

A review on  
**Mosque Architecture**

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## A REVIEW ON MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE

### Abstract

The mosque originates from the word "**Mesjid**", meaning the place where people prostrate to God. It is also referred to as the House of Allah. That is where Allah is worshipped. It occupies the heart of Muslim life and the centre of its settlement. Its importance has been heavenly emphasised and its form has been divinely guided. The function is clearly established in Sura 24, Aya 36:

*"In houses which Allah has permitted to be exalted and that His name may be remembered in them, there glorify Him therein in the mornings and the evenings." (24:36)*

Another verse establishes the building principle:

*"Certainly a masjid founded on piety from the very first day is more deserving that you should stand in it; in it are men who love that they should be purified; and Allah loves those who purify themselves." (9:108)*

Meanwhile, books of "**Seerah**", the life of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), refer to the divine guidance in his (Muhammed) major works including the construction of the mosque in Medina. This first embryo soon developed into a complex building equipped with a number of functional and decorative elements and incorporating spatial arrangements considerably different from buildings of earlier religions. The symbolic meaning given to these components is also important. This brief article explores the process of development of the physical and functional characters of the Mosque through time and geographical variation. In its first section, the article provides a general background to the importance of the mosque in Muslim life. In the second, it examines the morphological components of the mosque and follows the process of their development. In the last section, the article examines the design and functional types of the mosque providing a morphological and functional classification.

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### Introduction

The mosque represents the heart of Muslim religion and community. It is the House of Allah "*Beit Allah*" where two of the five pillars of Islam are conducted namely the five daily prayers and Friday "*Salah*". Additionally, a large number of Peligrimage "*Hajj*" rituals are also carried out in the mosque, in Al-Harem As-Sharif (Kaabah). Such importance is further emphasised by the Quran in numerous verses (16 times in singular form and 5 times in plural), indicating "And that the mosques are Allah's therefore call not upon anyone with Allah" (72:18).

In terms of community, the mosque is the place where members (the faithful) meet at least five times a day, united in the worship of one God, and stand equal in rows facing the direction of Kaabah. The Mosque also embraced other functions in the past including:

- A learning school for all types of religious, literary and scientific subjects.
- A court where justice was carried out.
- A political forum where citizens discussed their problems with the Khalifa. The tradition indicates that the ruler (whether a Khalif or an Emir) led the congregational prayer, discussed the affairs of the state, and often Friday Khutba contained political speeches ending with the community renewing allegiance.

Within these conditions, the Mosque was the nucleus that created the characteristics of the Muslim society.

### **Morphological components of the Mosque**

The above features and functions forced the Muslim architect to adapt his structural, spatial and decorative designs to accommodate them in one remarkable entity. We find, for example, the dualism of dome and minaret achieved a perfect expression of the submission to Allah, which became central element of Muslim religious architecture. The dome, popular in most cultures, had two main symbolic interpretations in Islamic architecture involving the representation of the vault of heaven and a symbol of divine dominance engulfing the emotional and physical being of the faithful. In functional terms, it is used to externally define the Qibla and internally lighten it (Dekkie, 1978). The most common forms of the dome are the semi-circular, which is the oldest, and most spread (figure 1). The bulbous dome (also called the onion shaped dome) was favoured particularly by the Mugals who spread it in Persia, the Indian sub-continent and Asia. Concerning the size, the earliest domes were small and often erected on the crossing before the *Mihrab* as seen in Quairawan (670-675), Umayyad Mosque in Damascus (705-707) and Cordoba (756-796) (figure 2). They progressively grew in size and number and were later used in various areas including the centre and some times covering the entire roof as seen in "*Mausoleums*", tombs of founders or of holy men. Under the Ottomans, in particular, the size of the dome evolved to cover the entire sanctuary area preceded laterally with smaller and numerous domes as seen in Suleymania Mosque.



**Figure 1: Umayyad Mosque (Damascus), a hypostyle mosque showing the semi-circular dome, and the arcades of the courtyard.**



**Figure 2: The dome over the *Mihrab* in the Mosque of Cordoba, internal view.**

The minaret is used to call for prayers (*Adhan*). Its height is mainly determined by how far the call is heard, a method which until recently did not require the modern amplifier. The minaret is also given a symbolic meaning giving the highest position to the declaration and attestation of faith, "*Shahada*". The declaration of "*Allah is the greatest*" and "*there is no God except Him and Mohammed (pbuh) is His messenger*", and the rest of the wording of *Adhan* is in fact a daily confession of Islam of that particular community or city. This noble meaning has been undermined by the articulation of skyscrapers, which dominate Muslim urban landscape including the city of Makkah itself.

