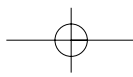
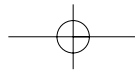


Nasser Rabbat, 'Islamic Architecture as a Field of Historical Enquiry',
AD Architectural Design, 74(6), 2004.

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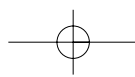
Islamic Architecture as a Field of Historical Enquiry

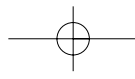


For many years, Islamic architecture, as a field of historical enquiry, was hampered by its Orientalist roots. Architectural forms were classified by types and styles, and perceived as sedate, static and unevolving. Nasser Rabbat, Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Architecture at MIT, demonstrates a dynamic way forward for the discipline.

Islamic architecture, long labelled with inaccurate and controversial qualifiers such as 'Saracenic', 'Moorish' or 'Mohammedan' was, until recently, among the least theoretically developed areas of enquiry in the field of architecture.¹ Few studies existed that moved beyond the taxonomic, typological or stylistic framework on the one hand, or the religiously or culturally essentialist or environmentally deterministic on the other. These approaches reflected the enduring influence of the two major and interdependent scholarly traditions that dominated the development of the study of the history of Islamic architecture since its inception until the late 20th century. The first stemmed from the peculiar historiography of the study of Islam in the West that came to be called Orientalism, and its various peregrinations both in the West and in the Islamic world. The second was the authoritative historiography of art and architectural history which, until the 1980s, routinely portrayed the history of Western architecture as history of architecture *par excellence*, while casting the architecture of other cultures in anthropological and ahistorical categories.²

The pioneering students of Islamic architecture were almost all European architects, artists and draftspeople who, from as early as the 1820s, travelled to the 'Orient' in the wake of the first European military interventions





in search of adventure, employment and the fantasy associated with this long mysterious land. Some worked for individual patrons who sponsored expeditions and study tours either as an aristocratic recreation or for profit. Others worked for local or colonial authorities, which were concurrently spreading their dominion in the various regions of the Islamic world and needed the services of all classes of specialists to establish and maintain a new order in their territorial possessions. And still others worked for universities or learned societies in the West that were interested in the architecture of specific areas or periods for scholarly or religious reasons.

Like Orientalists in various other fields of enquiry, the early students of Islamic architecture became engaged in the vast enterprise of collecting, processing and interpreting data on all aspects of culture and society in the Orient. They visited Oriental cities and sites (primarily in Spain, Western Turkey, the Holy Land and Egypt), measured and recorded buildings and ruins, and illustrated these using all sorts of techniques from freehand sketches to exact camera lucida projections. They also ferreted through the limited available written sources to verify the historical details about the structures: date, provenance, patron, cost and the like. They then produced impressive catalogues of series of buildings, singular monuments, and architectural and ornamental details that began to introduce to Europe, and to the dominant classes in the Orient itself, the rich Islamic architectural heritage that was hitherto almost totally unknown.³

The trailblazers were followed by several generations of architects, draftspeople and, ultimately, archaeologists, who expanded the scope of the survey to Anatolia, Persia, India, Morocco and Arabia, and eventually penetrated the faraway reaches of the Islamic world, such as Central Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. Although most of the surveyors were still European, natives of the Islamic world began to participate in the process from as early as the first decade of the 20th century. Before the middle of the century, the terrain had been mostly mapped out, and with the nagging exception of Southeast Asia, most major buildings in the Islamic world had been measured, recorded and classified into types and styles following a rather rigid dynastic periodisation, which is still with us today.

But despite their erudite and prodigious output, most early students were neither

equipped to, nor interested in, communicating the substantial intracultural variety and purposeful continuity within Islamic architecture, nor its conscious interaction with the architecture of other cultures, past and present. Instead, they set the stage for a self-contained architectural discourse charting the history of Islamic architecture as an endogenous and, seemingly, insular tradition that began with the building of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina around AD 620, and inexplicably fizzled out with the dawn of the colonial age in the late 18th century.

