they are pressed by the clients to pursue the stereotyped 'middle-eastern' dome, arch and slender minarets. Whilst some architects do try to argue for a more modernistic and progressive language, their views are almost always voted down by the committee. Some architects prefer to follow the client's 'Arabian Nights' interpretation of mosque architecture because their fees are connected to the more expensive proposals of many domes and multiple minarets. This situation gives rise, to the deepening problem of Islam and Muslims being viewed as an exclusive society alien to whatever cultures that surround them. Politically, this set up the Muslim to be viewed suspiciously by others and allow

Muslims to be used by unscrupulous leaders, religious or political, to forward their private agendas.

ACADEMIC CONTEXT

The main interest and focus of this work in the present time is to create a new and better framework for the idea of Islamic Architecture and the design of the mosque into an entity that would present a contextual existence in any host society.

It is our belief that the architectural work in this area is tied in with the problem Muslims are facing in the world whether in a mixed host society like Malaysia or in a non-Muslim dominated society like in the United Kingdom and in America. The central problem of co-existence within the construct of the Muslim mind set is an Islamic education system that has not moved significantly with the times in terms of its broader perspectives. Although there have been Muslim scholars who had grappled with this issue of Islam and the perspectives of other belief systems, the thinking of these past scholars has been buried by traditionalist minded religious clerics educated in a parochial setting and devoid of the education presented by a philosophical and a greater spiritual construct. The end result is the ongoing religious and racial tensions between Muslims and the host society as well as between Muslims and other citizens of different faiths as in the case of Malaysia [3].

In our literature survey about Islam, the Qur'an and the body of Hadiths from the sources of Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Ibn Madja, Muwatta and the Sirah Ibnu Hisham it was discovered that many social, political and cultural aspects of life in the modern Muslim world stands apart from the message and lessons of these corpus of knowledge in Islam [4] [5] [6] [7]. Investigators of Islamic architecture must understand the many layers of cultural interpretation that sits oddly with the original values as taught by Muhammad [8]. This is also true with respect to political system and policies that seemed Syariah based but is devoid of the spirit of the original message. Thus, the work that is deemed as 'Islamic Architecture' even that of the mosque is suspect and cannot be claimed to represent the ideal message of Islam in any one country or in any one period of history. In our work of reconstructing the principles of Islamic Architecture we have found that the theoretical construct of early modernists philosophies like Sullivan, Wright, Corbusier, Pugin, Morris, Gropius and the early principles of western modernism were born from the values of Protestanism, Communism and the ideals of democracy [9]. The Western world's political and social structure was born out of the clash of values of these ideas coupled with the implications of modern lifestyle and technology. The ideas of Islamic architecture had never gone through a serious 'clash of values' like in the west with respect to the ideas of modernism. Muslim architects simply inherited first the modernist ideas and forms without much question and later on the ideas of post-modernism also without much discourse. The move towards regionalism as a popular approach is simply an event that is akin to the flowing

of the tide of ideas. It is our academic and personal position that Islamic architecture and the design of the mosque particularly need to be deconstructed and reconstructed within the values of the Sunnah interpreted within the perspective of the modern lifestyle, cultural dynamics and the political framework of a particular society. The idea of design with sustainable means goes without saying.

If Muslims embrace the new approach of Islamic Architecture and Mosque Design they will not see Islam and Muslims being stereotyped and isolated simply because Muslims themselves have isolated the host society by being in a constrained and restricted mindset about respecting other faiths as well as social values. This does not in any way mean that we have 'compromised' Islam but my readings of the Qur'an and hadiths as well as about political Islam allows a broad leeway to operate in a creative and responsible manner [10][11][12][13][14].

It is hoped that this work can be the bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims by creating buildings like mosques and other Islamic facility that would be an enhancement to the context of the host society as well as the urban fabric that would put non-Muslims at ease living alongside Muslims who are supposed to be the most tolerant and understanding of all faiths.

TYPES OF CONTEXTUALISM IN MOSQUE DESIGN

In his book, Architecture in Context, Brent C. Brolin explains contextualism as designing a building that would fit in the urban surrounding. In architectural practice and education, contextualism simply means that a building should be designed in a manner that its presence complement or become the backdrop of the urban fabric [15]. Now this idea is apparently more difficult to practice as the training of the architect is to design an 'iconic' building that stands out as a personal piece of artwork. Thus, contextualism can be defined in several levels or degree of fitness and complementary attitude. Firstly, if a building such as an office structure built purely out of economic needs and has no cultural and political symbolic importance were to be built in the city then its façade and massing should follow the rhythms of massing, window fenestration in terms of size, material, colour so as to be distinct slightly from the rest but in consonance with the neighbours. This is more critical if the whole area is deemed as a conservation area with old buildings like the old city of Edinburgh. A mosque built of shiny marble and domes would not fit well amongst the grey stones of classical and medieval styled buildings in the surrounding. In a second level of contextualism, as in the case of the tall building, a podium that respects the height of the surrounding buildings can be built with the tower set way back so that the experience of walking amidst the city is not interrupted by a gigantic foot of the skyscraper as what happens in John Hancock Tower in Chicago that has no podium. The third level of contextualism can be understood by the idea of introducing an 'alien' object but finds a complementary presence in the urban

