Abu Dhabi Forms and Fragments

Mohamed El-Amrousi and John Biln

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Abstract:

The urban reshaping of Abu Dhabi incorporates monumental construction projects as part of a larger government-sponsored strategy of economic and cultural development outlined in the Abu Dhabi 2030 plan. Once the salient features of several of the most important recent monuments in Abu Dhabi are understood, however, it becomes clear that their power cannot be reduced to a simple effect of an urban development policy. Indeed, these works can be interpreted as examples of a conscious semiotic strategy of 'gathering' identifiably architectural forms of major Muslim monuments from around the world into a single location, a new 'center' of multi-ethnic community that incorporates 'Islamic' arts and crafts across geographic boundaries from Moorish Spain to Mughal India. In order to appreciate the implications of this building program, attention must be given to the history and built heritage of Abu Dhabi as an emerging modern city seeking a unique identity among neighboring Gulf State cities. In Abu Dhabi, Islamic architectural forms and fragments of well known historic origins have been carefully chosen in order to shape the new religious icons of this cosmopolitan city. While this strategy does not undermine the restored adobe houses, mosques, and forts in Dalma Island and Al-Ain, the constraints of scale, style and ornament of these local buildings has now been supplemented by exuberant mosque complexes of iconic imperial origin, effectively acting as contemporary counter-structures to the glass block towers that shape the fabric and identity of the city. This paper investigates the emergence of revived forms in selected congregational mosques in Abu Dhabi that are open for visitation by Muslims and non-Muslims. The Qubbat As-Sakhrah Mosque in Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, and Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Fujairah, none of which were designed by star architects, are investigated in this paper as manifestations of collagist practices that serve to reinforce a projected sense of community in the United Arab Emirates.

1. Introduction

Abu Dhabi's 2030 plan has begun to realize an ambitious program of shorefront and near-shore building development that, it is hoped, will serve to support a larger economic agenda by increasing demand for construction sector services and secondary investment related to tourism and business development. Oxford Business Group's latest report on Abu Dhabi notes that public construction projects, in particular, 'have been, and are likely to remain, a key driver of the [construction] sector and the economy as a whole'.¹ For example, the Yas Island project valued at 39 billion dollars was completed by itself with a Formula 1 track, a Ferrari theme park, a hotel by Asymptote and other sport, retail, leisure, and tourism facilities, compliments of Abu Dhabi Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC), which was commissioned with developing al-Saadiyat Islands into an international cultural destination. It is not incidental that the major projects on Saadiyat Island have all been designed by star architects, each of whom has won the Pritzker Prize – Jean Nouvel, Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, Tadao Ando, and Zaha Hadid. Other projects in the city aspire to a similar level of architectural spectacle and landmark status. The Formula 1 track at Yas Island, for example, is explicitly intended to 'raise the international profile' of the city,² and its considerable impact on sports and tourism industries cannot be neatly divorced from its architectural qualities as a globally recognized icon of the new Abu Dhabi. Although the major construction projects recently completed or underway in Abu Dhabi appear stylistically and conceptually diverse, there are deeper connections linking them with a parallel network of cultural centers and major

mosques designed by Arab architects. Together these two architectural approaches, one explicitly modern and international and one traditional and Arab, work to produce an image of Abu Dhabi as a contemporary city with modern Muslim identity.

Author.

Figure 1: Abu Dhabi Guggenheim model.

The mega-cultural projects in the Al-Saadiyat Islands such as the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim (Figure 1) and Desert Louvre have generated scholarly attentions.³ It may be tempting to consider these as modern interpretations of local iconic building traditions. However, none of these projects display any links to the oldest surviving monuments, such as Abu Dhabi-Qasr al-Hosn, a square-shaped fort with arched niches and small windows on its upper floor and residential quarters for the Royal family located around its courtyard. An embodied memory of a bygone era and seat of the government during the reign of Sheikh Shakhbut Al Nahyan (the brother of Sheikh Zayed), this fort started out as a round watchtower defending the settlement established around it. The fort remained the seat of power until Sheikh Zayed moved to several new palaces in Abu Dhabi and Al-Ain. Newly planned cultural projects in Al-Saadiyat reflect references that are not regional, let alone local. Rather, these mega-cultural projects attempt to evoke linkages to traditional settlements and icons that never existed in Abu Dhabi's history. Promoted as contemporary built works meaningfully linked to local tradition, these new cultural projects attempt to establish for Abu Dhabi global credentials while breaking from the gridlocked urban plan of the 1970s⁴ However, the oblique shapes of the Guggenheim resemble more those of the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles than Qasr al-Hosn or any other local monument, while Jean Nouvel's mega-domical structure covering intertwining vernacular forms representing a traditional Arab city (Al-Qahira, Damascus, Marrakesh, etc.) refers to a past that may have existed in the historic centers of the Arab world but has no direct reference to Abu Dhabi. Abu Dhabi was not the main trade port of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and its vernacular settlement was of a nomadic nature that constructed reed structures known as '*areej*'. Wilfred Thesiger's travel books and photographic albums, *Arabian Sands*, describe and depict Qasr al-Hosn with an empty space between it and nearby '*areej*' structures.

