

## A CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING FOR TEACHING THE HISTORY OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE: AN IRANIAN (PERSIAN) PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

*It has been a relatively long time since the inception of industrialization, as a result of which the architecture of the Muslim cultures has been faced with serious challenges. The rapid speed of modernization did not give the traditional architecture of these regions a chance to adapt to the changes. During recent years, however, great efforts have been made in dedication to the revival of cultural values, especially in respect of the education of young architects in these countries. It appears that the main place for responding to the quest for nourishing from regional values is in universities and mainly in the history/Islamic architecture lectures.*

*The history lesson has often been discussed as being a particularly useful tool in respect of the issue of designing new buildings, which can meet the contemporary needs of today. In view of that, various methods and great efforts have been devoted to improving the teaching of the history of architecture. In the case of the teaching of Islamic architecture, focusing on the architectural background, such as the socio-cultural factors and investigating in regional values is a more or less appropriate way of linking the past with the present.*

*Islamic architecture, which covers a considerable part of the globe, has frequently been viewed as homogeneous architecture. On the other hand, there are some other scholars, who, by emphasizing*

*the diversities of this architecture, have demonstrated some doubt even as to the use of the term Islamic architecture. Between these two extremes, in this paper it is argued that the subject of Islamic architecture should be seen and taught with respect to the existing various interpretations, as well as with consideration of the fact that all these diverse expressions only wish to express one thing: the Islamic view. A deep understanding of Islamic architecture in relation to regional values will enable students to think comparatively. As an example of such understanding of Islamic architecture, the Safavid architecture of Iran (16th-18th) has been analyzed. The focus of this analysis is to give an overview of the architectural background and the reasons for the creation of traditional architecture during this period. The paper aims to offer a wider view of the history of Islamic architecture; to see it as more than just the development of orders, forms, and materials.*

### Keywords:

History lesson; Islamic architecture; Safavid architecture; architectural education.

### Introduction

Architecture in almost all developing countries, including Muslim cultures, has been undergoing a transformation and change in contemporary

time. The conversion from traditionalism to modernism has created various challenges in all economical, cultural, and social aspects of life as well as in the architectural expression in these countries. Most of the modern Muslim architects who are looking for an expression of regional and cultural values in their modern designs, mostly limit themselves to just repeating traditional forms and/or orders.

A major part of this challenge, however, comes from inappropriate education and can, accordingly, be solved by offering a more imaginative and appropriate education. The quest for returning to original values as well as identifying an acceptable and appropriate way of adapting to modern time, contemporary design highlights the importance of history and tradition. History is, in fact, an integral part of the identity of any contemporary culture. The history lesson and its influence on the formation of our contemporary architecture, however, has often been underestimated in the schools of architecture.

In the case of the architecture of Muslim cultures, several forms and symbols have been introduced as general Islamic architectural characteristics. For instance, the dome and minaret are strong symbols of Islamic architecture, as is the use of the integrated courtyard, the Ivan, or other decorations. It is true that these forms are symbols of the architecture of Muslim cultures, but perhaps the more important question which our students should be able to answer, is why these forms appeared, should these forms or symbols apply in the same way to contemporary architecture? If these traditional forms and symbols should change in respect of today's demands, expectations or needs, according

to which criteria should these changes take place? On the other hand, the creation and development of traditional Islamic architecture was based on a particular perspective and philosophy, of which today's students and the architects of the future are almost ignorant.

The teaching of History appears to be the best, if not the only way in which students can be supported to reply to those questions. Students should be able to think about and interpret traditional Islamic architecture. Such a deep understanding will inspire students in their future professional life and in their designing abilities. Accordingly, in this paper various thoughts and ideas regarding the history of architecture and especially Islamic architecture have been reviewed. As an inductive analysis of the literature and writings on the subject, the study tends to explore the new ways of teaching Islamic architecture. Focusing on the architectural background, such as the social and cultural factors and raising questions in respect of the process of development in traditional architecture, have been argued as being the most suitable ways of teaching the history of Islamic architecture. As an example to testify to this, the Islamic architecture of Iran during the Safavid period has been analyzed. The Safavid architecture, particularly in that of the public buildings, has been evaluated in the study, which was based on four influential factors: 'identity', 'political power', 'symbolism', and 'religious belief'. This evaluation aims to achieve a combination of research and practice, history and theory.

