

The Middle East Architecture: In Search of a New Identity

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Generations of historians have negatively affected our understanding of humankind's architectural achievements. Continuing the socio-political analytical tradition established by art historians like Winckelman and Hegel, Fletcher (1933) defined each civilized society's goal as "the building up of a great national style in the art which is more than any other a national product" (p. 512). Implicit in this definition is the idea that each homeland worthy of the name develops a singular approach to building that is uniquely its own, one that is expressive of its time, place, cultural outlook and of the particular goals and aspirations shared by its people. Fletcher's view has encouraged the partition of global achievement into artificial compartments, and has discouraged the study and appreciation of contributions made by numerous cultures outside the historian's homeland. History has been written as a sort of tally sheet, identifying the generation of original design or constructional innovations, their date and place of birth, with various cultures or ethnic groups scored relative to their achievements. Western historians, understandably though regrettably, tend to give higher "scores" to the output of civilizations they favor, and grant fewer "points" to those outside the tight circle of Western European culture. Contribution from non-European cultures are described as mere "influences", secondary ideas flowing into western culture from without, margining their impact on the national product which historians strive to distinguish as unique. The unique earns higher points. Lower scores are earned when design or constructional ideas are adopted, borrowed or derived from another nation's products. The notion of effluence, of an idea flowing out from one culture to another, places emphasis on the source of the idea; the use of "influence" emphasizes the importance of the culture that makes use of the European borrowings are seldom described as "derivative", since that pejorative term suggests that the high points earned by original authorship would be applied to another culture's scorecard.

Nowhere is this condition more apparent than in Western treatments of the contributions of Middle Eastern cultures to their European neighbors. Though stricken from recent editions, Fletcher's original distinction between "Historical" and "Non-Historical" styles separated the European homeland from all others. The nineteenth edition of the text (1987) echoes Fletcher's negative evaluation in that "much of the formal character of Islamic architecture is derivative, and is notable primarily for the originality of the manner of combining diverse elements" (p. 543). This statement fails to recognize European architecture is similarly derivative, and that much that we value as Western is actually derived from Eastern sources. Even more closely aligned with Fletcher's negative judgement is the assertion that "the most comprehensive range of features, however, does not make a coherent architecture" (**). Pyla (1999) notes that even Kostoff's purportedly inclusive *A History of Architecture* (1985) fails to acknowledge the different developments in different Islamic cultures, and "essentializes 'Islam' as a single static culture" (p. 220). Both Islamic and European architecture are syntheses of multiple homelands'

contributions; neither is either singular or static. This oversimplification is prompted by the historiographical model's requirement to establish clear boundaries between cultures' architectural manifestations in the same way that maps create geographical borders. The canonical methodology requires that distinctions must be clearly drawn between "us" and "them", between the native national product and the foreign. Some historians display a certain generosity in acknowledging "influences" that the Middle East has had on European architecture, but none treat these borrowings as "effluence" from cultures that deserve more study.

Pyla (1999) notes that even Kostoff's purportedly inclusive *A History of Architecture* (1985) fails to acknowledge the different developments in different Islamic cultures, and "essentializes" "Islam as a single static culture" (p. 220). The acceptance of the term "Islamic" as sufficient to describe the design productions of numerous and diverse cultures spanning a significant geographical range is evidence in itself of Western historians' dismissive attitude toward non-western design production. Both Islamic and "Christian" architecture are syntheses of multiple homelands' contributions; neither is either singular or static. The prevalent oversimplification is prompted by the historiographical model's requirement to establish clear boundaries between cultures' architectural manifestations in the same way that maps create geographical borders. The canonical methodology requires that distinctions must be clearly drawn between "us" and "them", between the native national product and the foreign. Some historians display a certain generosity in acknowledging "influences" that the Middle East has had on European architecture, but none treat these borrowings as "effluences" from cultures that deserve both more study and more credit for their achievements.