The shape of the minaret varied substantially between regions, reflecting local taste and tradition. The square minaret evolved in Syria starting from the Great Umayyad Mosque and was developed under the Almoravids who ruled North Africa between (1031-1150). Examples of this include the three world famous minarets of Kutubia Madrassa (Morocco 1164-1184), Great Mosque of Telemcen (Algeria 1172) and Giralda (Spain 1184-1196). Finally, the spiral form dominates the Persian connection spreading to India and Turkey while the cylindrical and polygonal or combination of these styles is found in the rest of Muslim world.

The other feature in the mosque is the use of courtyard (*Sahn*) furnished with a fountain providing a space for ablution and under its covered arcades (*Riwaqs*) sheltered its visitors especially the poor. The edifice is generally oriented towards the "*Qibla*" complying with the regulation provided by Sura 2 Ayah 145, which states that:

*"And now We will turn you indeed towards a Qibla which shall please you. So turn your face [in prayer] toward the Sanctified Mosque, and ye [o Muslims] wheresoever ye find yourselves, turn your faces [likewise] toward it."* (2:145)

The sanctity of *Qibla* was further emphasised by the introduction of "*Mihrab*", a niche used to mark such

direction, and in private houses bedrooms and bathrooms are deliberately disoriented as a mark of respect. This leads us to raise an issue that many non-Muslims confuse with other religions thinking that Muslims attach special regard to the "*Mihrab*" like the Christians do to the *Altar*. The sanctity of the "*Mihrab*" does not come from the shape per se but from the direction it indicates (Qibla), in other words the Kaabah. This meaning had been clearly expressed in Turkey where some fragments of stones of the Kaabah were included in the "*Mihrab*" of Sokollu Mehmet Pasa mosque at Kadirga in Istanbul as well as the representation of Kaabah underneath the arch of "*Mihrab*" in some Ottoman Rugs (Dickie (1978). Furthermore, there are other hypotheses, which we cannot ignore. The Quran explicitly spoke of "*Mihrab*" in Surah 3, Ayah 39 referring to Prophet Zakaria being praying in front of *Mihrab* when he was promised the son Yahia (John):

*"Then the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary (Mihrab): that Allah gives the good news of Yahiya verifying a word from Allah, and honourable and chaste and a Prophet from among the good ones."*(3:39)

In Ayah 37 of the same Surah, Maryam (Mary) is the one described as praying in the *Mihrab*:

*"whenever Zakariya entered the sanctuary (mihrab) to (see) her, he found with her food."* (3:37)

The *Mihrab* here was translated as sanctuary rather than the niche. The meaning of niche is also introduced in Surah 24, Ayah 35:

*"Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth, a likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, (and) the glass as it were a brightly shining star, lit from a blessed olive oil tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof gives light though fire touch it not, light upon light, Allah guides to His light whom He pleases."*(24:35)

The word niche here has been transmitted in the symbolic form of *Mihrab* where traditionally Muslims put candles and lanterns reflecting the divine description and later was expressed in the use of this lamp under the arch of the *Mihrab* in most prayer rugs and carpets. Such symbolism extended to the lavish use of light in other parts of the mosque.

In spatial terms, the mosque, unlike Christian church, is wider than deep. The selection of this spatial form was intended to give more worshippers the chance to get nearer to the Qibla wall which is known for its heavenly merits. The first to come and sits in the front rows near the *Mihrab* is better rewarded than the one comes last and sits in the rear.

### **Morphological and functional categories of the Mosque**

The mosque plan was developed through a process of change and modification resulting in the emergence of four main forms reflecting the main periods of Islamic attainment (see Scerrato, 1976). These were the dates when Islamic World and sometimes regions were under the control of righteous and strong leadership. In this respect, the period of early Khalifs and their progressive successors developed the first type of Mosque. Being the earliest and most spread, this type had the form of hypostyle hall consisting of a main hall composed of a number of parallel aisles defined by arcades of columns and pillars. In addition to

creating a beautiful and emotional atmosphere which envelops the faithful as he enters the sanctuary, the extension of rows of pillars and arcades on all directions emphasises the limitlessness of the space, a symbol of the infinity of the Divine. This is further expressed in the system of organisation of prayers which consists of longitudinal rows of worshippers facing the qibla wall, and side ways forming a lateral expansion. The area near the *Mihrab* is defined by special treatment emphasising its sanctity. The use of dome in the square (crossing) in front of the *Mihrab* and the widening of the nave leading to it as well as the aisle closest to the Qibla wall are some of the main spatial arrangements introduced for this purpose. Further demarcation of this area is also defined by some stucco, floral, geometric and calligraphic decoration with intended meditation messages. Born in Medina from the Prophet's Mosque and developed in Iraq and Syria, the hypostyle mosque soon entered North Africa, Andalusia, Sicily and Persia and countries of South Asia.