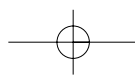
This trajectory was academically and disciplinarily formalised when Islamic architecture finally became a subject of study of art history. This happened slowly and gradually in the early part of the 20th century with the establishment of the first academic chairs for the study of Islamic art history, which included architectural history, in Western universities and research centres. The hegemonic conceptual framework of Western art history, which had its roots in the late 18th-century German and French theories of art, framed the intricate network of epistemological and cultural conventions that produced and used art historical knowledge. It also constituted the only system via which an area of study could gain legitimacy within art history. Moreover, it controlled the scope and methods of all subdisciplines, including Islamic architecture, and assigned them their slots in a chronologically, geographically and even ideologically prescribed hierarchy.⁴

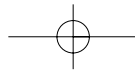
Accordingly, Islamic architecture was reduced to a set of prevalent characterisations – static, sensual and ornamental being the favourite among them – that stood in stark contrast to the self-conscious and historically evolving attributes frequently portrayed as specific to Western architecture. Instances that did not fit into this division – for example, the shared classical heritage in the medieval Middle East and Europe, the fruitful interaction between them during the Crusades, and their similar historicising stances in the 18th century – were explained away as oddities or aberrations provoked by singular historical circumstances.

The limitations of this burdensome, scholarly lineage were not seriously challenged until the 1980s. Empowered by critical developments in cultural studies after the publication of Edward Saïd's seminal book *Orientalism* in 1978, students of Islamic architecture began to question the validity of using geographic, historical, religious and cultural boundaries as disciplinary frameworks. They also began to hesitantly, yet exuberantly, ease into the liberating space of theory and method, and to extend their domain of enquiry into hitherto neglected periods, areas and points of contact with other cultures. The notions of uniformity, introversion, and cultural and religious determinism that long dominated the study of Islamic architecture

Opposite, top
Figure 1: Book cover of Pascal-Xavier Coste, *Architecture Arabe ou Monuments du Kaire mesurés et dessinés de 1818 à 1826*, Firmin-Didot (Paris), 1839, showing a distant view of Cairo framed within a highly ornamented archway of no discernible style.

Opposite, bottom
The 10th-century Bab al-Wazir at the Mosque of Cordoba (left), an example of the static, sensual and ornamental in Islamic architecture, and a view of one of the interior courts of the 1354 Bimaristan (hospital) of Arghun al-Kamili in Aleppo (right), with its austere surface articulation.





began to lose their grip as more and more scholars turned to the multiculturalist method in their enquiry. Some focused on the intercultural development of Islamic architecture over the last 15 centuries, with its substantial connections to the Late Antique Mediterranean, Iranian and Hindu-Buddhist cultures in the early periods and the European, Asian and African cultures of recent times.⁵ Others began to dip into the intracultural spaces – that is, zones within a given society at a given time that are shared by its diverse constituent groups – where people have always met and exchanged ideas, views, beliefs and practices and, in the process, created architecture.

Thus, the contributions of the various Islamic fringe sects and esoteric religious orders, Christian and Jewish denominations, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Hindus and others have started to be analysed as both instrumental components of a shared architectural language and as distinct expressions within its fold. The cumulative effect of these critical and revisionist enquiries has been to set Islamic architecture well on its way to finally devising its own epistemological and methodological contours, which will undoubtedly enrich both the

Above
The main *iwān* (archway) in the madrasah of Sultan Qalawun in Cairo (1284), a curious example of a basilical composition inserted inside an *iwān*.

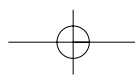
Dynastic periodisation has also resulted in needlessly privileging the role of the patrons in the conception of architecture and its signification to the detriment of the designers and builders. In the same way, categorising Islamic architecture after the Western stylistic sequence – Classical, Medieval or Baroque – has subjected the development of Islamic architecture to the rhythm of another architectural tradition, though the two have only intermittently shared the same trajectory.