### Review of Theoretical Discourse

According to Mohammed Arkoun (1997), Spiro

Kostof (1986), Haider Gulzar (1986) and John Habraken (2006) the best source of providing a correct understanding of traditional architecture and cultural issues to the architecture students, is the history lesson. In studying history, as Habraken (2006) states, students will learn what fundamental images and ambitions have guided us in the past and may guide us in future.

It is clear that studying the history of architecture is not limited to memorizing the dates, names and architects of famous buildings. In fact, the mission of the history lesson as well as other related courses in the study of architecture is to prepare students for the real designs and the practical world. One way of achieving this according to Robert Harrison (1996), is to define the subject of history as: 'thinking comparatively'; 'The past' should not be seen to mean something over and done with, inert, static, and finished, he says. Later Harrison (1996) claims libraries as the main place for learning history should be interesting places too:

*"I recently sat in on a student review in which a library represented the past, a video hall the present and a laboratory the future. The library was a tomb, as some libraries are, 'where there was nothing new'. This was based on a misconception about libraries, as places where you go to check facts, which matches a student's misapprehension about the stuff of history".*

To think comparatively and to bring the history lesson to life, as Spiro Kostof (1986) points out, architectural history courses must stress the social, cultural, and ecological factors that gave rise to specific architectural forms, rather than treating these forms as a purely plastic art. Haider Gulzar

(1986) also makes a similar statement when he says, "Theory is interwoven with practice and belief with action. In education, contents and method are inseparable. The best pedagogy is rooted in the arena of life. An education that does not enhance the art of living is only training for routine tasks or fruitless sophistry. The studio would be extended to the city and the city brought into the classroom."

David Dunster (1996) believes that emphasizing 'Architecture Theory' in the history lesson can be a good way to show the students how an idea is created, developed and then transformed into the architectural form. He categorizes the history of architecture teaching into two groups: the survey courses and the in-depth specialism. Dunster (1996) claims that these two types of courses establish, rather precisely, the limits of architectural history, which here models itself upon the parent – Art History, itself the progeny of the discipline that only evolved, in the form that we know it, during the 19th century- History. According to him, there is a possible third type of course- that which looks at current architecture, and this may well connect back into what he argues constitutes the threat to history proper – courses in interpretation, or, as they prefer to be called, Architectural Theory.

On the other hand, Adam Hardy (1996) emphasizes that: 'understanding characteristic kinds of form, space, and color is an important focus of history teaching. As he states: "One kind of architectural history aims to show how to see, how to experience, different kinds of architecture; or, to put it another way, to understand their different kinds of order, their characteristic kinds of form, space and color. Such an approach aims, in looking at a

particular work of architecture, to know its parts and how they are arranged together, and to contemplate the whole."

Later he makes it clear that perhaps this kind of history is 'appropriate mainly to the art parts of architecture, to the monumental more than the vernacular'. Nevertheless, since this type of history teaching has come close to getting 'under the skin' of designers in the past, he believes it is likely to give students an understanding of and inspiration for design,

Iain Borden (1996:143) also believes that demonstrating the 'process of creating buildings' might be an appropriate way of teaching history. According to him, architectural history has reached a point where, in many ways, it can successfully account for how and why buildings are built in the first place, and why they take their particular form. Borden (1996:137) states:

*"We should not present architecture as an autonomous activity, which can be appreciated only by being fully-immersed in its ways or by watching respectively from afar, but as something capable of being inserted and understood in wider comprehension of cultural production. This can of course be done by showing the economic, social and political contexts of architecture... We therefore need not just to place architecture as an historical subject within various historical contexts, but also engage in the inter-disciplinary debates centered on different theorizations of the cultural."*

### Islamic Architecture and History Lesson

Teaching Islamic architecture might be done by using any of those methods, which have been so far discussed. It can be taught as Adam

Hardy (1996:187) states by 'understanding characteristic kinds of form, space, and color' and/or by stressing the social, cultural, and ecological factors as Spiro Kostof (1986) believes and/or by demonstrating the 'process of creating buildings' according to Iain Borden (1996:143). However, notwithstanding taking all these useful and practical factors and points into consideration, there is a further step, which requires to be taken too, due to the nature of Islam and Islamic architecture.

