

The Transnational Mosque: Architecture and Historical Memory in the Contemporary Middle East

Kishwar Rizvi

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This catchy title, *The Transnational Mosque*, is timely and implies an analysis of global Islam and the multiplicities of mosque construction today. The premise promises to contribute to the scholarship on Islamic architecture, and yet there are some issues with the argument's structure and even greater ones with the analytical depth with respect to architecture.

The book's structure highlights the attempt to separate itself and "builds upon" (p. 7) established texts on the subject of contemporary Islamic architecture. However, its relatively small format, dense with text, is populated sparingly with uneven visual representation. The photographs vary in quality and vantage, and not all of the mosques discussed have images and architectural drawings – serious omissions in a field that is so visual, systematic comparative analysis requires analogous efforts with visual representation for the argument to sustain itself. The book contains an introduction; one chapter each on Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); and an epilogue that serves as a conclusion. But this four-fold argument, which focuses on the patron countries, is flawed because it inherently sets up a hierarchy of influence that situates equally the relatively minimal works of the UAE with the far-reaching impact of Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. It also ignores the "transnational" quality of those mosques not patronized by any of them.

The introduction, "Agency of History: The Symbolic Potential for the Transnational Mosque," begins with an italicized brief first-person narrative that describes Beirut's Muhammad al-Amin Mosque followed by a long account of patronage and political climate. Rizvi promises an interdisciplinary approach with field work, architecture and photo documentation, interviews with architects and patrons in a "study [that] interrogates multiple agents and diverse agendas behind the construction of transnational mosques" (p. 5). She defines "trans" as "beyond and across time of history and spaces of nations," but nevertheless frames the book in terms of nations.

After explaining the meaning and importance of mosque and including shrines in her argument as part of the network of devotional spaces, she critically addresses arguments of postmodern architecture in mosque design and critiques the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA), which "scarcely acknowledges their [mosques] existence" (p. 26). However, this award and the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) have documented dozens of contemporary mosques in their publications and online. Ironically, she references no less than fourteen of those featured in the AKDN's documentation and utilizes seventeen images from the AKAA and the AKDN in this book. The introduction closes with the book's framework: a three-fold focus on nationalist and religious ideologies, transnational architecture and political networks, and the role of the architect in transnational mosques.

Chapter 1, "Turkey and a Neo-Ottoman World Order: History as Ethno-Imperialism," begins with a narrative of her arrival at Berlin's Türk Şehitlik Mosque followed by various segments: "Diaspora and Turkish Patronage

in Germany,” “Islam and the Turkish Republic,” “Mosque of the People,” “Competing Discourse of the Nation,” “The Royal Architect,” “Architecture of Diplomacy,” “Conceptualizing the Diaspora,” and “Histories of the New Present.” Case studies of Berlin’s Wilmersdorf Mosque, Ankara’s Grand National Assembly Mosque and Kocatepe Mosque, and Japan’s Tokyo Camii and Turkish Cultural Centre are presented. Architect Hilmi Şenalp’s work is featured as a modern day “royal architect” who explicitly references the work of the prolific Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan (1489-1588) in his historicist designs. The discussion’s framework was promising, but the images used were inconsistent in vantage and quality (at least one mosque discussed had no images at all), and there were several broad, unsupported statements and an implied advocacy for the explicit repetition of historical forms in contemporary mosque design.

Chapter 2, “Global Islam and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: An Architecture of Assimilation,” begins with an anecdote of approach to Jeddah’s Amir Juffali Mosque and is divided into “Cosmopolitan Roots,” “The Mosque Strategy,” “The Visual Aesthetic,” “The National Mosque,” “Controlling the Minds of Believers,” “Patronage and Propaganda,” “Diplomacy through Architecture,” “Asserting a Sunni Presence,” “Diplomacy East and West,” and “An Iconography of Belief.” Several mosques are featured: the Juffali Mosque, Riyadh’s Great Mosque, and several government-supported mosques built abroad, including Islamabad’s Faisal Mosque and Rome’s Islamic Cultural Centre, both of which are clearly contemporary, and Beirut’s Muhammad Al-Amin Mosque, which is a historicist neo-Ottoman building. Rizvi criticizes Riyadh’s systematic destruction of historical sites and “fear of monuments” (p. 84) that, she argues, has resulted in conflicting approaches to mosque patronage – strict and iconoclastic with minimal decoration at home and elaborate design for a “new brand of Sunni Jihad” abroad (p. 103). However, the examples used are not completely consistent with the argument.

Chapter 3, “Iran and Shi’i Pilgrimage Networks: A Postrevolutionary Ideology,” opens with an anecdotal description of the sounds, smells, and imagery experienced by the author during a primarily female pilgrimage to the tomb of Ruqayya in Damascus. This chapter, which focuses on Shi’i devotional spaces (e.g., tombs) in addition to mosques in “transnational” argument, is subdivided into “The History of Shi’ism and the Centrality of Shrines,” “Alternate Sites, Other Religiosity,” “Tehran, the Modern Capital,” “Mosques and the Revolution,” “Ayatollah Khomeini Grand (Tehran) Musalla,” “Spaces of Messianic Authority,” “The Princess of Damascus,” “An Incision into the Urban Context,” and “The Contested Landscape.”

