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### Research Article

# Investigating the Islamic Architecture By Focusing on the City of Yazd, Iran

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**Abstract.** This research aimed to investigate Islamic architecture and its architectural impact on the city form and building structure in the Islamic world. This research's theoretical base was founded on the frequently used term 'Islamic architecture' in the literature that allegedly has created its physical expression. The method of literature review was used to confirm whether 'Islamic architecture' created its iconic physical structures. The Iranian city of Yazd was selected as a case study to document if any identified element in the ancient city of Yazd was affected by the so called 'Islamic architecture'. The reviewed literature revealed no agreement among researchers to confirm that there is a recognised physical form, theory, or method to represent 'Islamic architecture' in the Islamic world. This finding and literature review point to a clear conclusion that there was no typical form of architectural design that could show the existence of so-called 'Islamic architecture' all over the Islamic world. This paper may stimulate and excite the Islamic advocates' interest to further investigate and introduce evidence of recognised physical form or iconic structure to portray Islamic architecture.

**Keywords:** Islamic Architecture, Urban form, Yazd city.

## INTRODUCTION

According to its advocates, Islam has created an 'Islamic architecture' that has influenced the Islamic world's built environment's design and structures. This research aimed to investigate Islamic architecture and its architectural impact on the city form and building structure in the Islamic world. This research's theoretical base was founded on the frequently used term 'Islamic architecture' in the literature that allegedly has created its physical expression. The method of literature review was used to confirm whether 'Islamic architecture' created its iconic physical structures. The Iranian city of Yazd was selected as a case study to document if any identified element in the ancient city of Yazd was affected by the so called 'Islamic architecture'. The reviewed literature revealed no agreement among researchers to confirm that there is a recognised physical form, theory, or method to represent 'Islamic architecture' in the Islamic world. This finding and literature review point to a clear conclusion that there was no typical form of architectural design that could portray the existence of so-called 'Islamic architecture' all over the world. This paper may stimulate and excite the Islamic advocates' interest to further investigate and introduce a recognised physical form or iconic structure to show Islamic architecture.

Studying the cultural landscape resulting from the relationship between people and their environment is not new in social science. The cultural landscape reflects the belief, socio-economic objectives, and technical abilities of the people living in each area. An urban form's design can be seen as a natural expression of prevailing genuine factors such as climate, culture, spiritual values, and beliefs. Correspondingly, creating a physical environment depends on the world's picture that people carry inside their minds. However, the physical environment features do not always have an objective reality for all people alike because they are only significant in a particular cultural context (Bartsch, 2005). (Pocock et al., 1978).

Gideon Golany (1982) asserts that culture and belief help settlers adapt and accept the built environment's form and structure. He affirms that culture has a vital role in modelling people's environment and controlling the city's inhabitants' activities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AS A METHOD OF ANALYSIS

There was a reciprocal exchange of culture between Muslims and the Persian culture after recognising Islam as the official state religion. A prominent example is Baghdad's circle's (762 AD) plan, strongly influenced by the Persian cosmological concept (Abu-lughod, 1980; Bennison, 2009; Rabbat, 2012). This exchange of physical cultures had been interpreted as a formation of a 'neo Islamic style', wherein the Persian urban aesthetic style's efficiency had conflated with the spirituality characteristics of Islamic culture (El Araby, 1996). In return, Islamic culture's effect was manifested in the aesthetically pleasing calligraphy used to adorn the most skillful masterpieces that oppose neither artistic creativity nor beauty enjoyment (Omer, 2016).

While Islam is occupying massive geographical areas and embraces different cultures, races, climate and national heritages, Muslim societies are made harmonious in terms of social and physical environments. However, Islamic

dominations did not bring about major physical modifications to cities and towns, but they introduced various functions to the city (Al-Sayyed, 2000).

Communities created by Islamic principles have made Muslims believe that Islamic culture has the most profound influence on cities' historical and physical structure in the Middle East (Hillenbrand, 1999). For example, the city components such as houses, public baths, mosques and Bazaar were grouped in order for Muslim to perform their spiritual duties smoothly. Today, however, with the emergence of piped water systems, rapid transportation, electric air conditions, refrigerators, many standard features have vanished.

Does Islamic Architecture exist? Muslims proclaimed a feasible method for architecture and design, which is based on the principles of Islam. However, the literature suggests that religion, in a narrow sense, did not play a significant role in the morphology of cities (Bennison and Gascoigne, 2007). Amri Laroussi (2008) quoted the Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), saying the Islamic city does not exist. Accordingly, Stefano Bianca (2000) asserts that there is currently no Islamic method or theory to govern the urban form's design and development in the Islamic world. El-Amrousi & Biln (2013) have also asserted that Muslim scholars are still trying to construct a theory or find a method that carries Islamic symbols in its content.