In contrast, Thesiger's images of Al-Sindagha and al-Bastakia show the density of Dubai's historic mansions that developed around the Dubai Creek. In Dubai, the ubiquity of this built heritage, characterized by the mansion's wind towers (*barjeel*), allowed a convincingly reconstructed past to be woven around them. However, as new tourism enclaves, these have become spaces of staged heritage

that compress several times and spaces, various pasts, and an evolving present. Sometimes, similar enclaves are constructed from whole-cloth settings that appear entirely real and which sometimes surpass their imitated origins in apparent authenticity and presence.⁵ Such monuments tend to weave narratives of hybrid traditions that build on chosen sections of history, and they project onto the present a fusing of disparate places and spaces. This effectively creates a “new heritage,” which serves to validate a unified national narrative of place and identity that repackages the image of a Gulf state city from one of conservatism to one demonstrating the (constructed) charm of an emerging modern city interlacing tradition and modernity. In effect, this creates simulacra, imaginary worlds and social microcosms where different times and spaces can be seamlessly pulled together in order to separate the visitor from the real world.⁶

In Abu Dhabi, the group of neo-Islamic monuments discussed here comprise a complex strategy that considers the dimensions of cultural identity and architectural form, but which does not employ a strategy of spatial interweaving, as in Dubai. In practice, the Abu Dhabi strategy creates a competition between the collective imprint of regional Arab Muslim architects such as Yousef Abdellky (with the British consultants Halcrow), designers of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque; Abdul Raheem Sayed Al Hashemi, designer of Qubbat As-Sakhras Mosque; and the Malaysian architect's Arkitekt ICB SDN.BHD, designers of Sheikh Zayed Mosque Fujairah, on the one hand; and the designs of star architects such as Foster and Partners, designers of the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, UAE Pavilion-Saadiyat, the new Abu Dhabi Central Market and Masdar City; Zaha Hadid, designer of the Sheikh Zayed Bridge, and the Performing Arts Center; Frank Gehry, designer of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi; and Jean Nouvel, designer of the Desert Louvre Abu Dhabi, on the other hand. The mosque architects construct a contemporary heritage based Islamic icons with clear historic references, while star architects create new forms bearing their own identifiable signatures unbounded by external stylistic constraints.

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque Abu Dhabi (2007), Qubbat As-Sakhras Mosque (2010), and the Sheikh Zayed Mosque Fujairah (2013) are prominently located in sites that have high visibility and have websites that mention specifically that they are open to non-Muslims for visitation. These new shrines of Islam in Abu Dhabi are based on well-known historical precedents such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Taj Mahal in Agra, and Sinan Pasha's funerary complexes in Istanbul and Edirne. As such, they can be seen as together positioning Abu Dhabi as a new center for a globally emerging, multi-faceted Islam. Already, the extraordinarily popular Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque functions as the Taj Mahal of the Gulf, attracting up to 14,000 visitors a day.⁷ In this monument, we see the outlines of a new kind of Arab-Islamic authenticity, rooted neither in a purely mimicry-driven nostalgia for a lost past, nor uncritically embedded in a global modernity not of its creation. Such monuments are not simple manifestations of hyper-reality targeting a specific sector of tourism, as is the case in many of Dubai's high-end resorts, such as Al-Qasr in Jumeirah, the Palm Islands, Al-Mahra resort, and the Miraj Hotel. Works such as the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, rather, conform to a strategy of harnessing instantly recognizable architectural fragments and forms from across the geographies and histories of Islam, in essence ‘gathering’ a diverse collection of the high-end arts and crafts of Islam in a single place – Abu Dhabi.