The term 'Islamic architecture', which applies to the traditional architecture of Muslim countries, is a diverse architecture. The interpretation of Islam itself also differs amongst the various Muslim cultures. Religious beliefs generally have different meanings for various cultures. This reality in Islam is even more apparent because it is a social religion, which offers guidance and advice for everyday life. Consequently, in each region, the interpretation of Islam has been influenced by other factors such as culture, socio-economical factors, political powers, other religions, etc. For instance, it is well known that Islam is opposed to nationalism. In Iran, nevertheless, Islam or rather the Iranian interpretation of Islam, known as Shiism, has acted as a foundation for Iranian nationalism.

As the expression of Islam varies in different societies, it can also change within the same society. For example, Islam does not have the same manifestation for contemporary Turkish or Egyptian people as it did in previous centuries. Therefore, in referring to Islamic cultures and their architecture, it is better to consider the interpretations and expressions of the religion and the various cultures rather than just considering the Islamic religion as a purist singular religion.

Since these expressions are different from country to country and from region to region, we are dealing with complex manifestations in architecture and culture. On the other hand, this multiplicity of manifestations does not deny the real fact of sharing the characteristics of being Muslim. In other words, it is better to look at Islamic cultures as a large puzzle, in which although the pieces are different from each other, together they make a single image.

In addition, understanding diverse Islamic cultures and investigating traditional architecture is better done through the use of tools and/or ways, which are related to this tradition and culture. As a Muslim scholar and architect Ismail Serageldin (1990:45) by explaining the differences between Islamic and non-Islamic cultures, observed that we may not have a correct understanding of Islamic architecture and culture unless we use an insider tool/method:: "...I can describe the reality we live in this room by taking a yardstick, which is a very useful tool, and by measuring the size, the length, the height and describing all the curves in this room. It is a description of the reality, but does not include the temperature or the humidity of the room. Neither of these would be captured by a yardstick. It does not mean that the yardstick is not accurate but that we need other tools..."

Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati (1981) also believes that using original insider sources are as important as using well-known outsiders' ideas. The use of such sources will provide a correct understanding of the original culture and Islamic architecture. As an example of such Islamic architecture understanding and teaching, the Safavid architecture of Iran has been analyzed

in the following section using mainly original sources and by investigating the influential factors in the formation of architecture during this period.

### Iranian Islamic Architecture during the Safavid Period

According to Iranian history, it appears that since the arrival of Islam, although the Iranian population is a composition of different ethnic groups, during the Safavid period (16th-18th), an Iranian dynasty could have control over almost all the Iranian territory as it stands today. In fact, the Safavid period is significantly important in defining Iranian religious belief, language, and culture. Safavid architecture also has been one of the most important types of Islamic architecture in Iran.

Safavid architecture is not only important in Iranian architectural history, but it is also one of the most distinguished types of Islamic architecture. John D. Hoag (1977, In *Alsace?* 1997: 447) describes the Safavids in Iran, in the Ottoman Empire, and in Moghul India, as the three great innovators in Islamic architectural development. Hoag claims that these three empires differed from all previous Islamic regimes because: "...each had developed a certain self-consciousness, a kind of national self-awareness similar to the contemporary evolution which from the culturally rather homogenous lands of the Middle Ages created the varied European nations we know today. Each of the three adapted the architectural forms, ornament, and materials locally available and made of them a unique and wholly individual style while devising highly original solutions for the age-old problems of the mosque, the residential



Figure 1: Khaju Bridge, Safavid period, Isfahan (Source: Author).

dwelling, and the tomb...”

Safavid architecture and its famous historical buildings although are quite well known, has been rarely discussed in respect of why such forms and order have been used in this architecture (Fig 1, 2, 3, 4). In other words, the architectural background, as well as the influence of socio-cultural factors has often been somewhat neglected in studying and teaching this traditional architecture.

