

Mental associations in understanding the characteristics of Islamic architecture

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Abstract

Islamic architecture as the symbol of identity, history and culture of this wide land has always been inspiring to many artists and architects. Therefore, restoring the values of the architecture as a valuable heritage depends on understanding of its different features and elements. In this regard, study on the Islamic architecture can focus on its meaning, design principles and physical elements. As the audiences of this art mostly concern with its physical aspects, using these elements based on their mental images can lead us to create spaces and buildings that can transfer the same valuable meanings to future generations. With this aim, the research tried to achieve audiences' images from Islamic architecture by surveying their mental associations. Totally, 137 graduated of architecture participated and described their first mental associations and the first picture that they had in their mind about Islamic architecture. The results indicates design approach, light and space, decorations, physical elements, monuments and temples, and spirituality; were the most important associated elements and decoration was the first element among other mentioned elements. In addition, the mosques and religious buildings were the subject of most of collected pictures from participants.

Aims:

1. Exploring the characteristics of Islamic Architecture based on users' mental images and its associations.
2. Recognition of the dominant Islamic architecture samples and their features.

Questions:

1. What are the first mental images when users imagine Islamic architecture in their mind?
2. Which buildings and characteristics refer to Iranian-Islamic Architecture and can figure it in people minds?

Keywords: Islamic architecture, mental association, mental image, physical element, space and light, decorations

Introduction

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Islamic architecture is deliberated upon according to its religious, corporal and functional components and at times is studied based on cultural and climate grounds. Despite the various challenges that have arisen and the denial of this architecture and its emphasis on the cultural and historical aspects of its context in various countries, the existing rudiments of Islamic architecture associates it with architecture and distinguishes it from other arts. Studies in the field of Islamic art and architecture can be classified into two groups. The first category, studies focusing on the formal aspects, which are derivative and devoid of spirit, and individuals such as Andre Godard and Arnold are prominent figures. The second category of studies that focuses on the semantic aspects and considers it a mysterious art based on the Islamic spirit and in this regard individuals such as Burkhardt and Carbon are among the prominent theorists (Maddepoor, 1995). A review of the works of scholars such as Nasr demonstrate that in Islamic architecture the form and the meaning are not separated since meaning desires form for manifestation and from a religious point of view, creation is a symbol and representative of God and the Absolute Truth.

In general, one's perceptions and imagery of subjects and phenomena are based on shape and form, and thus interacts with the phenomenon and distinguishes it from other subjects. Now, the question arises that what is the first image that comes to mind with the embodiment of Islamic architecture? By responding to this question and extracting intellectual images from Islamic architecture, the associations and its prominent components of Islamic architecture can be discovered which covers the main purpose of the present study. Therefore, the current research attempts to discover the visual symbols of this art in order to discover what features have an impact on the minds of the audience as an associative element of Islamic architecture.

Conclusion

As history concludes, the decorations of Islamic architecture have formed the subjective image of the audience more than any other influence (Figure 11), which confirms the research carried out in this field. For example, Grobe argues: "The most fundamental characteristic of Islamic art is the immortal pattern that has been fully developed from the beginning and in all periods; decorating surfaces with a timeless pattern of any kind and in any media is for this purpose, that is, to hide and dissolve matter, whether in monumental architecture or in a small metal box, this idea is applied so that it can decorate architecture; hence, the rigid and dull walls behind the plaster face transformation" (Grobe, 2009). Henceforth, Grobe ruminates that advancements in architecture and building constructions in the Islamic world is due to developments in

technology, decorative designs, ornamentations and the progress of Muslims in mathematical studies in creating works that represent the divinity of God.

Burkhardt, a traditionalist who deals with the art of Islam, in regard to decoration, states: "In Islamic architecture, heavy and unformed matter has been transformed into decorative designs and figurines, as if they were supernatural objects; with these ornaments, the interior of the rooms and spaces are no longer stone and brick, but rather mysteriously emit light, spontaneously prompting the verse: "Allah the Light of the Skies and the Earth"; to pious men; moreover, whenever architecture exemplifies into a universal and clear phenomenon, it will ultimately reach a crystal evolution". Burkhardt again states: "In the words of Imam Ali (pbhm) we have: "Muhammad is a human being, but not like a human being, but rather like a ruby between stones in the sense that Muhammad is mortal but not like other human beings but like crimson amid gravels. The term refers to the analogy between the nature of the crystal and the spiritual evolution, which also points to the point of architectural continuity to alchemy" (Burkhardt, 1997).

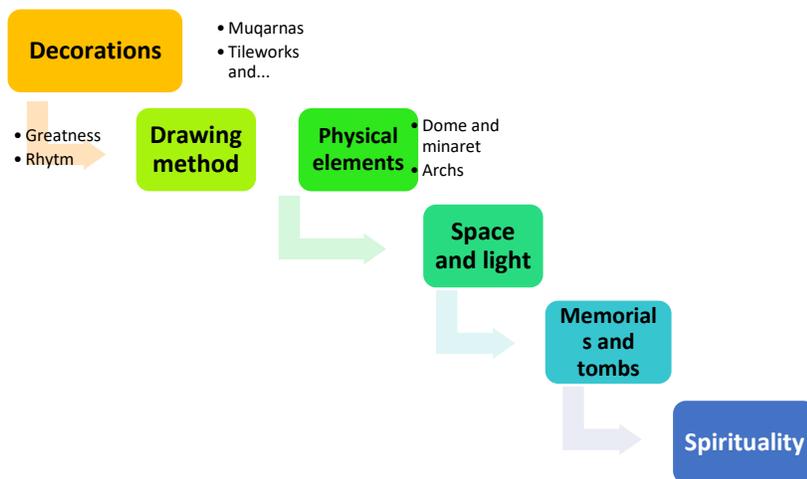


Image 11- Research findings in regard to the participants' intellectual associations of Islamic architecture in terms of priority

