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Islamic Architecture Evolution: Perception and Behaviour

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Abstract

The building of a mosque in this day and age is a great achievement of the Muslim community, particularly if the community is living in a non Muslim country. Technology has been the drive to improve construction method of early Muslim community that influence of values and perception towards Islam in the whole world until today. While appreciating the quantitative increase and aesthetic embellishments of many new urban mosques, several Muslim scholars, intellectuals and activists have expressed their concern and reservation regarding the function of these mosques in light of pristine world-view of Islam.

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1. Introduction

The title chosen for this research is to introduce the idea of changing uses and meaning of the mosque in contemporary Muslim societies. Although, when in the mosque, the believer might expect to be in direct contact with that which he regards as sacred, in practice increasingly finds himself confronted with manifestations of altered uses of the house of worship – changes of a non religious nature which he may find difficult to understand and to relate to. As Spahic Omer said,

“To be sure, studying the Islamic Built Environment by no means cannot be separated from the total framework of Islamic: its genesis, history, ethos, worldview, doctrines, law, and practices. Any

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approach by anybody and at any point of time with recourse to disconnecting the Islamic Built Environment from that which held sway over its conception and formation would undoubtedly result in failure and , may distort the real picture of subject matter and with it the picture of Islam” (Spahic Omer, 2002)

My contentions is that the entire history of the mosque has be reconsidered and reinterpreted, with particular reference to forms and design, as well as perception and behavior related to semiological systems (i.e. signs and symbols used by members of any social group to convey shared values) which determine the study of perception of abstract concepts such as ‘sacred’ or ‘sanctity’ space in mosque in Malay modern society.

2. Literature review

Why I choose the mosque? For historians of architecture and culture alike, the answer is gratifyingly simple as Robert Hillenbrand said “This is the Islamic building par excellence, and as such the key to Islamic architecture” (Robert Hillenbrand, 1994). Moreover, the medieval Muslim world, like medieval Europe, was a theoretic society and the mosque was the natural expression of that society. The mosque as a place of worship is a building enclosing a space that is regarded by believers as sacred and distinct from its secular surroundings, and that by virtue of its sanctified status it can enhance the meaning of the words and actions of the believer while he is present there. If any change is made to the traditional concept of the mosque and its sacred character, the main function of the building is distorted (M. Arkoun, 2002). It is for this reason that the design, the forms and the special features of the building, including the dome, the minaret, the mihrab and the mimbar, are usually reproduced in accordance with the familiar architectural imagery which has been instilled into the minds of individuals as the result of constant repetition down the centuries.

In the case of the mosque, aside from the traditional and well established attitudes of believers towards what they regard as sacred, there is the modern approach to the meaning of the ‘sacred’ based on reason, revealing aspects and changes which remain beyond the understanding of those whose faith is founded only on unquestioning belief (Nasr, 1981). The choice, then in making a study of the place of the mosque in contemporary Muslim society is between merely accepting the tradition bound viewpoint of believers – one which simply repeats what they regards as being ‘sacred’ or attempting to analyze perceptions and beliefs by placing them either in their historical, sociological, anthropological or psychological perspectives (M. Arkoun, 2002).

2.1. A historical appraisal

In any attempt to define and understand the role of the mosque it is necessary to take note of the situation that prevailed in Medina in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad ¹. As was true of every new religion, the question of the ‘sacred’ and its cognitive and ritual status was relevant issue in the earliest years of Islam; the act of building a mosque for the emerging Muslim group in Medina was seen as both a political and a religious gesture. The Quran makes an explicit reference to a rival group which built its own place of worship to compete with the ‘true’ mosque founded by the Prophet and including the shifting of the direction of the qibla from Jerusalem to Mecca ².

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