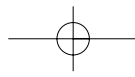
discipline and practice of architecture in the Islamic world and beyond.

Three main issues can be singled out as promising venues in the field's current quest for critical research programmes. First is a claim for a dynamic historical framework. Piggybacking on other historical frameworks and other periodisations has clearly distorted the understanding of Islamic architecture for far too long. For example, classifying Islamic architecture along the dynastic sequence of Islamic history – that is, to speak of Abbasid or Mamluk architecture – has led to the disregard for the architecture's autonomous evolution, since artistic and architectural movements rarely correspond to political shifts. Dynastic periodisation has also resulted in needlessly privileging the role of the patrons in the conception of architecture and its signification to the detriment of the designers and builders. In the same way, categorising Islamic architecture after the Western stylistic sequence – Classical, Medieval or Baroque – has subjected the development of Islamic architecture to the rhythm of another architectural tradition, though the two have only intermittently shared the same trajectory. This has also meant that some attributes of Islamic architecture have been glossed over when they were named after formally, or conceptually, comparable characteristics of Western architecture, of which Baroque Ottoman is the most conspicuous, even though the similarity was mostly skin deep and historically unsubstantiated.

This terminological confusion has pervaded Islamic architecture to the point that any serious revision of the methods and conceptual frameworks of the field have to begin with a critical analysis of chronological division and historical parallels. Furthermore, as any cursory historical investigation will demonstrate, other decisive forces – such as massive population movements, lingering national and tribal pride, theological and spiritual breakthroughs, not to speak of artistic, structural and technological innovations – had a more profound effect on architecture in Islamic history than mere dynastic change. But this does not mean that dynastic nomenclature has to be totally thrown out. Some terms seem to be reasonably fitting, especially when applied to the specific geographic area where a truly dynastic architecture flourished, for example Umayyad or Seljuk architecture.

In other instances, different designations need to be devised either because several dynasties followed the same artistic paradigm – as in the case of the various splinter dynasties in the early Abbasid period, or the post-Seljukid small princedoms in Anatolia and Syria – or a stylistic or typological rupture occurred in mid-dynastic reign. It is very difficult, for example, to pinpoint the difference in the architecture of the two successive dynasties, Ayyubids and Mamluks, in Cairo,





although, otherwise, they were politically and socially particularly distinct. A flexible and multireferential periodisation, with chronologically open-ended boundaries that account for the stylistic, dynastic and sociocultural overlaps, would provide the most adequate historical setting for the study of Islamic architecture.

A second topic to explore is what can be called the multicultural quality of Islamic architecture, a quality shared by all architectural traditions with a living history. No single model – or unique cultural reference for that matter – can be induced as the sole inspiration behind any of the famous examples of Islamic architecture. Different tensions were at work. The people and groups concerned seem to have adopted, borrowed, resurrected and invented at every stage, and then reapplied the new creative process to the next work. The buildings they constructed reflected these choices in their forms, spaces and techniques, but also exhibited a relative stability of their intentions and goals. They referred to multifarious cultures, traditions, ideals and images which their patrons, designers and builders considered suitable, representative or desirable, for themselves and for their cultures.

The multicultural quality, however, goes beyond colouring our perception of Islamic architecture to conditioning the means by which we can analyse it. Thus, not only were divergences from a putative norm common, but the very idea of an overarching conformism or an underlying essentialism do not seem to provide an adequate explanation for any of the bold and innovative buildings dotting the historical landscape across the Islamic world. Old research models will have to be abandoned and new methods designed to comprehend and structure the diverse alignments that have asserted, and reasserted, themselves in diverse and flexible combinations within the domain of Islamic architecture throughout its long history.