fabric. For instance, in a three or four storey urban fabric, there is suddenly a dome with the height of an eight storey building sitting on top of a five two six storey podium. This would be a complementary scenery if the dome turns out to be that which belongs to the city council or the administrative center of the city. But if a penthouse or a wealthy patron feels inclined to transfer an Indian Onion Dome decked with ornament smack in the city center of New York, that would be an architecture of non-contextualism to say the least.

We shall now define our own idea of mosque contextualism levels within the modern cities of the western world as follows. The Western world has built their cities in what was known as the International Style of boxes of concrete and steel with large glass curtain walls. These modern buildings sit comfortably between old structures of classical and medieval tradition of Greece, Roman and Gothic expressions. For our purpose, we have taken the idea that most Western cities are more International Style in expression and thus the mosque should take this consideration seriously and not reject them outrightly. Thus, the levels of contextualism that we have forwarded is related to the closeness to the ideal of early modernist type of 'International Style'. It should be noted that there were three strong traditions of modernism which were the Miesien minimalist box, the Corbusien chunky blocks and the naturalism of Wright's organic architecture. Since most cites opted towards the first two approaches, thus our level of scale of contextualism is escribed. Firstly, Non-Contextual Mosques are those that contain a totally revivalistic stereotyped middle eastern mosque language as shown in the Washington D. C. Islamic Center (figure 3) and the Boston Mosque (figure 4).

Figure 3. Islamic Center, Washington D.C.

Figure 4. Boston Mosque

Partially Contextual Mosque are those that contain the architectural language of domes and minarets but has a more cubist and purist language for the walls and fenestration without ornamentation as in the London Central Mosque (figure 5) or the Tuscon Islamic Center (figure 6).

Figure 5. London Central Mosque

Figure 6. Tuscon Islamic Center

The Fully Contextual Mosque is one that has no traces of any ornamentation, domes, arches and contains the main language of machine architecture of the early modernist like the An-Nahdah Mosque (figure 7) in Singapore and the ISNA Center (figure 8) in USA.

Figure 7. An-Nahdah Mosque in Singapore

Figure 8. ISNA Center, Indiana

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SACRED LANGUAGE OF THE MOSQUE

Scholars such as Titus Burkhardt and Syed Hussein Nasr or Nader Ardalan seem to argue that there is such a thing as a 'sacred architecture of the mosque' [16][17]. Scholars such as Hillenbrand, Hoag and Ettinghausen use the force of Muslim history and civilization to argue for the presence of a set of language deemed to be that of the mosque like the dome, the minaret, the muqarnas and many others [18]. Our research and understanding of Islam, architectural technology and function deny that there exist such a language deemed 'sacred' or 'historically correct'. All the traditional elements of the mosque that we have inherited to this day in the traditional past can be explained away using simple understanding of structure, construction and traditional material acting against the backdrop of climate, culture and political agendas of specific patrons. In other words, the forms thus inherited are no more than the product of 'historical, social, cultural, technological and political forces'. With respect to the Muslim scholars' assertion, we have researched through much of the Sunni sources of hadiths and Qur'anic Tafsir and discovered the only requirement of the mosque is that it has a clean place to pray and points toward Mecca. The mosque can be as simple as a square area drawn by a piece of chalk or made more permanent by an arrangement of stones. Islam does not require any liturgical furniture nor any sacred relics or places to perform the normal daily ritual. The only 'sacred object' in the form of a building is the Ka'ba because it was believed to be the building built by Abraham who was the father of the three faiths of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The only 'sacred' place in Islam is the Haram area where no non-Muslim shall step in it. All mosques in the world are in one sense 'not sacred' in comparison to the Sacred Mosque of the Haram, the Mosque of the Prophet and the Masjid al-Aqsa as the Prophet had proclaimed them to have special rewards for those who pray in them as in the following hadiths:

'Abu Huraira narrated it directly from Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) having said this: A prayer in my mosque is a thousand times more excellent than a prayer in any other mosque, except Masjid al-Haram.' (Sahih Muslim, Vol. 2, page 697, hadith no. 3209) [7].

'Abu Huraira is reported it directly from Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) that he said: Do not undertake journey but to three mosques; this mosque of mine, the Mosque of Al-Haram and the Mosque of Aqsa (Sahih Muslim Vol. 2, p. 699, hadith no. 3218)[7].