Another finding noted in this study is the importance of the art of muqarnas and various decorations such as tilework in space; what adds importance to this art is the granting of

this exquisite element to Islamic architecture by Iranian artists and this feature has constantly been emphasized by individuals such as Barbara Brand and has been dealt with in addition to its physical aspect in a semantic sense. In fact, carvings in the form of muqarnas and hive cells that attract light through their thousand sides or carved surface and transform the stone, plaster and plaster decorations into diamonds and gems (Rahnavard, 2010: 24).

Pope also commented on the presence of muqarnas designs at the entrance of the mosques, and in response to the participants by referring entrance way of the mosque he declares: "The exterior of the entrance way is enriched with atriums, niches and masses of stunning muqarnas and long sequences of inscriptions." Pope continues: "The whole façade is covered with a magnificent blue tile, the predominant color of which is located on the underside of the tiles on a golden marble; from the distance of the volume with the awe of this mosque's front, which sometimes looks like a foggy blue, compared to the mild-mannered royal palace, it proclaims the profound superiority of religion over worldly power and the central position of religion in city life" (Pope, 1365: 253). Another example is the use of muqarnas in the sub-dome space, in which Islamic designs along with the element of color provide a magnificent atmosphere (Yavari & Bufa, 2011); hence, adding ornamental beauty. The images mentioned by the participants in Figures 12 and 13, respectively, are from Sheikh Latifollah Mosque and Imam Mosque in Isfahan, due to the different characteristics of these two valuable monuments, they are mentioned several times in regard to the responses.

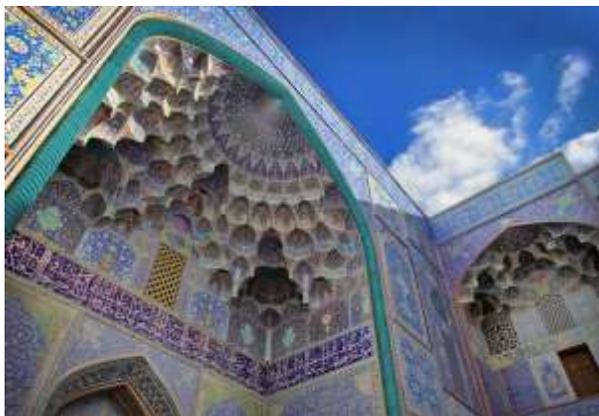


Image 12- The muqarnas decoration of the entrance way of Sheikh Lotfoallah Mosque
(www.tripyar.com)



Image 13- The muqarnas decoration of the entrance way of Imam Mosque of Isfahan
(www.eadabt.ir)

As to be expected and discussed in various studies on the physical elements of Islamic architecture, features such as domes, minarets, arches and arch ways have been mentioned. Furthermore, design components such as grandeur, magnificence and rhythm have also been suggested by the participants. Moreover, this phenomenon has been of interest in the studies of architecture in monuments such as the Jame Mosque of Yazd and entrance way design of mosques.

Another point to note is that, as Dr. Maddepour points out in his book "The Embodiments of Spiritual Wisdom in Islamic Art," the element of rhythm and repetition in space is a solution to the creation of an infinite and immeasurable space in Islamic architecture of diverse nations from Iran to Egypt and they are symbolized as an emblematic mediator to the absolute existence of God; moreover, this feature was emphasized by the participants.

Other findings of the present study, which are partially unrelated to available sources, relate to the factor of light in space, although much has been addressed from the viewpoint of religious and theological perspectives in regard to Islamic art and architecture, this was not among the first among intellectual associations of the participants; unquestionably, its generalization will require repeated research. Finally, while many scholars deny Islamic architecture and explain it with religious or Muslim architecture, the reference to mosques and tombs as religiously functioning buildings accounted for only 4% of the responses.

In response to the main research question that led to the first mental image of Islamic architecture, as it is evident in the data analysis, most of the image is related to the

element of ornamentation in Islamic architecture, which has always been emphasized in Islamic architecture. The decorative element that has always been considered in Islamic architecture for the purpose of dignifying the material and making it an exquisite and lavish architecture has also been the focus of the audience and has become the most significant component of this architecture; in addition, the design features and physical elements of this architecture, based on the monotheistic beliefs of Islam, have been among the hallmarks of this art to the point that it has made mosques and minarets the most important physical components in the mind of the audience.

An interesting point to note as a research achievement in this article is that spirituality had the least effect on the mind of the audience, indicating that subjective associations are more than material and physical aspects. This result suggests that audience minds are more than implicit meanings, and this aspect is more imperative to them, while the participants of this study were graduates of architecture. Therefore, further research that is suggested in the remainder of this article is to further research the general target audience of Islamic architecture in order to investigate the role of architectural education in this regard and to examine the possible differences and similarities between the two groups in this regard.

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