Many researchers who focus on Islamic cities indicate no viable Islamic architecture in urban design (Binaca 2000; Hillenbrand 1999; Michell 1978; Hakim 1998; Bavar 1983). Besim Hakim, for example, states that "it would be feasible to construct a comprehensive theory of urban form in traditional Islamic cities which currently does not exist" (Hakim, 1998: 1).

Abu-Lughod (1980) believes that there is a difference between Islamic and non-Islamic urban environments, even in geographical regions with a similar climate and topography. These differences suggest that Muslim cities share many characteristics other than the inhabitants' religion. Enan (2007) stated that 'Muslims only really started to build cities when "royal authority" got the upper hand over religion which previously forbade them from doing any excessive building or to waste too many resources on building activities for no purpose' (Bennison and Gascoigne, 2007: 1-2).

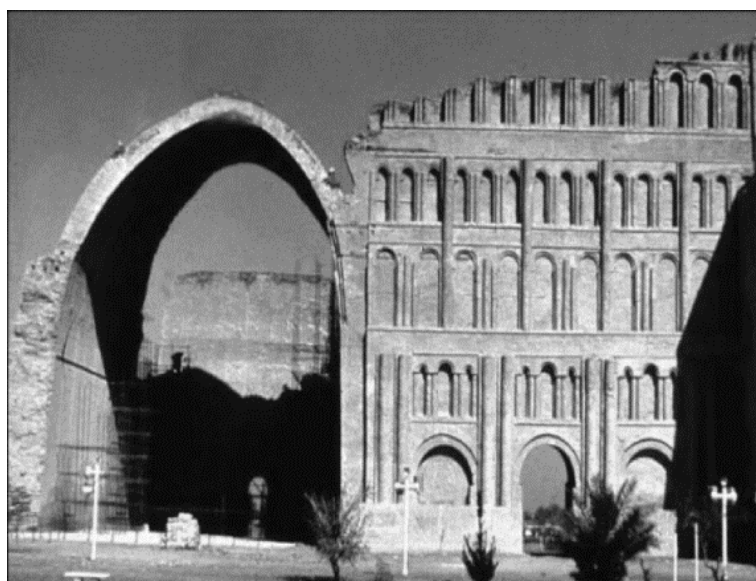
**The Controversy Over Islamic Architecture.** It is risky to suggest that an 'Islamic architecture' with common features existed today due to Islam's multifaceted history. There was no sign of the 'Islamic architecture' until the term was used in academia in the early nineteenth-century (Rabbat 2012). The absence of an original and coherent form of 'Islamic architecture' led Muslims to seek urban design types such as the Zoroastrian's fire temple to design the Mosque. Ira Lapidus (2002) and Gamal Hamdan (1962) likewise argue that Islam, in most cases, inherited the forms of the civilisations it conquered instead of introducing a new urban form that they claim to be 'Islamic architecture'. Bloom and Blair (2019) suggest that what is currently called 'Islamic architecture' originates from existing structures and architecture in Roman, Byzantine, Persian and Mesopotamian architecture and all other lands that Muslims occupied since the seventh and eighth centuries.

Ahmad Aziz (2016), for example, reports on scholars who regarded Islamic as a tradition of the past that had ceased to be creative with the onset of Western's

colonialism and its modernisation in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He also asserts that the primary controversial issue in defining 'Islamic architecture' is its time frame and its degree of inconsistency with modernism. Consequently, the architecture built under colonialism and independence was not considered 'Islamic'; instead, it was either seen as modern or a cultural hybrid (Ibid). It might then be inferred that no Islamic architecture with a universal character, structure or form could have developed.

Muslims use some design values that replicate others' traditional interest in mathematics for shaping their buildings (Bavar, 1983). For example, in developing the design for mosques, Muslims adopted the fire temple style, and it has remained a distinguishing feature of Islamic structure into the present day (Grabar, 2006; Ettinghausen, 2003). Bloom (2017) incorrectly consider the typical structure of the pointed arch as a feature of Islamic architecture as it was entirely alien to the pre-Islamic world. However, the author of this paper argues that this type of archetypal structure was applied in shaping most of Sassanid's buildings, including the Palace of Taque-Kasra (Persian) or Eiwāneh- madāen (Arabic) more than three centuries before the arrival of Islam (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Palace of Taque-Kasra/ Eiwāneh-madāen, Madaen, Iraq



The very concept of 'Islamic architecture' is highly contested in today's architectural discourse because it has remained uncertain if a building considered Islamic truly represents 'Islamic architecture'. Ali et al. (2017) gave an example from Egypt where some ancient architectural features were used to design Islamic structures to attest that what is perceived to be 'Islamic architecture' is, in fact, an imitation and replication of earlier designs and building methods.