There is also the hadiths of the Prophet denying a sacred language for mosques as such:

Narrated 'Urwa: 'A'isha said, "The Prophet in his fatal illness said, "Allah cursed the Jews and the Christians because they took the graves of their Prophet as places for praying" 'A'isha added, "Had it not been for that the grave of the Prophet would have been made prominent but, I am afraid it might be taken (as a) place for praying (Sahih Al-Bukhari Vol. 2, p.232)[4].

Narrated 'A'isha: When the Prophet became ill, some of his wives talked about a church which they had been seen in Ethiopia and it was called Mariya. Um Salma and Um Habiba had been to Ethiopia, and both of them narrated its (the Church's) beauty and the pictures it contained. The Prophet raised his head and said, "Those are the people who, whenever a pious man dies amongst them, make a piece of worship at his grave and then they make those pictures in it. Those are the worst creatures in the sight of Allah." (Sahih Al-Bukhari Vol. 2, p.237) [4].

Thus, with this argument, there is no need of any kind of historical baggage that can be deemed as sacred from the religious perspective. However, this does not mean that the architect of the mosque may not consider certain forms and ornament to be 'important' for the continuity of communication with the historical past when it is called for.

ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN THE LARGER CONTEXT OF SOCIETY AND HUMANITY

In this section, we would like to put across the values of Islam in relation to living as part of a larger community of Muslims and non-Muslims as an argument of contextualism for mosque architecture. In the first hadith, the Muslim's responsibility to his fellow men, regardless of race or religion is beautifully transcribed as follows:

On the authority of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him), who said that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: Allah (mighty and sublime be He) will say on the Day of Resurrection:

O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him?

O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that (the reward for doing so) with Me?

O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink. He will say: O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found that with Me [7].

The need for basic shelter, for sustainence and for care speaks volumes about the design of the city and the mosque in Islam. Can the homeless find shelter in the mosque like the Suffa people who stayed at the Prophet's Mosque in his lifetime? Can the hungry find food in the mosque like the soup kitchens of modern society or the Langgar tradition of preparing daily food for the needy at the Gurdwara? Designers of mosque should ask these important question in order to answer the values of this hadith.

The requirement of the Muslim to be part of a larger community and fully involved with the welfare of all can be seen in the following hadiths:

Abu Dhar reported the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) as saying: He who separates the community within a span takes off the noose of Islam from his neck [19].

Mundhir b. Jarir reported on the authority of his father: While he were in the company of the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) in the early hours of the morning, some people came there (who) were barefooted, naked, wearing striped woolen clothes, or cloaks, with their swords hung (around their necks). Most of them, nay, all of them, belonged to tribe Mudar. The colour of the face of the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) underwent a change when he saw them in poverty. He then entered (his house) and came out and commanded Bilal (to pronounce Adhan). He pronounced Adhan and Iqoma, and he (the Holy Prophet) observed prayer (along with his his Companion) and addressed (them reciting verses of the Holy Qur'an): "O people, fear your Lord, Who created you from a single being" to the end of the verses, "Allah is ever a Watcher over you" (iv. 1). (He then recited) a verse of Surah Ashr: "Fear Allah, and let every soul consider that which it sends forth of the morrow and fear Allah" 1ix. 18). (Then the audience began to vie with one another in giving charity). Some donated a dinar, others a dirham, still others clothes, some donated a sa' of wheat, some a sa' of dates; till he (the Holy Prophet) said: (Bring) even if it is a half a date. Then a person from among the Ansar came therewith a money bag which his hand could scarcely lift; in fact, they could not (lift). Then the people followed continuously, till I saw two heaps of eatables and clothes, and I saw the face of the Messenger (may peace be upon him) glistering like gold (on account of joy (Sahih Muslim Vol. II, p.487) [7].

Narrated Abu Sa'id Al Khudri: Once he Prophets at on a pulpit and we sat around him. Then he said, Blessed is the wealth of Muslim from which he gives to the poor, the orphans and the needy travelers. (Or the prophet said something similar to it) No doubt, whoever takes it illegally will be like the one who eats but is never satisfied, and big wealth will be a witness against him on the Day of Resurrection (Sahih Al Buhari Vol. II, p.315) [7].

From the hadith above architects should ask some very serious questions. How does the architect respond to this value in designing the front of the mosque? What spaces can be created to invite people in but still maintain a concern for security of the congregation? These are clues toward the better design of a mosque that would be a boon to any modern city.

It is narrated on the authority of Ibn Abu Laila that while Qais b. Sa'd and Sahl b. Hunaif were both in Qadisiyya a bier passed by them and they both stood up. They were told that it was the bier of one of the people of the land (non-Muslim). They said that a bier passed before the Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him) and he stood up. He was told that he (the dead man) was a Jew. Upon this he remarked: Was he not a human being

or did he not have a soul? And in the hadith transmitted by 'Amr b. Murra with the same chain of transmitters, (the words) are: "There passed a bier before us" (Sahih Muslim Vol. II, p.454) [7].