National mosques discussed specifically include the Husayniyeh Ershad institution, Tehran's Ayatollah Khomeini Grand Musalla, the Isfahan Musalla in Takht-i Fulad cemetery, Qom's Shrine of Fatima Ma'suma, Tehran's Tomb of Ayatolla Khomeni, and the Jamkaran Mosque and Shrine. International patronage discussed included the Shrine of Sayidda Zaynab and the Sayidda Ruqqayya Shrine and Mosque, both of which are in Damascus. The chapter concluded with a critique of these shrines, both of which have an "unabashedly Iranian look" (p. 146). The architectural analysis skims the surface with a pale descriptor of the pastiche of "styles" used in the examples. The chapter ends with a summary statement that in many ways, the large complexes in Iran represent Tehran's overcompensation to establish its strength and growing religiosity.

Chapter 4, "Grand Mosques in the United Arab Emirates: Domesticating the Transnational," opens with an anecdotal, as opposed to a personal, description of the Jumeirah mosque with its colors, context, and dualities (of entrances and signs). Value-laden descriptors betray her bias when commenting on the pastiche of historical architectural motifs, which elicited no such critiques in previous chapters, including her assessment of the use of historicist elements as "anachronistic" and that in this mode "meaning was manipulated" for a "fabricated sense of the city" (pp. 151-52). The chapter is divided into "Oil Wealth and New National Narratives," "Creating Indigenous Histories," "Architecture as Negotiation," "The Jumeirah Mosque and the Egyptian Connection," "A Cosmopolitan Aesthetic: The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque," and "Global Ambitions at Home and Abroad." After a brief history of the country, several mosques, including the Imam Husayn Mosque with a "Persian look" (p. 160), Dubai's Grand Mosque, the Bastakiyya Mosque, the Abu Dhabi Mosque, the Mariyam bint Sultan Mosque, the Jumeriah Mosque, and the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque.

However, the accounts are minimal and contain little analysis. Not only was the discussion brief, but the analysis was reduced to the repeated tropes that the mosques were government-created visions of Islam. The lack of images for several examples and the inconsistent quality of photographs and drawings also made for a disconnected read. She launched into some discussion with the Jumeirah mosque, noting that the Egyptian "connection" was a result of the large Egyptian presence and their participation in the cities' development (p. 174), but provided no analysis of the specific neo-Mamluk forms used or their meaning. Frustratingly, an image of Cairo's fourteenth-century Umm al-Sultan Sha'ban madrasah was shown with no commentary connecting it back to the argument. The majority of this chapter focused on national mosques.

In the last section, four more were introduced: two in Sharjah, Jeursalem's Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Mosque and Kazakhstan's Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Mosque. Like other case studies, basic facts describing costs, area, and materials were outlined without any mention, let alone analysis, of the meaning of "transnational" mosque expressed in the architectural language.

The epilogue, "The Mutability of History," begins with a quote about the importance of the architectural critic (from a western source). Sections included "Architects and the Rhetoric of Post Modern City," in which the author focuses on four architects: three from the Islamic world who have "authority" and "vision," and the fourth from Europe and who, being "foreign," relied upon "orientalist fantasies and fairy tales" (p. 202). Instead of supporting these assertions with an argument of architectural analysis, she summarizes their resumes. The "foreign" architect, Helmut Borchert, is discussed for the first time via a caricature critique of his designs of three mosques in Qatar built during the 1980s. The following section, "A Corporate Modernity," focused on the work of London-based Halcrow Engineering consulting and argued that this multinational firm with the British government "has been a key ally and developer of UAE" (p. 203) with a "corporate aesthetic."

The final section, "Weathering and Historical Contingency," summarizes the cultural and historical aspects of Islamabad's Faisal Mosque with little mention of its architecture and reiterates arguments supporting the study of trans-national mosques. Surprisingly, two new mosques are introduced here, both winners of past AKAA cycles: Pakistan's Bhong Mosque and Bosnia's Šeref-udin White Mosque, which, she states, responded to the clients' needs and tastes. Aside from misidentifying the architect of the latter mosque (p. 209), ending with these two examples was puzzling because neither one fits into the book's four-patron-country argument of the "transnational" mosque.

So who is this book for? For those interested in the region's politics, there are certainly many brief references to timely issues of the day (e.g., recent politics, terrorism, and some political history and power of the four countries). Those who have some background understanding of architecture will be immediately frustrated with the surface examination and broad strokes used to examine the architecture with respect to the political and cultural contexts. Those who possess a specific understanding of architecture in the Islamic world will be disappointed, for the premise's enticing potential was not fulfilled.

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