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Historicism and Post-modernity:

Transnational Mosques in the Contemporary Middle East

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Mosques are a ubiquitous sight throughout the Islamic world and wherever there are sizeable populations of Muslims. However, at the turn of the twenty-first century, they have sometimes come to be associated with violence and from which extremist ideologies are disseminated. The violence seems to suggest an understanding of time as a continuum on a Mobius strip circling back onto itself, not as a linear progression. In such an ideation, the Qur'an is used as a manual of contemporary law and the end of time strangely echoes the mythical beginnings of Islamic history. Ancient practices and institutions are called upon to create a new world order through the discourse of religious revivalism, enabled through symbols disseminated by new technologies. Architecture serves as the physical embodiment of this mobility of meaning; the mosque is thus simultaneously a memorial to the past and an aspiration of what is to come.

Among the current debates on Islam is the reinterpretation of history, which is often linked to an idealized age of Caliphal rule, the painful legacy of colonialism, or imagined regional alliances. They hinge upon contested definitions of identity, where governments and communities of belief compete for the dissemination of their own version of an Islamic past,

present, and future. The contestation is expressed rhetorically and monumentalized through the construction of public institutions, foremost among which is the mosque.

In this brief talk I focus on four nations in the Middle East and the manner in which their state mosques both reaffirm religious praxis and participate in the construction of nationalist ideology. This is an overview, if you will, of my recent book project. In it, transnational mosques are defined as buildings built through government sponsorship, both in the home country and abroad, and whose architectural design traverses both geographic and temporal distances. The centers from which my study emanates are located in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. I argue that these four nations represent distinct visions for the future of the larger Muslim community, and are taking steps to advancing that agenda. The mosques they build, both within their sovereign borders and across them, reveal the religious and political alliances that are formed locally and world-wide, and the complex transnational connections that define the contemporary Middle East, indeed the Islamic world today.

CONTEXT

Before we get to the issue of what I would call a historicist turn in the design of contemporary mosques, it is important to note that in the early years of the twentieth century, architectural production in the Middle East, as elsewhere in the developing world, was predicated upon emulation and engagement with Western forms of modernism in which emphasis was laid on projects that furthered the image of statehood, such as educational and governmental buildings. Depending on the country and its political leanings at the time, choosing the historical moment for architectural representation was a very self-conscious act. For example, in early twentieth

century Iran, Islamic architecture was seldom given much attention; instead, monuments from the Achaemenid and Sassanian periods (that is, from the 6th c. BCE -7th c. CE) were renovated and served as inspiration for modern buildings.

By mid-century state mosques began to appear as symbols of a nation's links to its Islamic past – that is incorporating and coopting religion within the rhetoric of statehood. Soaring minarets and hemispherical domes dotted the landscape of modern capital cities, from Islamabad to Kuwait City. This period also coincided with the dissemination of state-sponsored mosques built for diasporic communities. For example, the Islamic Center in Washington DC, was completed in 1957, through the patronage of a group of ambassadors from Muslim countries that came together precisely for this project. Mosques such as these were incorporated into the rhetoric of nationalism, representing countries as well as communities of belief.

TRANSNATIONAL MOSQUES

The 1970s were a watershed moment in the history of the Islamic world, which witnessed the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the beginning of the Islamic revolution in Iran. The following decade saw the rise of the Welfare Party in Turkey, and the conclusion to the Iran-Iraq war. This was a period of intensive mosque-building throughout the Islamic world. For example, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, under the charismatic leadership of King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz, established a “Mosques Project” overseen by the Ministry of Hajj and Auqaf (that is the ministry overseeing the Hajj pilgrimage and charitable endowments), “for the development of a contemporary traditional mosque architecture in Saudi Arabia.” Thus, the architect, Abdel

Wahed El-Wakil, was commissioned to design mosques inspired by the Mamluk architecture of his native Egypt that were formally traditional and aesthetically modern.