In several clear hadiths about doing good to others, the Prophet has outlined the true Islamic value of charity:

Jabir (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: Never a Muslim plants a tree, but he has the reward of charity for him, for what is eaten out of that is charity; what is stolen of that, what the beast eat out of that, what the birds eat out of that is charity for him. (In short) none incurs a loss to him but it becomes a charity on his part (Sahih Muslim, Vol. III, p.818) [7].

Jabir b. 'Abdullah (Allah be pleased with him) reported: Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) visited the orchard of Umm Ma'bad and said: Umm Ma'bad, he who has planted this tree, is he a Muslim or a non-Muslim? She said: Of course, he is a Muslim, where upon he (the Holy Prophet) said: No Muslim who plants (trees) and from their fruits the human beings of the beasts or birds eat, but that would be taken as an act of charity on the Day of Resurrection (Sahih Muslim, Vol. III, p.819) [7].

The Prophet said: A Muslim is one who is easy to make friends with people and also easily to be made friends of, and there is little value in a person who is difficult to make friends with and difficult to be a friend of [20].

The architecture of the mosque is the architecture of charity for all. Perhaps there is a seating place to wait for the bus or a place to rest in from the rain or just to charge a phone, these are elements of charity that can be integrated in the mosque and make it an urban facility.

Abu Amina Elias writes in her article on Islam and the brotherhood of man in the following manner [21]:

The primary expression of this teaching is stated in the following authoritative tradition: Anas ibn Malik reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said: None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself. Source: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 13, Grade: Muttafaqun Alayhi [21]

Many scholars interpreted "brother" in this and other traditions to mean universal brotherhood that includes all of humanity. An-Nawawi comments on this tradition, saying: This is interpreted as brotherhood in general, such that it includes the disbeliever and the Muslim. So he should love for his brother, the disbeliever, what he loves for himself which is his entering Islam, just as he should love for his brother Muslim that he remains in Islam. For this reason, it is recommended to supplicate for the disbeliever to be guided. The meaning of love here is an intention for good and benefit, and this meaning is religious love, not human love. Source: Sharh al-Arba'īn 13 [21]

And Ibn Hajar Al-Haytami writes: What is apparent is that the use of the word brother is based upon its widest meaning, such that it is befitting for every Muslim to love for the unbeliever to have Islam and the virtues that derive from it... His saying to love for himself means of what is good, so that he will be together with them as if they were one person. Source: al-Fath al-Mubīn 1/305 [21]

And Hamza Muhammad Qasim writes: The Prophet's saying to love for his brother what he loves for himself is interpreted as universal brotherhood, such that it includes the disbeliever and the Muslim, and he should love for his brother the disbeliever what he loves for himself which is his entering Islam. For this reason it is recommended to supplicate for their guidance. The Prophet invited the unbelievers of the Quraish to goodness and he loved good for them. He would say: O Allah, guide my people for they do not know. This confirms that the meaning is to love good for all people. There is no difference between a Muslim and a disbeliever in his saying that the best faith is to love for people what you love for yourself and to hate for people what you hate for yourself. Source: Manār al-Qārī 1/91 [21]

And in another narration, the Prophet said: None of you will find the sweetness of faith until he loves a person only for the sake of Allah. Source: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5694, Grade: Muttafaqun Alayhi [21]

In these hadiths and interpretations of Abu Amina, it is without a single doubt that Islam is a religion of inclusivity with the whole oh humanity [21]. As such any building especially a mosque should reflect this simple and eternal value of co-existence. Mosques should have activities of outreach through formal and informal activities. Formal activities would be an open day and informal activity would be as simple as providing reading rooms or laundry services and shops and public spaces so that the larger community can benefit. Although in recent times the threat of extremist has put many Muslim communities as target of vendetta by non-Muslim, there is a way for the architect to design for security but still provide and openness and friendly gesture through the proper planning of spaces and the appropriate expression of scale, elements and material.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this work can serve as an eye opener to mosque committee members on the subject of inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Many mosque members have the wrong notion that the stereotyped language of mosque is 'sacred' and that it is important for Muslims to retain and fight for their exclusive identity. In actual fact the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad do not support such an extremist attitude because such positions are born mainly through racial and political indoctrination and cultural upbringing. If mosques was to be designed within the context of the urban environment of its host countries, perhaps non-Muslims would feel much at ease living alongside Muslims and would trust them as loyal citizens of that country. As architecture is a piece of technological product and an expressive art form, it's eternal and obvious presence in human life

can play a major role towards bridging the civilizational and cultural gap among Muslims and non-Muslims.

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