While the architectural qualities of these new Muslim shrines in Abu Dhabi essentially bypass regional building traditions in adopting forms from a broader spectrum of Islamic architecture, these new Muslim shrines are at the same time crucial to the urban image and vitality of Abu Dhabi. Anthony King notes in *Globalization* that a shared interdependency has become a fact of life through which a global imaginary is becoming an environment and an identity.⁸ A related divorce of architectural form and detail from immediate social and cultural contexts is effectively shifting architecture to a new era, an era of global homogenisation of representation. This allows the creation of a new kind of heritage which can easily serve to validate a unified national narrative of place and identity. The iconic status of such buildings and

their relocation in the United Arab Emirates questions the idea that style is locally generated and it interrogates the academic assumption that mosque-type stylistic classifications can operate only within specific contexts of identity and nationalism. Classification of building styles builds on academic genres from 19th century colonial traditions where the museum, the map and the census created a specific world order.⁹ In emerging modern Arab cities, stylistic order is no longer a constraint, as mimicked religious and secular forms and fragments, as well as fully replicated buildings, have become widely acceptable and visited as sites of architecture spectacle upon which a paradoxically unique urban identity can be constructed.

Author.

Figure 2: Qubbat as-Sakhrah Mosque in Abu Dhabi.

2. Qubbat As-Sakhrah Mosque in Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi's new shrines of Islam display salient features of historic monuments from the Muslim world and remain true to the exterior form, materials, and craftsmanship of their exemplars. However, in contrast to their spectacular exteriors, in which much effort has been made to faithfully emulate antecedents, the interiors of these mosques deviate from any specific style. These projects are explicitly eclectic and sometimes kitsch. Accordingly, architects and art historians can be forgiven for finding them difficult to appreciate. As Oleg Grabar notes, the discomfort such works produce is rooted in their particular sense of newness, which requires art and architectural historians to deal responsibly with a sense of both past and present at one time in a single work. In purely historical monuments, age value and their status of incompleteness as historic buildings adds an element of sanctification to them which tends to make them easier to accept as works worthy of serious study.¹⁰ The new religious icons of Abu Dhabi are indeed stylistically and temporally eclectic, but they, too, should be studied seriously, particularly if we want to understand the role of historical reference in the modern Islamic city.

A good place to begin this analysis is the Abu Dhabi's Qubbat As-Sakhrah Mosque (Figure 2). The mosque is nestled among Bain Al Jessrain's stately villas and luxury hotels, standing as a replica of one of the world's most recognized and holiest of mosques, Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The external facades of this monument highlight many of the details of the original. The Qubbat As-Sakhrah Mosque

has been designed so as to faithfully mimic the original's golden paneled dome with its distinctive tiled drum pierced with arched windows and Ottoman tiles. The tiles that were added by Sultan Suleiman in the 16th century are also replicated. The exterior emphasizes the use of arched windows and blind niches with alternating patterns of Ottoman *cuerda seca* and *Iznik* tiles on the upper section of the façade, while the use of white marble dado and strips of beige marble further demonstrates the degree to which traditional motifs can be successfully re-orchestrated well beyond the constraints of an exemplar's own time and space.

A strong sense of expansive and inclusive historical referencing is reinforced through the replication of the domed pavilions found around the original Dome of the Rock. The Qubbat As-Sakhrah Mosque designer, whose name is not mentioned, replicated even the smaller domes found on the original *Al-Haram* site in Jerusalem. The iconic *thuluth* inscription bands, circumambulating the upper parts of the facades of the octagonal structure, discuss Quranic verses from Surat 'Ya Seen' (no. 36), appropriately replacing Surat al-Isra (no. 17) of the original, which specifically concerns Jerusalem, rather than Abu Dhabi (Figure 3). As Oleg Grabar points out, such verses are generally chosen in order to relate as much as possible to local site and surrounding community.¹¹

On the walls and spandrels of the interior arches, as well as the exterior facades of the Dome of the Rock, those verses are associated with the night trip of the Prophet Muhammad (al-Isra and Miraj journey). Here, the *thuluth* inscription bands preserve clearly identifiable references to iconic monuments and institutions that together constitute a shared 'memory' of historic ornament accumulated over time and preserved in decorative motifs such as arabesques, textured stucco, tile-mosaic, and marble inlay. The evocative power of these motifs derive from much more than their superficial sign-value. Their power here further resides in the physicality of the craft preserved in the rare expertise of the trained craftsmen assembled to re-manifest them. In these neo-Islamic monuments, an unexpected but entirely inescapable sense of historical authenticity, at once symbolic and material, sits alongside unselfconscious open-air social interaction.

Author.