For the Wahabi Kingdom, the discourse on architecture and its representation is based on Salafism, a particular interpretation of Islam that looks back to the writings of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad for guidance. It is a literalist form of religious expression that avoids materialism through fear of idolatry. It manifests itself – in the Kingdom – as a pared down aesthetic, with no ornamentation at all. Not even Quranic verses, which are thought to distract. This abstraction does not, however, pertain to the buildings they export out.

At the time that King Fahd was establishing the Mosques Project at home, the Kingdom also began its global sponsorship of mosques, as a way to expand its political influence and simultaneously disseminate Salafist religious goals. The notable example is the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, designed by the Turkish architect, Vedat Dalokay, and completed in 1988. The style of the mosque is an abstracted Ottomanism, based on an early design submitted by Dalokay for the Kocatepe Mosque in Ankara. Instead of the Ottoman domes, we have tent-like panels, representing the desert landscape of Saudi Arabia and responding to the pastoral setting in Islamabad. Here ornamentation is not held back instead the *minbar* and *maqsura* are designed by two Pakistani artists known for their dynamic and masterful style - Gulgee and Sadequian, respectively. Here, too, the historical style serves as shorthand for ideology.

Interestingly, the construction of grand state mosques and their ambassadorial counterparts in the 1980s coincided with the rise of postmodernism, giving credibility to their historicist references. Historicism thus gains legitimacy through global trends in post-modern architecture, which had revitalized classicism as an antidote to early-twentieth century modernist

attitudes toward design and aesthetics. For the proponents and practitioners – such as Robert Venturi and the late Michael Graves – the style served as an antidote to the mechanistic and impersonal architecture of their predecessors, turning instead toward the cultural context of form, which was seen as rooted in familiarity and traditionalism.

Thus it may come as little surprise that the Republic of Turkey is represented through neo-Ottoman style mosques that harken back to the classical age of Suleyman the Just and the architect, Sinan. Indeed, one of the latest mosques to be built by the current government is the Minmar Sinan Mosque in Uskudar, the Asian side of Istanbul, designed by the architect, Hilmi Senalp. He is also the architect of one of the earliest neo-Ottoman style mosques built outside of Turkey, the Ertugrul Ghazi Mosque in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. Thus, expanding its global reach from Turkmenistan to Washington, DC, Turkey serves as a patron and an ally, as well as a negotiator between diverse religious and ideological spheres. The Turkish diaspora has an important presence in countries such as Germany, and its workers are helping to develop the industries of several post-Soviet republics in Central Asia.

Mosque-building, in particular, has been an important tool for the current government, whose Islamist links are a source of pride as well as condemnation in Turkey itself. The neo-Ottoman style of these mosques may be viewed as a reflection of the country's expansionist ambitions, or as the recuperation of a past severed in the secularization movements of the twentieth century. Both interpretations would be correct; however, their significance is dependent on specific geographical and nationalist contexts.

We may debate the merits of this neo-Ottomanism, but it is an important force in the current national politics of Turkey, as the unfortunate events of Taksim Square made evident.

Nonetheless, this historicism is not limited to Turkey. Current events in North Africa and the Middle East amply demonstrate that allegiances in the Islamic world are often based on the perception of shared histories - of language, ethnicity, and religion. Architecture, in particular that of mosques, manifests such connections by referencing historical periods and building styles, as well as by enabling the rituals of inhabitation that augment the practice of religion.

The case of Iran is different from that of both Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as it utilizes Shi‘i pilgrimage networks to recreate and expand its zones of influence. Take for example, the mosque-shrine complex of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus, believed to have first been established in the late 7th century. The shrine serves local Shi‘i residents as well as the multitude of pilgrims arriving from far-away places such as India and Europe. It resembles sixteenth-century Safavid architecture in its form and decoration thanks to the generous patronage of the Iranian government. It is uncanny being at this site, in Damascus, a city overlaid with Mediterranean Roman, Byzantine, and Umayyad architecture and feeling like you’re in the desert plains of Iran. A similar case of displacement takes place at the Sayyida Ruqayya shrine complex, also in Damascus, which is embedded in the old bazaar yet looks like nothing around it.