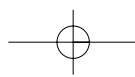
Some experiments seem to have led to nowhere, and were dropped either immediately or after a few trials. Others were felt to be more satisfactory and were adopted for longer stretches of time. And still others became cultural standards, used over and over again, some even surviving the 'pre-Modern' periods to become iconic markers in the revival of 'Islamic architecture' as a design category pursued by many practitioners today. The cases of the arch and dome as carriers of cultural meanings are such examples. Not only did they complete the transition into modern times with

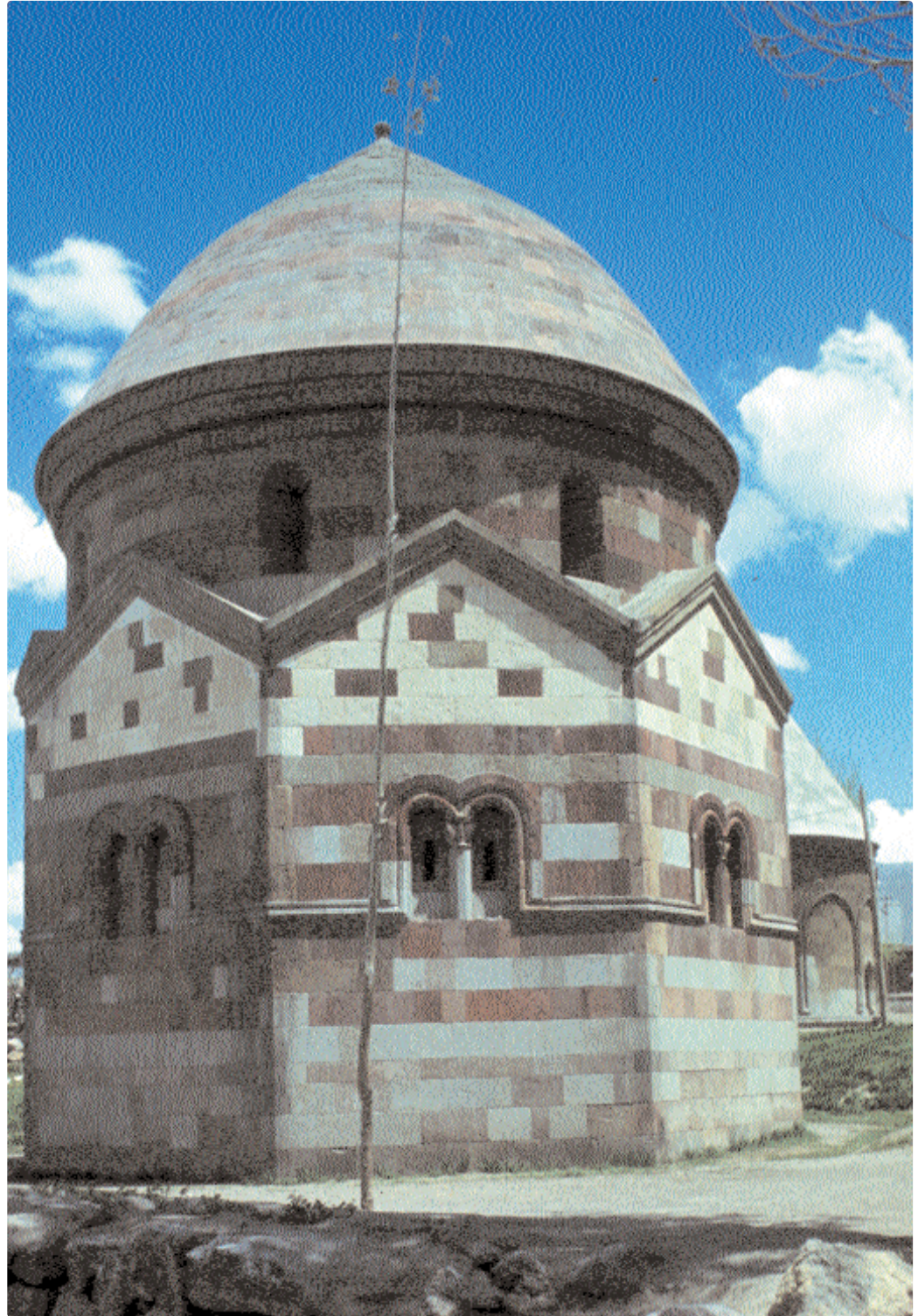
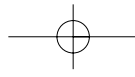
hardly a change in their significance, but their use has expanded to permeate all religious structures where Muslims build monuments to their faith.