Figure 3: Qubbat as-Sakhrah Mosque, entrance façade

In contrast to its exteriors, Abu Dhabi's Qubbat As-Shakhrah has a relatively plain interior. The obvious exception is the dome which is decorated in an interlacing arabesque similar to that of the original Dome of the Rock. The gold and glass lanterns inside the Qubbat As-Shakhrah are inscribed with the first verse of Surah Al-Isra, referring to the journey made by the Prophet to Jerusalem, a detail that further suggests a link between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem. Although the interlacing patterns decorating the inside of both the original dome and the replica are similar, a change in color from the original to one much lighter in the Abu Dhabi version offers a simpler interior that does not reflect the vivid exterior. The Qibla wall door has been sealed and replaced by a projecting space for the Mihrab. Overall, the Qubbat As-Shakhrah's interior is a simple prayer space that does not offer much decoration. Given the design emphasis on the exteriors, this mosque was clearly meant to be seen and appreciated from the outside. Indeed, the new mosques of Abu Dhabi challenge the logic of the introverted malls and isolated dreamscapes of Dubai. These mosques instead function as popular exterior gathering spaces and, not incidentally, gesture via their exteriors to a shared heritage largely ignored by the mega-malls and other interiorized public spaces more typical of Gulf cities.

As Abu Dhabi's neo-Islamic-styled monuments mark the reemergence of the congregational mosque as a landmark in the modern city, they also question the notion of a fixed heritage associated with a specific place. The problem of style and its suitability to the region faces many architects today. This is perhaps especially so in oil-rich Gulf states where the usual competition among architects is exacerbated by the presence of 'star' architects with global stature, a desire by city governments to claim distinction for their cities through architectural expression, and the ready availability of virtually unlimited budgets for the funding of new projects. The success of architectural solutions rests in the quality of the metaphors by which these tensions and opportunities are formally resolved. The challenges of modern times demand high levels of creativity from architects, intensifying their responsibilities and rendering their tasks more difficult than ever by requiring a completely different logistics of architectural practice.¹² In contrast to the typical modern strategy of attempting unprecedented formal innovation, and the typical post-modern strategy of altering proportions and compositional strategies in search of 'original' interpretations of traditional form, these iconic mosques employ clearly recognizable historical forms and compositions to unambiguously reference a shared Islamic tradition.

3. Reconstructing the Past: Forms and Practices

Historically, the notion of global competition and building new forms on precedents in the Muslim world has its roots as early as the 16th-century, when Sinan Pasha created a skyline for Istanbul through his mosque complexes, which he based on the domes and silhouette of Hagia Sophia. However, the style-based approach taken in new Abu Dhabi monuments cannot be properly understood without placing it in the larger context of regional urbanism. The modern Arab city has its roots in Beaux Arts neo-Classical design principles, which involved the suppression of function and meaning in favor of making available sets of architectural signs and fragments of varying historical styles through disaggregation and recombination into new formal compositions. Whatever value this approach had for the production of monumental architecture was immediately undercut by the accompanying loss of any cultural meaning directly relevant to the lives of the urban population these buildings served. Similarly, but with a little more concern for cultural meaning, much of the study of traditional Islamic architecture and monuments has proceeded from descriptions and representations of the arts of Islam by Orientalist artists and architects such as Owen Jones (1842-5), Pascal Coste (1818-1837), Prisse d'Avennes (1877), David Roberts (1838-1840), and others. Many of the books on Islamic geometric design share with Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* a desire to stimulate new creativity in pattern making and in architectural design. These artists and authors offered detailed drawings of Muslim monuments and act as a significant set of references for the construction, restoration, and reconstruction of tradition.

Abu Dhabi evidences a serious determination to consider anew what it means to be Arab and Islamic, and to recognize that the principle design challenge today will be how to support a cohesive social identity inseparable from a shared Islamic heritage, but to do this in a thoroughly modern way. The challenge of newness in a historical context, addressed by Grabar, is also considered by Jonathan Raban in his novel *Arabia*. Raban, who visited Abu Dhabi in the late 1970's, draws special attention to the historic vacuum created by the lack of a cohesive built heritage. Raban notes that the then-new Abu Dhabi tower blocks built of pre-stressed concrete and clad in colored glass panels contained unused and presumably unwanted office furniture still covered in plastic. He also describes the different approaches taken by developers of Gulf cities en-route to modernization and the need for the wax figures dressed in traditional clothes in museums to reassure the nationals of their identity. Even thirty years ago, Raban could identify a rivalry, rooted in images of modernity, between Gulf State rulers, each trying to develop longer runways, bigger airports, and more impressive waterfronts.¹³ A large Arab expatriate population, increasing political importance of the country and lack of tangible heritage in Abu Dhabi, taken together, set the ground for understanding the interest in reconstructing a monumental past that could assert the image of Abu Dhabi as a modern Arab capital. In which a mix of functional and symbolic elements could effectively reinforce in their users an overarching but non-specific sense of being 'Arab.