Architecture has, indeed, been studied and written about as a national product, often for nationalistic reasons. In order to boost the stature of our homeland's design achievements, it has been seen as necessary to diminish that of foreign lands. In the case of the Middle East, religious and political differences have, to this day, made it acceptable to diminish the importance of the region's design accomplishments. The noted Orientalist W. Montgomery Watt (1977) observed that "for our cultural indebtedness to Islam, however, we Europeans have a blind spot. We sometimes belittle the extent and importance of Islamic influence in our heritage, and sometimes overlook it altogether" (**). His observation mirrors that of Robert A. M Stern (1981):

"Historians have let us down; they have looked at the present through the lens of a particular view of the present. They concentrate on only a portion of an era - usually its most intensely purist. Thus, not only have whole phases of history been overlooked? but also whole countries, particularly where pure forms are inherited from other places and hybridized with native traditions (p. 34)."

A review of various historians' treatments of significant inheritances from the East in the West's Middle Ages clarifies both the extent of the latter's indebtedness and of the "blind spot" to which Professor Watt refers. While *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (**) dismisses the possibility of Europe's borrowing of the pointed arch as "speculation" (p. 235), texts specific to architectural history are somewhat more generous. Hamlin (**) states that it was "probably borrowed from Moslem prototypes, possibly as a further development of Sassanian ovoid arches" (p. 273). Gloag (1969) acknowledges the pointed arch as an Eastern invention, but qualifies that "it had been dormant-its latent possibilities unappreciated, until the new experimental spirit in architectural design" in Europe brought it to full fruition in the Gothic era (p. 144). Yarwood (1987) credits Islam with the development of the pointed arch, as well, but states that "it was employed without comprehension of its constructional possibilities" (p. 57). Interestingly, Sir Christopher Wren (1713) stated about "Gothic" architecture that "it should with more reason be called the Saracen style", but a more nationalistic tendency is apparent in Cichy's *The Great Ages of Architecture* (1969). There, Gothic is "an art of northern origin, and an expression of an essentially Germanic spirit" (p.248). The author's homeland is not in doubt as he finds that the Gothic style "reflects, in the precision and logic of its constructional scheme, the rationalism of the Latin mind, and in the other-worldly, soaring beauty of its esthetic effect, the unfettered imagination of the Germanic races". An appreciation of the "scorecard" brand of history makes it understandable that Cichy could not acknowledge that the wellspring of this precision, logic rationalism, beauty and imagination was sited far from Germany geographically and removed, chronologically, by centuries. To have done so would acknowledge that these qualities were derived from another culture. To be derivative is to lose points. A similar Eurocentric bias is evident in Anderson's (1985) *The Rise of the Gothic*:

The introduction of the pointed arch must be seen? as an expression of the nature and needs of North-Western Europe, no longer the home of wandering and barbarous tribes? but now, in the earlier 12th century, the most important region of the planet, for its vitality, its inventiveness, and its desire to expand, not merely territorially, but into regions of the mind and the spirit. (p. 39). While the horseshoe arches of Moorish Spain are often illustrated in architectural history texts, the pointed arches used in Middle Eastern cities even before the advent of Islam are rarely depicted. Perhaps the horseshoe arch, never adopted by mainstream Europe, serves to reinforce the foreign nature of Islam to Western students. Neatly separating the products of one homeland from those of another may be pedagogically expedient, but this strategy fails to relate the complexity of cultural exchange that is the true driving force behind architecture. The ruins of a Zoroastrian temple at Fahraj, in present day Iran, serve to illustrate that North-Western Europe centuries before he "earlier 12th century". While Anderson acknowledges that the pointed arch had, indeed, been introduced from Islamic culture, its "migrating" to Christian Europe made it become "the symbol of Western domination in science and technology". It could be argued that it had been symbolic of Eastern domination in those areas even before Mohamed.



Fig. 1 Ruins of ancient Zoroastrian temple/pointed arch+ ribbed vault, Fahraj, Iran; Photographed by author, summer 2000

Frankl's landmark *Gothic Architecture* (1962) mentions the pointed arch only five times in 270 pages, and never cites the East as its source. His main thesis is clearly stated in the work's first sentence: "The Gothic style evolved from within Romanesque church architecture when diagonal ribs were added to the groin vault" (p. 1). Explaining at great length the Romanesque and Roman precursors of the rib-vault, he dismisses versions in Moorish Spain, Egypt and Persia as "different in character" from Gothic examples, without explaining the difference. Pope (1933), however, states that "the aesthetic potentialities of salient ribbed vaults had been exploited by the Moors over a century before they appeared in the rest of Europe" (**). Frankl mentions the 42 ribs, projecting and three-dimensional, at Hagia Sophia, but states that "quite understandably they are never given as the source of the Gothic style" (p. 2). Interestingly, Abbott Suger himself makes several references to that monument, obviously keenly aware of its magnificence and eager to exceed its sumptuousness in his own abbey church of St. Denis:

"I used to convene with travelers from Jerusalem and, to my great delight, to learn from those to whom the treasures of Constantinople and the ornaments of the Hagia Sophia had been accessible, whether the things here could claim some value in comparison with those there (Panofsky, p. 65)."

The theological and symbolic function of St. Denis was of paramount concern to Suger, and Frankl's text dwells on a philosophical reading of Gothic architecture. Where we have been told of Islam's lack of appreciation and lack of comprehension of the elements it had developed, a synthesis of the same features becomes, in European hands, a "form symbol for the institution of the Church" (p. 266). In reality, the features and elements which Islam adopted from the wide variety of cultures it represented were also implemented consciously as "form symbols"; Europe merely invested borrowed forms with a meaning expressive of its own theological and political structures.

Not all surveys of Western Architecture are as miserly in crediting the East with significant contributions; a notable exception being *Simpson's History of Architectural Development* (1961). But the findings of specialists in Islamic and earlier Middle Eastern architecture are sadly absent from the standard texts assigned in our lecture halls. While Kostof acknowledges that the pointed arch, vault rib, buttress and stained glass, constituent elements of Gothic architecture, were not the invention of Europeans, he fails to state their sources. He does grant that Muslim architects appreciated the structural advantages of the pointed arch "almost from the start" (333) but fails to mention where or when that start occurred. Specialists like Jairazbhoy, Kenneth Conant and A.V. Pope, in contrast, offer detailed evidence and convincing arguments for revising our estimation of Iranian contributions. Their research documents, from medieval sources, the spread of those architectural elements associated with the Gothic style, providing a compelling provenance that makes the use of the word "speculation" seem either petty or deliberately misleading. The long history of the pointed arch in the Middle East and its eventual introduction to Europe (through Norman Sicily) is thoroughly traced. Pope, as quoted above, documents the use of the ribbed vault. Traceried windows with stained glass are described in literary sources, placing their significant use in the East as early as the late seventh century. Pope's quotation of a medieval acknowledgement of the East's contribution to European architecture makes its absence in the year 2000 all the more astonishing: "Consider and reflect how in our days God has changed West into East" (Foucher of Chartres, in Coulton).



Fig. 2: Royal Mosque/ribbed vault, Isfahan, Iran; Photographed by author, summer 1999

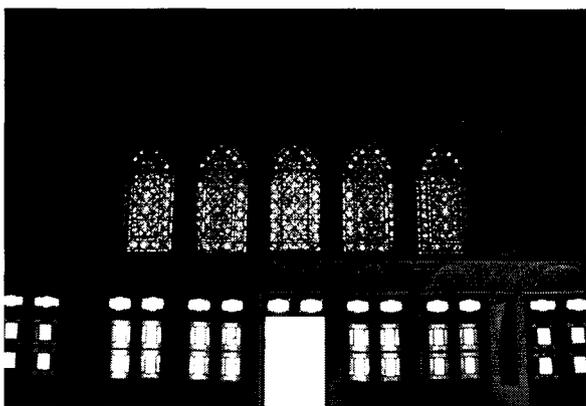


Fig. 3: Garden of Dolatabad/stained glass, Yazd, Iran; Photographed by author, summer 2000