One of the major differences between this Iranian dynasty and that of the other Muslim rulers is in their ‘religious belief’ and their interpretation of Islam. Historically, Iran has been known as one of the most important parts of Islamic world. The interpretation of Islam, however, in Iran has differed from other Muslim countries since

the Safavid period. During this period, Twelver Shiism was chosen as the official religion of Iran. This transformation from the Sunni to the Shiite form of the Muslim religion has had long lasting effects on Iranian society, culture, and architecture. As in modern times, many religious beliefs and traditions are comparable with this period.

There is no evidence, however, to show that Shiism was the original religion of the Safavid kings, although this form was chosen and introduced by them as the state religion of Iran. In fact, the Safavid dynasty had its origins in a long established Sufi order, which had flourished in Azerbaijan since the early 14th century. Clifford E. Bosworth (1996:279) describes the origin of the Safavids as:



Figure 2: Imam Mosque, Safavid period, Isfahan (Source: Author).



Figure 3: Hasht-Behesht Palace (Palace of eight paradises), Safavid period, Isfahan (Source: Author).



Figure 4: Chehel-Sutun Palace (Palace of forty columns), Safavid period, Isfahan (Source: Author).

*"...The family [Safavids] headed a Sufi order, the Safawiyya, based on Ardebil in Azerbaijan, originally orthodox Sunni in complexion, but in the mid-fifteenth century the leader of the order, Shaykh Junayd, embarked on a campaign for the material power in addition to spiritual authority. In the atmosphere of heterodoxy and Shi'i sympathies among the Turkmen of Anatolia and Azerbaijan, the Safawiyya gradually became Shi'i in emphasis..."*

There are some testimonies, even, which show Shah Ismail I, the founder of the Safavid dynasty was not a strict Muslim. As A.H. Morton (In Morgan, 1999:22-23), states "the behavior of Ismail and his court was highly unorthodox in any Islamic terms right up to the end of the reign". As a noticeable example, he quotes the court's attitude towards alcohol: "wine was indulged in among the Qizilbash in the reign of Ismail, not shamefacedly and in private as an illegal vice, but openly and with enthusiasm as part of public rituals". This therefore, raises the question as to why Shiism was introduced as the official religion of Iran during the Safavid period.

In fact, most historians like, for example, David Morgan (1999:22-23) describe this involuntary conversion to Shiism as for reasons of state, a kind of 'political calculation' and a 'sense of identity':

*"...The line of argument goes that the advantage of Shiism, in the eyes of Shah Ismail and his advisers, was not that it was necessarily true, but that it served to differentiate Persia from the Ottoman Empire, to provide the new Safavid state, whose people perhaps lacked a sufficiently nineteenth-century concept of national feeling, with a sense of a distinct and coherent identity: Shiism = Persia..."*

Thus, during this period, 'religion', and 'power' were integrated with other in order to create a new Islamic empire. As a result, it can probably be concluded that the Safavid leaders established the foundation of today's Iranian 'identity'. As American historian Nikki Keddie (1998) states, they were acknowledged in this role because they were able to establish a common religion, and they were also able to unify a large area, which more or less constitutes the Iran of today.

Choosing religion as a unifying factor, however, was a smart way in respect of dealing with the variety of ethnicities and cultures in the then, as now, Iranian society. Iran is a large country with various ethnicities, cultures, and sub-cultures, such as Fars, Turke, Lor, Baloch, Kord etc. This variation still exists. As a result of choosing the Shiite form of religious belief and Farsi as the official language, different social groups came together to create a nation and support this new empire.

During this period, some legends were even created in order to marry Persian royalties to

Islam. The famous one that ordinary people still believe in, is the legend that (Imam) Husayn, the martyred son of (Imam) Ali had married the captive Sassanian princess, Shahrbanu, the 'Lady of the Land'. Through such stories, and many other attempts, Iranian Safavid royalty tried to tie themselves to the religion of Shiism. As Persian kings, had themselves formerly been attached to the Zoroastrian religion.

It appears, therefore, that the three factors of 'identity', 'power', and 'religious belief' were important in the Safavid culture. It was also necessary that the architecture of this period should also reflect those influential factors since architecture has been known to represent and express the language of cultures. In fact, the architecture of public buildings during the Safavid period particularly expressed those aforementioned influential factors.