At home, the new Imam Khomeini Mosque-Musalla in Tehran, is the largest such construction in the Middle East; it remains under construction since its inception more than twenty years ago, although Friday prayers were begun two years ago (in 2013). The Khomeini Musalla is a gigantic monument, simultaneously imitating the Arch of Ctesiphon in Iraq and the great mosques of Isfahan. The first reference is to recent history, namely, the Iran-Iraq War that ended in 1988, and the second, a marker of the Shi‘i ideology that was asserted in Iran in the 16th

century. This temporal collapse marks the mutability of religious experience and the ways in which architectural signification is manipulated.

The United Arab Emirates, the fourth and concluding example, provides an important contrast and counterpoint to the previous ones. Established in 1971 after gaining independence from Britain, the federation of seven emirates was called upon to create a national identity through a different set of paradigms than those at hand for their older neighbors. In the early years of the UAE's existence, British and Egyptian firms played an important role in setting up institutions and government bureaucracies. Thus it is not surprising that the first monumental national mosque, with an eye towards local and global recognition, was the Jumeirah Mosque in Dubai which was built by an Egyptian firm and inspired by Cairene architecture. Almost a decade later, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque was completed in the capital, Abu Dhabi, designed by a Syrian architect and overseen by the British firm, Halcrow (now merged with a the uS firm CH2M). The Zayed Mosque is a collage, comprised of materials and skills sourced from the four corners of the earth (marble from China and Italy, artists and craftsmen from Europe and North Africa). The goal is to appeal to the diverse populations that call the UAE home, presenting a vision of a tolerant and cosmopolitan Islam. Incidentally, both the Jumeirah and Sheikh Zayed mosques are also tagged as cultural centers, and opened to the general public – regardless of religious affiliation – at select times.

HISTORY AS SOURCE AND INSPIRATION

Architecture emerges through these diverse examples as the repository of historical consciousness, serving as it does to both monumentalize belief and situate it within particular

geographic and ideological sites. For example, a building like the Zayed Mosque may have a singular physical location, but it will arguably reference places far removed from Abu Dhabi and moments remarkably distant from its date of construction. This mobility marks contemporary practice and subverts ideas of regionalism and nationalist styles that have pervaded the discourse on architecture in the twentieth century.

The mosques I presented to you serve to illustrate the complex and multivalent discourse that revolves around the concept of statehood. At the center of this discourse is the issue of historical memory. As the editors of a recent volume of *Public Culture* have noted, “The performance of history in the present has suffused public life and the media, and it spills into legal debate and policy formation. In this regard, the role of representational art forms...is significant.” Architecture must be included in this list of representational art forms, as an object of creative expression but also as a space of inhabitation, wherein the performance of history is monumentalized and also, literally, enacted through civic and devotional rituals.

The emphasis on historical style is not simply an attribute of post-modernity or a cynical reference to the past. Instead, the need to monumentalize different periods of Islamic history capitalizes on the zeitgeist of Islam at the turn of the twenty-first century, in which backward glances appear to provide direction and serve as inspiration for communities and governments seeking a new vision for the future. The historicism also comes at the heels of a revivalist moment in world history, which is witnessed in the rise of fundamentalist movements from Asia to the Americas, from Christian communities to Hindu ones.

As Anthony Vidler writes, “To think as a modernist, would be to think of history as an active and profoundly disturbing force; to take history on its own terms; realistically or

idealistically to tangle with history and wrestle it into shape. It would be, indeed, to think historically. To think as a postmodernist, by contrast, would be to ignore everything that makes history history, and selectively to pick and choose whatever authorizing sign fits the moment. History is used and abused in postmodernism; it is feared and confronted in modernism.” –

Histories of the Immediate Present

Nostalgia and theological revivalism are the fundamental motivations for the historical turn in transnational mosques. It would be incorrect to call this taste a move toward the “familiar” as modern forms of inhabiting the world are a more likely context for many urban dwellers in the Middle East. Nonetheless, the broadened public sphere has allowed for the revival of religious discourse to be a strong force in social change.