Foucher was not astonished merely at the changes he witnessed in ecclesiastical architecture. Crusaders encountered castles, warships, tournaments, coats of arms and military regalia that were later imitated both in the Holy Land and back at home. Ebstosser (1979) relates that “the intellectual level of the European feudal lords did not approach that of their Islamic Arab counterparts” (p. 201), and it is to their credit that the Crusaders applied the knowledge they had learned. Just thirty years after the First Crusade, the Norman Roger Guiscard crowned himself king of southern Italy and Sicily, lands wrested from Islam during the preceding century. The following year (1131), he began construction of the Capella Palatina at Palermo, his capitol. Pointed arches, mosaics in multi-lobal arch form, pavements in intricate Islamic geometric patterns and *muqarnas* decorating the vaulted ceilings all testify that Roger adopted significant architectural features from his defeated enemy. An “excellent gallon vase” given by Roger to Count Thibaut of Blois found its way to St. Denis, to the delight of Abbot Suger, who records the gift in his *De Administratione* (Panofsky, p. 79). It is also interesting to note that Roger’s grandson, William the Good (1166-89) was a connoisseur of Arabic poetry, and it was under him, according to Dante, that Italian poetry began to emerge (Jairzbhoy, p. 115). The pointed arch was also used in the basilica of St. Benedict at Monte Cassino, whose abbot later became Pope ****, and was visited

in 1083 by Abbott Hugh of Cluny, five years before he began reconstruction of his abbey in France. That abbey, with 150 pointed arches used structurally in the aisle, prompted the Cistercian Abbott Bernard of Clairvaux to criticise his sanctioning of the use of the “infidel” pointed arch in a Christian church (Conant, **) It should be noted that Abbott Suger, chief counselor to King Louis VII of France and, in many texts, creator of the Gothic style at St. Denis, was a Cluniac.



Fig. 4 Cappella Palatina/nave, Palermo

A more scholarly (and less politicized) view should acknowledge the region once termed the “Cradle of Civilization” as source of many important design developments that have had significant impact on multiple facets of the built environment. Structural systems like the pointed arch and dome were fully exploited in the Middle East; the former was adopted to great effect in Europe’s Gothic cathedrals, the stained glass windows that are as emblematic of the Gothic as the pointed arch also can be traced in Iranian architecture. Example of similar stained glass treatments described in literary source relative to the place of the Sassanian King Khosrow Parviz in the seventh century. A Stained glass and rock crystal plate, possibly used by that King, bears comparison to the rose window at Chartres.

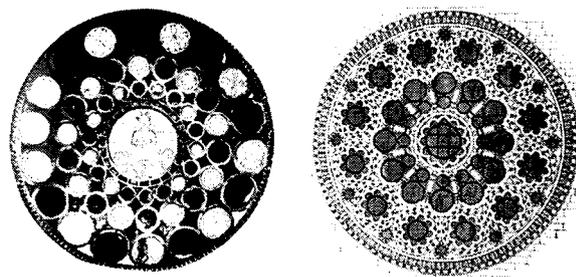


Fig. 5 Sassanian/stained glass plate & Chartres/rose window: *The Royal Hunter*, by Pudence O. Harper Gothic, by Hans H. Hofstatter

The Iranian development of the “Paradise garden, a place to enjoy cultivated trees and flowers with the addition of water features such as pools and fountains, provided the foundation for Renaissance European gardens, and of the field of landscape architecture. Both the planning and finishing of interior spaces were so highly developed that they became a standard of comfort and craftsmanship in the West. Rather

than “influencing” Europe, the design achievements of the Middle East overflowed the region’s borders and contributed mightily to other homelands. Further discussion about Middle Eastern architecture is vital to our discussion. In order to define its historical contribution to West. For instance the discussion of Iranian architecture is that of the architecture of different environments, cultures and periods. Hardly can a tangible, real relationship be imagined between the rock architecture of Western part of the country, the wooden architecture of North, and the mud-brick architecture of the towns on the edge of the desert. The great architectural diversity of the vast Iranian territory can probably be attributed to the existence of different climates, ethnic immigrations into Iran, and the long-lasting hegemony of non-Iranian dynasties.

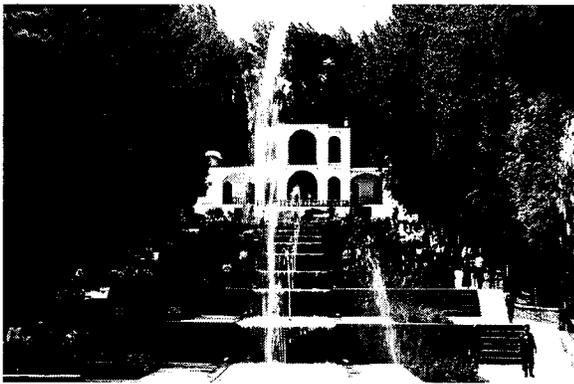


Fig. 6 Garden of Shazdeh, Mahan/Kerman, Iran; Photographed by author, spring 1997