A third critical issue, and one concomitant with the second point, is the dialogic dimension discernible in Islamic architecture. In many of its celebrated examples, this architecture appears to have been guided by a purposeful intellectual and aesthetic exchange within its own multicultural environment or with past and contemporary cultures near and far. Thus, Islamic architecture has interlocutors in Late Antique, Persian, South Arabian, Syriac, Coptic, Visigothic, Byzantine, Armenian, Buddhist and Hindu architectural traditions, and recently Modern and Postmodern European ones. But rather than mimetic, the process seems to have been dialogic; that is, it went beyond one-way copying to consciously engage the other architectural traditions in an interchange that resulted in original yet historically and territorially grounded architecture. This is evident in all Umayyad structures known to us today.⁶ But it is also apparent in a vast array of other examples where the cultural dialogue has visibly modified the formal outcome. These include medieval Persian and Central Asian tomb towers; Seljukid and pre-Ottoman Anatolian mosques, madrasahs and *tekkes*; Egyptian, Syrian and North African palaces with basilical plans; Ghurid, Mamluk and Tughluqid architecture in India; and some recent modernistically sensible mosques such as the White Mosque of Visoko or the Parliament Mosque in Ankara, to list but a few.

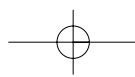


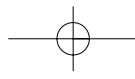
Right
Detail of the cast-iron porticoes of the Gezira Palace in Cairo (1864) designed by the German architect Karl von Diebtsch and presented as evidence of the capacity of Islamic architectural elements to adapt to modern industrial production (top), and the Bhong Mosque near Rahimyar Khan, Pakistan (completed 1983), a colourful, eclectic mix of domes and arches seen by their builders as signifiers of Islamic architecture with a Punjabi twist.





Right and opposite
The so-called Emir Saltuk Tomb
(end of 12th century) in Erzurum,
Turkey (right), a magnificent and
unique example of multilevel
dialogue with several
architectural traditions –
Soghdian Central Asian,
Anatolian Armenian and
Byzantine, and possibly late
Romanesque, and (opposite) the
Grand National Assembly
Mosque in Ankara (1985–9),
designed by the Çiniçi team; a
bold adoption of modernistic
gestures to the construction of
the most traditional of Islamic
architectural types – the
congregational mosque.





The effects of this dialogic exchange on the other cultural interlocutors were as pervasive as they were on Islamic architecture, despite the dominant art-historical framework that tends to ignore such exchanges and discourage any serious investigation into their scope and significance. Young scholars working on Byzantine, medieval European, Eastern Christian and Hindu architectural traditions are coming up with countless instances of direct and evidently conscious and intentional adaptations from Islamic architectural sources.⁷

Thus, to begin to critically understand the history of Islamic architecture, it is no longer adequate to study only its particular material, conceptual, social or religious contexts. Nor is it sufficient simply to identify its intra- or extra-cultural references and to decipher the various channels of appropriation they have traversed. The enquiry itself must be recast to account for the decisive role of intellectual and disciplinary dialogue in the emergence and evolution of the variegated architectural traditions that we today call Islamic. This interpretation shifts the focus from passive to dynamic exchange, and introduces the notions of reception, translation and representation in reading and explaining the unfolding of Islamic architecture as an active and contributive component of world architecture. It also offers a methodologically solid framework to consider how an open-ended search for expressive forms and designs has endowed Islamic architecture, like other major architectural traditions everywhere, with a vibrant historical self-consciousness.