The eleventh century saw the rise of Seljuk Caliphate as a reaction against deteriorating conditions and weakening state of the Fatimids in Syria and Palestine and Ghazanavids in Persia and northern provinces of Azerbaijan, Tajikistan etc... This had far reaching consequences as the success of these early Turkish people to the throne of Caliphate left its imprints on the general architectural and artistic character of Islam and set forth processes for the establishment of the Ottoman power. Under the patronage of Suljuk princes, Iran (Persia) developed new style of mosques known as "*Iwan*" mosque. Here, a high vaulted hall was built to function as a great entrance leading to the sanctuary and domed area before the *Mihrab* and sometimes leading to the *Sahn*. The roof of the *Iwan* is vaulted and commonly covered with "*Muqarnas*". Historic sources established the first appearance of this style about 890 in Friday Mosque of Shiraz as well as in Friday Mosque (Masjid-I juma) in Niriz in Fars built about 970 (Scerrato, 1076, p.58). Persians historically knew the *Iwan* as they used it under the Sassanian rule as a ceremonial forum. Later, it spread to the rest of the Muslim world especially to northeastern parts of Islam, which had strong connection with Persia. The *Iwan* was successfully adapted to other building forms such as in educational buildings known as "*Madrassa*" where it served as lecturing hall and on its sides rooms were converted providing rooms for students. Another useful adaptation of the *Iwan* plan was in hospitals and caravanserais, which spread in Iran, Syria and Anatolia. The popularity of this type of Mosques in Persia reached its peak in 11<sup>th</sup> century leading to the introduction of the four *Iwan* mosque (figure 3) which first appeared in Isfahan Friday Mosque (11<sup>th</sup> century).

The succession of the Ottomans to the Caliphate in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, at the hands of their founder Othman (d.1326) and reaching its apogee in the 16th century, resulted in the introduction of new features to the design and construction of the Mosque. Under the Ottomans the mosque evolved from the traditionally horizontal space to a vertical structure rising into the sky through its domed roof, which was arranged in a number of small domes rising progressively like steps towards the main dome of the central nave. In this type, the infinity is expressed through verticality and hence the dome became the dominating skyline of Muslim mosques, probably influenced by Hagga Sofia as many Western academics would suggest. Furthermore, this mosque stressed another important symbol involving the oneness of God, conceptualised by Al-Tawhid, which forms the essence of Muslim faith. The perfect centralisation of the space under the main dome affirmed its unity and confirmed the symbol of one God. In the view of Davies (1982, p.127):

*"The interior is then one unit to be perceived in its entirety at a single view. Its reality is not to be found in the domes and arcades but in the cavities they define. Plenitude of space ... majestic space ... continuous space ... tawhid (the consciousness of divine Unity) made visible."*

Ottoman domed mosques themselves displayed a variety expressed in the style and number of domes employed. At first, the roof was made of a number of small domes sometimes combined with a central larger one (mother). The first of these is the Yesil Cami Mosque (Bursa) which was founded by Mehmet I (1403-1421) in 1419. The Mosque was located in a complex site that included a bath, a tomb, and a Medrassa. Typical of Ottoman mosques, Yesil Cami was dominated by its domes, which covered most of the interior space.