Hassan Fathy, provoked by the spread of concrete and glass blocks of architecture insinuated by modernism, attempted to develop an alternative architecture in Egypt with an emphasis on nostalgia and revival of the past. His work was based largely on rural building traditions that tended to bracket any sort of active engagement with modernity or contemporary approaches to construction. Fathy's projects were never very popular with the public, but they helped produce within the international design profession the notion that local heritage and socio-cultural realities should be protected from the homogenizing effects of Western Modernism.¹⁴ Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, Fathy's disciple, extended Fathy's approach to include the use of rich materials and historic forms, especially in the Gulf States. In particular, El-Wakil designed an influential series of Cairene Mamluk-inspired mosques along the Corniche of Jeddah. Virtually exact replications of domes and sections of the façade of the mosque of Sultan Hassan (1356) can be seen on the King Saud Mosque in Al-Sharafeyyah in Jeddah. Overall, El-Wakil's Corniche projects of the 1980s effectively re-introduced the mosque as modern sculpture to the Gulf States. What is interesting here is that although these mosques drew upon Mamluk forms, they evidence a blurring of stylistic boundaries. El-Wakil insisted on the possibility of transplanting stylistically distinctive monuments beyond national boundaries in order to create stylistically charged religious spaces unrelated to locality or local community. At the time, the fragmentary design approach taken by El-Wakil in his mosques in Saudi Arabia effectively highlighted the need to preserve and reassert important cultural references by incorporating certain architectonic layers of a historic monument. As an attempt to adapt non-local architectonic elements to local taste, however, this further marginalized the importance of whatever little heritage still intact. In this respect both El-Wakil's design strategy and those of designers of the new iconic mosques in the UAE can be understood to be constructing new heritages which are well integrated into the larger architectural history of Islam, but at the same time stylistically disconnected from the local built heritage

4. Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque is an important example of the recent iconic mosques in Abu Dhabi. This mosque represents a unique phenomenon in the Gulf. It is a religious monument built with the explicit intention of becoming a site for visitation based on its assimilation of classical Islamic forms and crafts into an *in situ* museum that displays ornaments from a wide spectrum of dynasties. The vehicles of this display are the very walls, niches, domes, ceilings and floors of the mosque itself. From the outset, then, even before they enter, visitors should expect to find a monument that dispenses with any notion of a fixed heritage associated with a specific place. Instead, the architectural and aesthetic elements this mosque brings from other places and times are treated as entirely transportable. This strategy gains

legitimacy from the obvious quality of the building and sophistication of the design. Despite striking similarities in form and massing between the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and the Taj Mahal or the Hagia Sophia – monuments arguably unequalled in beauty, power, and craftsmanship across Islam – the Abu Dhabi monument is not simply a pale copy of some superior original. Designed by the Syrian architect Yousef Abdellky, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in 2007 was built by the Italian contractors Impreglio & Rizzani de Eccher and the British consultants Halcrow. To date, the external landscape has been delayed until a strategy can be devised to ensure that no part of the landscape treatment will obstruct views to this iconic monument.

As a symbol of Abu Dhabi itself, it was built on a 9.5-metre plinth in order to increase its visual impact across the surrounding landscape, but perhaps its primary claim upon the imagination follows from the scale and shape of its domes. The central dome in front of the *mihrab* is 87 metres high and 33 in diameter, thereby higher and comparable in width to that of the church/mosque/museum of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque is a highly unusual monument in that it acts simultaneously as a religious site, a space of visitation for non-Muslims, and a venue for the display of the arts and crafts of Islam. Its domes, countless Moorish Hispanic arches, marble inlay columns constituting its *riwaq*, and towering minarets balance the superstructure, a pyramidal cascade comprising a main dome on smaller domes and a central baldachin. Together, these pay tribute to an imperial tradition deeply associated with sacred space (Figure 4). At the same time, this is a modern mosque, one that recognizes that its social rituals are largely limited to religious functions since it is no longer associated with the broader social activities that typically surrounded religious complexes of the past; these included schools (*madrassas*), hospital (*bimaristans*), *caravansaries*, and soup kitchens, all of which today have become spatially independent of religious buildings. Overall, the intricacy, formal sophistication and quality of materials expressing the decorative themes of the Grand Mosque stand in contrast to the lack of seriousness evident in much postmodern architecture collage. This project's neo-monumental architecture employs a rigorous formal strategy of inclusion and exclusion of a type that Anthony King suggests is typical of the new universalism of the modern metropolis¹⁵.