Obviously, this conclusion stands in stark contrast to the defamed Orientalist view that identifies Islamic architecture with sedate, static and supra-historical forms, which has unfortunately and, possibly unwittingly, been resurrected by some of the contemporary essentialist theoreticians and practitioners looking for easily definable or loudly expressive architecture.⁴

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Notes

1 Two recent surveys of the field make this clear: see Stephen Vernoit, 'Islamic art and architecture: an overview of scholarship and collecting, c 1850-c 1950', in Stephen Vernoit (ed), *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections 1850-1950*, B Tauris (London), 2000, pp 1-61; Sheila S Blair and Jonathan M Bloom, 'The mirage of Islamic art: reflections on the study of an unwieldy field', *Art Bulletin* 85, 1, March 2003, pp 152-84.

2 The most graphic illustration of this division is Sir Banister Fletcher's 'Tree of Architecture', which clearly assigns to non-Western architectural traditions, called nonhistorical styles, dead-end branches while preserving the trunk and growing branches to Western or historical styles. The tree occupied the frontispiece of the first 16 editions of the book *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method for the Student, Craftsman, and Amateur*, published between 1896 and 1961. For a critical discussion of Fletcher's dichotomous structure, see: Gulsum Baydar Nalbantoglu, 'Toward postcolonial openings: rereading Sir Banister Fletcher's History of Architecture', *Assemblage* 35, 1998, pp 6-17.

3 The most remarkable among these early studies are Pascal-Xavier Coste, *Architecture Arabe ou Monuments du Kaire mesurés et dessinés de 1818 à 1826*, Firmin-Didot (Paris) 1839; Girault de Prangey, *Souvenirs de Grenade et de l'Alhambra: monuments arabes et moresques de Cordoue, Séville et Grenade, dessinés et mesurés en 1832 et 1833*, Veith et Hauser (Paris), 1837; idem, *Essai sur l'architecture des Arabes et des Mores, en Espagne, en Sicile, et en Barbarie*, A Hauser (Paris), 1841; Owen Jones and Jules Gouvy, *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra from Drawings taken on the Spot in 1834 & 1837*, Owen Jones (London), 1852; Prisse d'Avennes, *L'art arabe d'après les monuments du Kaire depuis le VII^e siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIII^e*, A Morel et cie (Paris), 1877.

4 See Zeynep Celik's discussion, 'Colonialism, Orientalism, and the Canon', *Art Bulletin* 78, 2, June 1996, pp 202-5. For a specific aspect see Nasser Rabbat, 'Writing the history of Islamic architecture of Cairo', *Design Book Review* 31, winter 1994, pp 48-51.

5 The list is becoming quite long. A selection of the variety of approaches and areas includes: RA Jairazbhoy, 'The Taj Mahal in the context of East and West: study in the comparative method', *Journal of the Warburg Courtauld Institute* 24, 1961, pp 59-88; Patrick Connor, *Oriental Architecture in the West*, Thames and Hudson (London), 1979; Gulu Necipoglu, 'Suleyman the Magnificent and the representation of power in the context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-papal rivalry', *Art Bulletin* 71, 3, September 1989, pp 401-27; Sibel Bozdogan, 'Journey to the East: Ways of looking at the Orient and the question of representation', *Journal of Architectural Education* 41, 4, summer 1988, pp 38-45; Cynthia Robinson, 'Mudéjar revisited: A prolegomena to the reconstruction of perception, devotion and experience at the Mudéjar convent of Clarisas, Tordesillas, Spain (14th Century AD)', *RES43*, spring 2003, pp 51-77.

6 See Nasser Rabbat, 'The dialogic dimension in Umayyad art', *RES43*, spring 2003, pp 78-94.

7 See, for instance, Jerrilynn D Dodds, *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990; Finbarr B Flood, 'Pillars, palimpsests, and princely practices: Translating the past in Sultana Delhi', *RES43*, spring 2003, pp 95-116; Michael W Meister, 'Crossing lines: architecture in early Islamic South Asia', *RES43*, spring 2003, pp 117-30.