However, these factors did not hold the same level of importance from building to building. For example, in the architecture of palaces 'power' was usually the strongest factor. Such as Aliqapu palace-the most important ceremonial palace of the Safavids- was constructed in a style similar to that of pre-Islamic Persian palaces (Fig 5). The use of the flat roof and the thin, tall columns on the veranda is reminiscent of the Persian palaces in Persepolis, whilst, in the architecture of for instance, mosques 'religious belief' was much more important than other factors. For example, Lotfollah mosque, which was built in front of Aliqapu palace, has a different design approach. This mosque with its single dome on top of a long horizontal skyline expresses a calm and peaceful character (Fig 6). The small-scaled public buildings such as local mosques, small baths, private gardens

and so on, had less to do with political power in comparison to monumental buildings (Fig 7, 8). Therefore, it depends from which perspective and in respect of which type of building, the architecture of this period is studied.

Overall, the Safavid architecture in Iran as a distinguished part of Islamic architecture contains some special characteristics, which make it different from other types. Those

characteristics were based on the influential socio-cultural factors of this period. In as far as, the Safavids are known as the founders of Iran cultural identity, the architecture of contemporary times should also reflect some of these original cultural values. However, the way in which the architectural characteristics of this period might be reused depends on the approach to and interpretation of the architecture of this period by the designer.



Figure 5: Aliqapu palace, Safavid period, Isfahan, (Source: <http://archnet.org>).



Figure 6: Lotfollah Mosque, Safavid period, Isfahan, (Source: Mohammad Sadeh).



Figure 7: Pigeon Tower, Safavid period, Isfahan, (Source: <http://archnet.org>).



Figure 8: Ismail Mausoleum and Isaiah Mosque, Safavid period, Isfahan, (Source: <http://archnet.org>).

### Conclusion

There is no architecture, which has been designed or created overnight or by the acts, will or thought of just one person. In fact, architecture represents the story of life, in which the anonymous characters are just as important as the rulers and even the architects themselves. The development and progression of architecture depends on the socio-cultural, economical, environmental and many other

factors at the time. For example, in answer to the question: 'what is architecture?' states: *"... Is it the vast collection of the various buildings which have been built to please the vary-ing taste of the various lords of mankind? I think not. No, I know that architecture is life; or at least it is life itself taking form and therefore it is the truest record of life as it was lived in the world yesterday, as it is lived today or ever will be lived. So architecture I know to be a Great Spirit.*

... Architecture is that great living creative spirit which from generation to generation, from age to age, proceeds, persists, creates, according to the nature of man, and his circumstances as they change. That is really architecture..." (Lloyd Wright, In Brooks Pfeiffer & Nordland 1988:7)

To study and learn architecture, particularly the history of architecture, then, it is very necessary to pay attention to the architectural backgrounds and the influencing factors. Studying the history of architecture should be a thoughtful process, which is accompanied by understanding and interpretations. Teaching the history of architecture in this way as Iain Borden (1996:144-145) states, gives students new things to think about and new ways in which to think about them. Borden claims that asking architectural students to think about a number of different interpretations, even contradictory interpretations, "...turns history into something that is not so much to be learned as to be thought about and puzzled over; it renders architectural history active, not passive..."

This type of history teaching is even more necessary for the study and interpretation of Islamic architecture, since it has often been viewed as a homogeneous architecture. The term Islamic architecture has been used to describe the traditional architecture of many regions, from Indonesia and China in the east to Morocco and Spain in the west. The interpretation of Islam and Islamic architecture over such a large territory has been heavily influenced by local cultures and other regional factors. However, it does not mean that there is doubt about using the term 'Islamic architecture' as some scholars, claims.

Between these two extremes, however, it

appears that Islamic architecture contains some shared values, popular forms, functions, and symbols. It also expresses regional and local characteristics, which differs among various Muslim cultures. Introducing Islamic architecture in history lesson, therefore, should be based on such diverse interpretations as well as focusing on the architectural background and taking into account those factors which influence the formation of the built environment. As a result of such understanding, insight and awareness it is possible to bring the spirit of Islamic architecture into the history lesson.

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