The impact of climate, which is an important factor of diversity, is clearly conspicuous in residential architecture. Without being influenced by official stylistic developments, this diversity has gradually emerged in the course of time and is rooted in the geographic location. On the contrary, the diversity of official architecture has been associated with political-cultural developments. For example, Seljuq architecture takes shape following the same stylistic particularities in Iran, Turkey and Syria, the geographic domain of Timurid architecture involves Iran and Central Asia, and Safavid architecture is reflected in Isfahan, Qum, and other cities. Another secondary but significant variable is the ethnic mobility and the quiet frequent migration of architects throughout the Islamic world. This is why the work of Iranian architects can be seen from Syria to India. Iranian architecture is neither entirely an expression of harmony and unity, nor entirely one of opposition and plurality. Rather all at once, it fluctuates between these opposed features. Introversion and the interior-exterior dialectics are among familiar subjects, but our aim, instead of pointing out to introversion in the current architectural vernacular is to indicate the interior-exterior dialectics in terms of its intellectual definition and its characteristics.

Another point which deserves discussion in the architecture of cities neighboring the desert is the precise order of mosque plans and the sinuous disposition of streets in residential areas, which exhibits a conspicuous opposition between order and disorder in Iranian architecture. Understanding the dualism of order and disorder not only reveals the particular layout of Iranian cities, but also indicates the general tendency of Iranian aesthetic, which can be studied even in the design of a carpet. Many western scholars and researchers have spoken of the uniformity of the Iranian architectural language by reason of its limited vocabulary. In opposition to this view, another group of researchers, particularly European travelers, have mentioned the striking diversity of Iranian architecture and decoration. It seems that this divergence derives mainly from different outlooks in regard to Iranian architecture. The truth is that Iranian architecture is highly diverse in some aspects, and uniform in other aspects. As noted by numerous

European scholars and some Iranian researchers, despite the apparent complexity of Iranian structures and patterns, architecture has sometimes emerged upon very simple bases. This characteristic probably constitutes one of the wonders of Iranian architecture as well. A gradual transition of architecture from structuralism to formalism can be traced along the history of Iranian architecture (Islamic period), particularly from the Seljuq to the Safavid period, when the formalistic approach seems to have been prevalent, such examples as Khaju Bridge in Isfahan attest to the existence of strong tendencies toward tectonic construction.

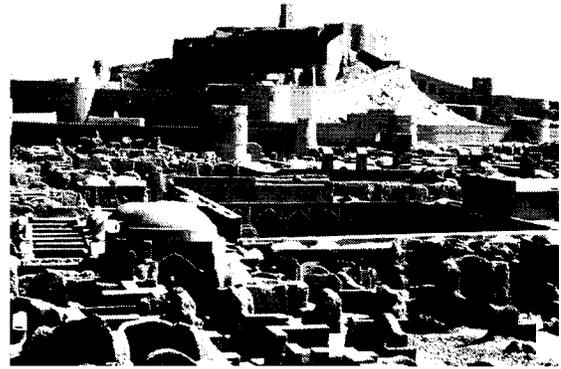


Fig. 7 Ancient Citadel of bam, Bam, Iran; Photographed by author, summer 2000



Fig. 8 Friday Mosque, Golpaiegan, Iran; Photographed by author, summer 2000

Though “revisionism” is the pejorative label sometimes applied to the re-evaluation that this research intends to promote, it should be seen as no more threatening than an ongoing refinement of our understanding. While happily acknowledging Rome’s enormous debt to Greece, Westerners are less enthusiastic about acknowledging our debts to cultures outside the perceived “family”. Discussion about globalization, diversity, multiculturalism define our time, and underscore the narrow parochialism apparent in our traditional approach to architecture history. We should begin to question the validity of discussing “Western”

architecture, and of the convenient compartments that contain and transmit out knowledge about development. Perhaps in the near future we will be as embarrassed about traditional distinction between East and West, about the nationalistic bias still blatantly evident in architecture history text, as we today by Fletcher's definition of Historical (ours) and Non-Historical (theirs) styles.

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