Author.

Figure 4: Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque.

Arts, crafts and building techniques are all displayed *in situ*. Upon entering the Sheikh Zayed mosque, visitors see multi-colored carved marble panels, crafted in the *pietra dura* inlay technique on the columns circumambulating the courtyard (*riwaq*). The *riwaq* of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque explicitly reference the tradition of *Iznik* panels that dominated mosque interiors in the 16th and 17th centuries, where they were a common trait in Ottoman mosques such as the Rustum Pasha Mosque in Istanbul and the Sulymaniya, and Selimiya Complexes, both pinnacles of Sinan's Pasha's works (1535-1588). In the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, idealized designs are again replicated in marble on the entrance walls to the prayer hall and in mother of pearl on the *qibla* wall. The mosque has 80 *Iznik* panels, highly decorated ceramic tiles popular in the 16th century, which feature distinctly in Istanbul's imperial and religious buildings (Figure 5). Calligraphic panels on the niches in the external walls of the prayer hall were designed by prominent calligraphers such as Mohammed Mandi , Othman Agha from Turkey, Farouk Haddad from Syria, and Mohammed Allam from Jordan. Traditionally hand-crafted in an innovative design rather than exact mimics, these characteristic tiled panels depict vegetal motifs similar to those produced in royal workshops and echo the imperial nature of Ottoman mosques (Figure 6).

In the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, they are exhibited in deep niches on the marble walls and as facings for the ablution and drinking fountains. Designs of these innovative *Iznik* tiles compliment the flora and fauna of the mosque entrance and the immense woven silk carpet. Tour guides relate the different motifs and ornaments used in the building to specific moments in the history of the UAE as a center of trade between East and West, a crossroads between civilizations, and to the personal attributes and achievements in planting and landscape of the ruler, Sheikh Zayed, after whom the mosque is named

Author

Figure 5: *Iznik panels and pietra dura*.

In the mosque, intricate celestial arabesques in floral and star patterns are highlighted by fiber optics. The careful arrangement of aesthetic objects on display, the controlled lighting, and the many details built into the architecture itself together produce what is effectively a stage set in which visitors follow a structured narrative path through the interior. The mother of pearl decoration seen throughout the mosque has played a central part in religious architecture and is a material technique that can be referenced to Mamluk inlay patterns in the *mihrab* area and on *minbars* and cenotaphs in Mamluk buildings in Egypt and Syria. Jewels and pearls have been crucial to the representation of transcendent space in Islam, and they have typically been used to express the radiance of flora and fauna and the luminous nature of believers' houses in the afterlife. Many visitors will recognize that the pearl motif commonly refers to celestial architecture, more generally signifying a paradise of infinite luminosity. Typically, galleries were used as reception halls, providing sumptuous settings for official ceremonies

and magnificent frames for the figure of the ruling patron. In such a context, these motifs easily blend aesthetic and religious connotations with sentiments of civic concern or national pride.

Author

Figure 6: Calligraphy panels, Iznik tiles, and pietra dura inlay.

Taken all together, these aesthetic fragments, decorative elements, surface treatments, and building forms function as an explicit and clearly recognizable set of references to the broad history of Islamic architecture. Following Duncan, it might be tempting to consider such an eclectic assembly of forms, images, and treatments a simple ‘composite space’.¹⁶ However, this collage of fragments and treatments takes place within an architectural design that projects a convincing image of totality and completeness, in spite of the incorporation of diverse iconic references and well-known images from the history of Islamic architecture, landscape, and urban design.

Perhaps the most direct insight into the power of Abu Dhabi’s new ‘Islamic’ shrines comes with the recognition that unlike the secularism that underwrote what Benedict Anderson has famously called ‘imaginary community’, nationalism here could never be fully placed under the banner of a modern mythology of state. A significant excess always remained, expressed most obviously in the penetration of religious meaning and sense into what in many other places has developed into secular institutions of civil society and political governance. Through a strategy of reproduction and fragmentary assembly of well known Islamic monuments, now figuratively transported to Abu Dhabi, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque exemplifies how a sense of religious fellowship and socio-cultural cohesion can be cemented into an image of urban totality and national identity without resorting to overt political symbolism. Here, political passivity of citizenship is sublimated into active art appreciation and spiritual enrichment.