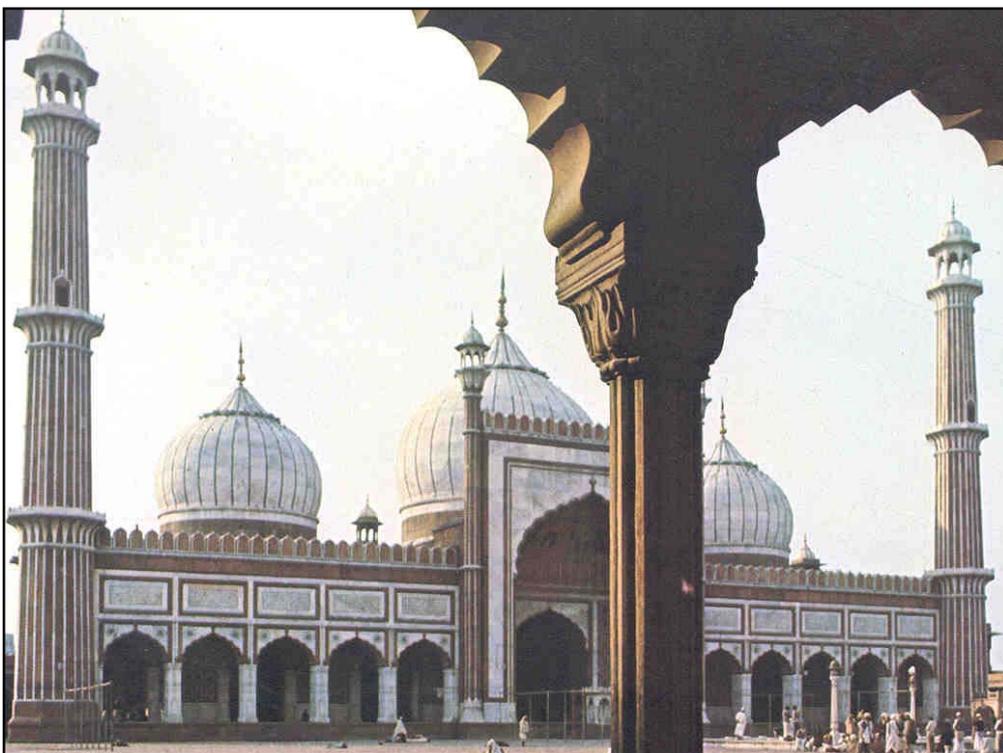
**Figure 3: Masjid-I- Jami, Isfahan (11<sup>th</sup> century), the first four Iwan Mosque.**



**Figure 4: Sinan's Sulaimanya Mosque (1550-1557), Istanbul.**

The fame of the Mosque is connected to its Persian made blue and green tiles decorating its walls which were made by artisans from Tabriz city (Hoag, 1969, p.42). The general decor and ornamentation of the mosque recall that of Hall of the Ambassadors at Alhambra. It is a mixture of both late Suljuk and early Ottoman art as seen in the style of its entrance which clearly emphasised the Suljuk tradition of extensive use of *Muqaranas*. These cupolas later increased in size and number first in Bayzid II Mosque in Istanbul (1501-1506) built by Kheyrudin and then at Suleymaniya Mosque (1549-1557), Sinan's masterpiece (figure 4). The second feature of the Ottoman mosque is the pointed slender minaret, which differs greatly from the rest of the Muslim world.

The fourth type of Mosque is the one developed by the Mugal dynasties in the Indian subcontinent. Here, a successful combination of the three above styles evolved into a fascinating new style consisting of a horizontal hypostyle hall area for the practice of rituals, covered with flat roof incorporating large onion shaped (bulbous) dome, and a large porch entrance recalling the Persian Iwan as seen in Delhi's Jami Masjid (India between 1644 and 1658) (figure 5).



**Figure 5: Jami Masjid in Delhi, India (1644-1658), a combination of hypostyle and iwan styled mosque with bulbous domes**

In addition to the formal and design styles, mosques were also categorised in terms of function and status in similar fashion to that of prayers. The five daily prayers are attributed to the individual and performed in the *Mesjid*. This is the first category mosque providing daily congregational prayer for the local community (district for example). Although daily prayers can be individually performed but in congregation they have higher merit up to 27 times. The Friday prayer, is performed once a week gathering the whole community in one bigger place that is called *Jami*, an Arabic reference to gathering the faithful from all corner of the built up area, and sometimes even from neighbouring villages and hamlets. The Jami has the highest status

locally (nationally) and comes after the Kaaba, Al-Quds in Jerusalem and Prophet's mosque in Medina (Saudi Arabia). The third type of prayer is the *Eid* Prayer which is done twice a year in *Eid Al-Fitre* and *Eid Al-Adhha*. Here, the whole town goes out to pray in an open surface known as *Mussala*. Lastly, the one life time prayer (at least) in Kaabah during Pilgrimage which gathers an enormous populous of Muslim world to circumsulate around the Kaabah and to stand on the Mount of *Arafat* near Makkah.

Outside these categories, we find other small mosques having other functions rather than congregational prayer. Among these are the *Mausoleum* mosques, which are structures built as burial places for important people such as rulers, holy men and other personage. These are usually located outside towns with modest size, but some have monumental character as in Gur-i-Mir mausoleum (Samarkand) and Taj-Mahal (India). The *Madrassa* is a collegiate mosque used for teaching as well as praying as in Al-Azhar mosque. The *Zawya*, however, is a monastic mosque where the devoted faithful could retire from this world into a holy environment. *Zawya* is also used as a boarding teaching base for student followers of a particular scholar, fulfilling the role of Madrasa. We have to note here that monasticism in Islam differs greatly from that of Christianity. The *Itikaf* tradition as set by the Prophet (pbuh), allows devotees to go into retreat but for no more than 10 days a time.

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