The Architecture of the Mosque. The Mosque that was established to provide Muslims with a space to perform their ritual and spiritual activities underwent many

changes since it was erected by the Prophet Mohammad in Medina city (Figure 2). in the 7th century (Bennison, 2009).

**Figure 2:** First Mosque Built in Medina City, KSA.



Source: UNESCO

The later developed shape of the Mosque was an imitation of the ancient Zoroastrian's dome-shaped fire temple (Figure 3). Over time, it has become the primary symbol of Islam and Islamic culture. The minarets (towers) of the Mosque were later added to announce prayer times and help Muslims identify the Mosque's sites location.

**Figure 3:** Ruins of a Zoroastrian Fire Temple, Iran



Source: UNESCO website

The propagation of the dome-shaped fire temple may be regarded as the Sasanian's most significant influence on Middle Eastern architecture, including the mosque structure. According to Aziz Ahmed (2016) and Sumaiya Ahmed (2016), the architecture of mosques around the world has been influenced by various cultures, including non-Islamic cultures, instead of continuing with the shape of Zoroastrian's fire temple only. Oleg Grabar (1983) also suggests that the perceived Islamic symbols used in Islamic structures' design were neither coherent nor consistent in different Islamic societies' architecture.

Furthermore, Haraty and Utaberta (2019) assert that "the mosque architecture ideas are not spiritually motivated in the cosmic sense, but the use of materials besides the construction and the aesthetics determines the function of the building" (2019:529). Likewise, Spathic Omer (2016) stated that the mosque style in non-Islamic regions is influenced by new technology rather than the built forms found within traditional Muslim societies. The propagation of the dome-shaped fire temple may be regarded as the Sasanian's most significant influence on Middle Eastern architecture, which impacted the mosque structure. According to Ahmad Aziz (2016) and Sumaiya Ahmed (2016), the architecture of mosques around the world has been influenced by various cultures, including non-Islamic cultures, instead of continuing with the shape of Zoroastrian's fire temple only. Oleg Grabar (1983) also suggests that the perceived Islamic symbols used in Islamic structures' design were neither coherent nor consistent in different Islamic societies' architecture.

Grabar (1983) based his argument on the lack of a typical mosque style in different countries and asserted that there was no visual symbols system in Islamic culture. Therefore, he finds it difficult to hold that Islamic architecture exists. For example, he stated that if we were to stand before a mosque in a non-Islamic society and try to identify it aesthetically or see what kind of building it is, we would not say it is a mosque (Ibid, 1983).

Most of the capitals and major cities of Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Iran and Saudi Arabia have distanced themselves from Islamic symbols and adopted similar Western-style designs and urban form and iconic tower structures to deal with phenomena of ever-increasing innovation.

### **The City of Yazd**

Yazd is the capital city of Yazd Province in Iran, with a population of 529,673 in 2016 and covers an area of 735 km<sup>2</sup>, located in the eastern part of central Iran (Persia). It has kept many of its traditional forms and ancient architecture. The name of the city was derived from Yazdegerd, a Sassanid ruler of Persia. Since the third century AD, it has been the centre for Zoroastrianism until the Arab Muslims conquered Persia in 651 AD.

Settlement design in Yazd city Situated in Iran's central desert, Yazd has scorching hot and dry summers and freezing winters. Most buildings are constructed of very thick high earthen walls (Figure 4) and with extremely high insulation values.

**Figure4:** Narrow Path in Yazd Residential Areas, Iran.



Source: UNESCO

The compact form of Yazd city and its buildings and narrow twisty lanes were prerequisite factors for confronting its harsh climate condition, which was built three centuries before Islam's arrival. City configuration tends to be packed very tightly together, maximising shade at ground level with covered lanes and the Bazaar in the city's center (Figure 5). Nevertheless, these prerequisite factors had incidentally matched the cultural needs of Muslims in central Iran. For example, Aziz (2016) stated that houses were served by a limited number of the narrow twisty cul-de-sac and made up of inward-oriented residential quarters to provide comfort and privacy for the inhabitant and conceal them from the public.

This type of structure represents the conventional picture of the traditional Persian city, referred to by Mortada (2003) as the stereotypical model, except it does not necessarily represent Islamic architecture. UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed the city of Yazd in the world heritage list because it was considered the world's oldest adobe city (UNESCO, 2017).