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque demonstrates how state sponsored monuments can give citizenship and civic virtue acceptable content without requiring any redistribution of real power. State provision of such public monuments made, and still makes, the state look progressive without requiring substantive political change. These monuments act as signs of the advent of a new age, demonstrating the power of ideology in a gentrification process that reinforces an image of the city as a living organism and the state as a benign agent of stability and continuity.¹⁷ In the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the state is effectively subsumed into and identified with the rich and transnational history of Islam itself. As an assemblage of eclectic sources, and yet with an overall consistency and sense of fidelity as a “whole” facsimile

dominating the flat terrain it visually unifies, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque demonstrates how a fragmentary semiotics of imperial mosque antecedents can implicitly serve the interests of the modern state while explicitly serving a citizenry drawn together by religious sentiment and cultural identification.

5. Sheikh Zayed Mosque Fujairah (2013)

Author

Figure 7. Sheikh Zayed Mosque Fujairah.

Contemporary congregational mosques emerging in the UAE can be best understood as simultaneously historical, real and mythical, local and distant. The monuments discussed here – along with others built, un-built, or projected – effectively comprise the evolving identity of Abu Dhabi as a powerful and wealthy emirate now being extended as far as Al-Fujairah on the East Coast. The new Sheikh Zayed Mosque Fujairah (2013) is massive in scale and visually dominates the entrance of Al-Fujairah, an otherwise small town on the Eastern coast overlooking the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Its location on the flat terrain below the volcanic mountains allows for complete views of facades, something which was not generally possible in the architectural traditions of the Islamic world since it demanded the often unavailable luxury of ample surrounding space. While the interior design is not yet finished, the exterior is fully faced in white stone. The brightness of the Sheikh Zayed Fujairah mosque's towering minarets and waterfall of domes stands in remarkable contrast to the dark mountainous backdrop of Al-Fujairah. This congregational mosque has become the landmark of the city replacing any previous emblematic signs. Located between the main streets leading to the coastal resorts the mosque's classical Ottoman styling, symmetry and detailing not only creates a new icon for Fujairah, but also acts as an emblem of power that pays homage to Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed.

After Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the Sheikh Zayed Mosque Fujairah is the second largest mosque in the country. Set amid fountains and palm-dotted gardens on a large property in the heart of Fujairah city, the mosque is roughly the size of three football pitches and will be able to hold 13,500 people in its prayer hall. When completed, the mosque will have an Ottoman-styled courtyard, framed by its 6 pencil-shaped minarets and 35 domes. The main prayer hall is covered by a dome that is 44 metres in diameter, emphasizing a centralized plan closely associated with the works of Sinan Pasha.

Indeed, the new congregational mosque has undeniable similarities to the Sultan Ahmet (Blue) Mosque in Istanbul. Here, the structural system of domes resting on four semi domes and further supported by buttresses has been extensively mimicked. Even the number of balconies projecting from the pencil

shaped minarets are exactly replicated. The Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Fujairah, has been constructed exactly in parallel with the opening of a new free way that allows easy access from Abu Dhabi and Dubai to Fujairah. The production of this mosque, in Al-Fujairah, and at this time can be read as a form of extension of Abu Dhabi's sovereignty to the Eastern region through the technique of infrastructure development. In fact, this approach is essentially the same at Sinan Pasha's in claiming the small market town of Edirne through the construction of his final masterpiece, the Selimiya mosque in the 16th century (Figure 7).

As part of the greater plan of reconstructing the UAE's past, the Sheikh Zayed Mosque Fujairah anchors an urban assemblage that projects a range of architectonic elements and cultural signs of Islamic community, but it does so in the context of unselfconsciously contemporary activities engaged in by the Arab expatriate residents living in the Gulf, as well as a state strategy of leadership veneration and political consolidation. We can now begin to grasp something of a new and unexpected power of the Muslim monuments that commences with the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and continues through the other neo-Islamic monuments in Abu Dhabi and now in Al-Fujairah. We should also begin to recognize how this has reinforced the practice of reconstructing a past, particularly one that emphasizes the importance of visitation religious sites (*ziyarah*) and spatial movement, in a region that was devoid of such tradition. The fact that a wide public embraces these new congregational mosques suggests a new era in which it has become acceptable and effective to replicate architectural icons and figuratively transport them to new geographies and locales.