**Figure 5:** Persian Courtyard House, Yazd, Iran.



Source: UNESCO website

Instead of being influenced by Islam or an 'Islamic architecture', Yazd, with its compact form and narrow twisty streets and buildings' structure, shows more compatibility with all buildings typical of arid zone configurations climate forces. This type of city structure is considered compatible with today's sustainability principles due to its energy conservation and the use of environmentally friendly construction materials – mainly sundried brick (Smith, 2005). None of these design features has any link to a so-called 'Islamic architecture' as Yazd was formed and existed for more than three centuries before Islam's presence in Persia.

However, like other cities globally, Yazd was influenced by both internal and external factors, including climate conditions, culture, and modernism which represented a variety of origins and growth patterns. Fletcher (1961) suggests that Muslims' early imitation or adaptation of non-Muslim buildings was deliberate, as these buildings were often communal centres for pagan societies. Likewise, Hadi Mirmiran (2004: 39) suggests that Muslims were "unable to create any world-class modern architecture, nor was it completely successful in using Persian architectural principles and ideas".

The vernacular architecture of Yazd was a wise response to the severe climate conditions to protect interior spaces from the impact of outside elements. However, some design features had incidentally matched the Muslims' need inspired by Islamic principles. Many may attribute some of the apparent pattern similarities to the Islamic belief. However, Yazd city has preserved its ancient traditional Persian morphology of protection from severe climate conditions by introducing elements such as Ab Anbar (water reservoir), Baad Geer (wind catcher), and the covered Bazaar (market).



## **Findings**

A review of the literature indicates discrepancies and inconsistencies among researchers regarding the existence of 'Islamic architecture' due to the lack of any recognised method or theory that can be used to define Islam's influence on the built environment. It was also found that climate condition was the prime factor influencing the built environment of Yazd city. In contrast, other factors such as Islamic culture and modernism have no significant effect on shaping Yazd city's form and the design of its buildings.

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this paper was to answer the question: if Islamic architecture exists and whether its existence had any influence on the shape and form of the physical structure of buildings. Although there is a close interaction between what people create and what they believe, this study proved that Muslim culture did not create any iconic design structure to be followed in Muslim world or could influence city structure and building design. Nevertheless, Islamic culture penetrates every aspect of Muslims' lives, including the internal space separation of their residence, without pre- existed instruction for Muslims to follow a specific design.

From the findings and what was observed in the structure of the ancient city of Yazd, it is safe to say that climate conditions and modernism factors had a prominent influence informing the city of Yazd. From this standpoint, it would be acceptable to argue that the alleged existence of 'Islamic architecture' and its influence on city form and building design proves to be incompatible with the claimed exclusive Islamic architecture in the real world.

However, this study's finding proved that researchers' adaptation of the term 'Islamic architecture' appears to be superficial and far from reality due to the lack of any known code or recognised theory to characterise its physical manifestation. The absence of a recognised code of architecture or design might be because Muslims always try to be contemporary to corporate modernism and innovations in responding to people's changing needs over time.

This lack of structural similarity in the Muslim might be due to the fact that Muslims always try to be contemporary to corporate modernism and innovations in responding to people's changing needs over time. Being temporary world means that the depth and intensity of Islamic symbolic value were in time and not through time. In other words, Islamic monument types were significant at only one period of time and did not catalyse the continuity of these types across the Muslim world. For example, there are many historical monuments such as the Taj Mahal, Dome of the Rock, and the Umayyad Mosque, which claimed to be Islamic architecture. However, over time, these Islamic architectural types did not inspire similar monuments in Muslim cities. The architectural types of these historical monuments were not recreated across Muslim cities because these monuments' symbolic significance is synchronic, not diachronic. Ostensibly, Muslims reject any non-Islamic design; however, they always imitated and adopted the architectural models of the Sasanian, Roman, Byzantine, Persian empires and Mesopotamian culture and modernised and post modernized towers to form their settlements.

## CONCLUSIONS

Investigating whether the existence of 'Islamic architecture' and its alleged influence on city and building structure was the primary purpose of this study. This study concludes that there was no direct architectural code of conduct or Islamic scripture were found to portray the influence of so-called 'Islamic architecture' all over the Islamic world. the conclusion implies that interpretation of Islam's architectural effects on the built environment remains subjective and broad. Traditional Islamic architecture often identified itself through means other than visuals, including the city's sound, the call to prayer, the word of revelation but not its structural forms. Architecture should, therefore, not be limited to buildings; instead, it can embrace any conscious selection of a place, space, or environment for a particular purpose.

Thus, it is not possible to classify certain types of structure as 'Islamic architecture'. This study's finding of the city of Yazd has also would leads us to conclude that 'Islamic Architecture' had no significant influence on the city form or buildings' structure in the city of Yazd and broader Islamic world.

\*All photos were copied from the UNESCO website. It was stated in the site that:

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