Conclusion

Abu Dhabi's efforts to duplicate the great 'original' monuments of Islam and to securely cement its extraordinary program of image compression in the popular imagination has helped to consolidate its international profile and shift the perceptual center of Islam just that much farther east to the southern edge of the Arabian Gulf – to the center of the region's economic growth and to the locus of its cultural ambition. The new mosques of Abu Dhabi gain this power from a subtle fusion of aesthetic sign fragments which reach back to, and are present within, the great works of historical Islam. This is a strategy that serves to unify the community in a shared culture across time and space, and one that responds directly to contemporary social, political and aesthetic challenges. In the long view, of course, architecture is always transforming itself to meet the changing demands of the times. Such transformation is never wholly of one place or time, however. The Agha Khan awards program, for example, seeks to recognize modern/Islamic projects that incorporate similar strategies for achieving genuine spatial and architectural experience, and which might carry the potential for applicability across the Islamic world. Thus, the crucial concepts with respect to creativity in architecture may be transformation, time/space, and 'difference'. In architecture, the new entity betrays itself by the absence or reversal of hierarchies or the trivialization of past canons and conventions at the level of major taxonomies, such as nature/culture, plan/façade, interior/exterior, communal/private, and so on.

Architecture's entanglements with other systems above and below it, and history's necessary concern with human endeavor and the specific nature of at-hand issues, together provide an extraordinary set of resources for contemporary architectural practice. Plan typologies, formal relations, decorative styles, and so on owe their lasting value to a repetition (iterability) which is itself intrinsically linked to both embedded meaning and a novel context. As Durmus notes, the production of new meaning is creativity in itself. As we have seen in the Qubbat As-Sakhr, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and the Sheikh Zayed Mosque Fujairah, a contemporary redeployment of sign fragments, decorative modes, and architectural compositions can function in a coordinated strategy of political, cultural and identity development. Paradoxically, the closer Abu Dhabi's semiotic fragments come to the originals from which they draw inspiration, the more meaningful the buildings they constitute become in today's contexts. Rather than appearing as merely derivative and superficial – rather, that is, than appear to

function as flat and weak ‘pastiche’ of signifiers severed from a meaningful system of architectural representation¹⁸ – these monuments creatively recoup a deep sense of shared identity and contemporary relevance, which resonates both culturally and politically. They can operate in this way only by virtue of their deployment of sign fragments that have never entirely lost their charge as elements akin to Anderson’s ‘emanations of reality’.

Notes

¹ *Abu Dhabi 2010* (London: Oxford Business Group, 2010), 127.

² *Abu Dhabi 2010*, 152.

³ Davide Ponzini, ‘Large scale development projects and star architecture in the absence of democratic politics: The case of Abu Dhabi, UAE’, *Cities* 28 (2011), 251–259.

⁴ Salma Damluji, ‘Brave New Cities, in *The Architecture of the United Arab Emirates*, ed. Salma Damluji (Reading U.K.: Garnet Publishing, 2006).

⁵ Christian Steiner, ‘From Heritage to Hyper-Reality? Tourism Destination Development in the Middle East between Petra and the Palm’, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 8: 4 (2010), 240–253.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

⁷ Abdel-Krim Kallouche, ‘Sheikh Zayed Mosque: The grandest of them all’, *Gulf News*, August 1, 2011. <http://gulfnews.com/pictures/life-style/shaikh-zayed-mosque-the-grandest-of-them-all-1.816998>. Accessed 6 December 2011.

⁸ Anthony King, *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁰ Oleg Grabar, ‘The Mosque in Islamic Society Today’, in *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development & Regional Diversity*, ed. Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 242–245.

¹¹ Oleg Grabar, *Shape of the Holy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹² Serap Durmus and Sengul Oymen Gur, ‘Methodology of deconstruction in architectural education’, *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15 (2011), 1586–1594.

¹³ Jonathan Raban, *Arabia through the Looking Glass* (London: Collins Harvill, 1979).

¹⁴ Nihal Perera ‘Contesting visions: hybridity, liminality and authorship of the Chandigarh plan’, *Planning Perspectives*, 19, 175–199; and Panayiota Pyla, ‘Hassan Fathy Revisited: Postwar Discourses on Science, Development, and Vernacular Architecture’, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 60: 3, 28–39.

¹⁵ Anthony King, *Spaces of Global Cultures*.

¹⁶ Carol Duncan, ‘The art museum as ritual’, in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries*, ed. Gerard Corsane (New York: Routledge, 2005), 78–88.

¹⁷ Carol Duncan, ‘Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship’, in *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 88–103.

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).