

# Islamic Architecture: A World History

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Contemporary scholarship about the architecture of the Islamic world continues to expand with new explorations beyond the ‘canon’ of high-profile historical examples typically included in surveys. Recent publications now include studies of lesser-known buildings, new thematic lenses and studies of contemporary buildings designed for and by Muslims.

Eric Broug’s past publications focussed on Islamic geometric patterns, which emphasized a practical understanding with step-by-step design guides, stemming from his own work and interests as a geometric artist. In 2013, his densely insightful and instructive *Islamic Geometric Design*<sup>1</sup> progressed from the work-book model he had previously published and included beautiful photographs of details from historical mosques and Islamic buildings from around the world. Broug framed this work in an innovative manner by choosing to centre on the process of creating various geometric ‘star’ families with images and diagram guides for drawing each star pattern. In *Islamic Geometric Design*, Broug professed that his approach would focus on ‘my own experience as an artist, designer and researcher. It is, I believe, the most likely way in which craftsmen over many centuries created geometric compositions’ (p.12) rather than the

historical, cultural or political significance of the buildings examined. Given the title of the book, and the instructive quality, this was a wholly reasonable and effective approach. I enjoyed Broug's previous work as both a researcher, designer and educator and I was curious to see what *Islamic Architecture: A World History* would hold. How much 'history' would be included in a book that covered the world, and would there be new insights regarding (geometric) design?

In *Islamic Architecture: A World History*, Broug has curated a collection of images of buildings constructed either in the name of Islam, or buildings influenced by Islamic design, from around the globe. The book is organized regionally with intentionally juxtaposed examples from the 'canon' of history alongside lesser known and new buildings as well as buildings that do not have an 'Islamic' purpose but have utilized 'Islamic' decorative motifs. The images are large, full-colour and focus mostly on the exterior with some interior images. No architectural plans, drawings or diagrams of geometric design are included. The accompanying text is minimal and oftentimes focuses on a brief description rather than any kind of comparative arc either within the region or thematically.

The contents of the book include: a brief introduction, six regional sections (Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf Region, Iraq, Iran and South Asia, Turkey and Central Asia, Africa; Asia Pacific, Europe and the Americas), and two brief sections on 'Women in Islamic Architecture' and 'A Waqf'. It is not clear how the countries in each regional section are ordered – they are not ordered by any chronology or alphabetically by name (and why some countries are in the region they are, for example, why is 'Egypt' located in the 'Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf region' chapter and not in 'Africa'?). Instead, Broug puts the emphasis on highlighting interesting or unusual motifs in design and is 'guided by beauty, visual interested and relevance' (p.7), especially surface embellishment.

In the 'Introduction' Broug notes that there are over three million mosques in the world and discusses the choice for the title of the book to include the phrase 'Islamic Architecture' which has been critiqued by scholars as a monolithic a term.<sup>2</sup> Broug notes that 'Architecture from Muslim Societies' would be more appropriate but does not disclose why 'Islamic Architecture' was chosen. Broug gives some personal insight

regarding his academic journey in the field of Islamic visual culture and his intention in ‘casting his net wide’ by including examples from all over the globe – this is the most promising aspect of the book – to include side by side the known and the unknown.

In the chapters that form the main body of the book, Chapters 1-6, are each fronted by a short, three-page text, while the rest of each chapter is dominated by large photographs with detailed captions. The chapters can be read quickly as visual essays that intentionally situate prominent historical examples next to contemporary explorations next to remote small projects. This is an unusual way to compose such a broad subject and one where the reader is required to engage with the materials in a primarily visual manner to create their own connections as to the curation and inferred meaning in the ordering of the buildings.

Each chapter opens with a stunning detailed photograph, and the resplendent 8<sup>th</sup> century Great Mosque of Damascus begins Chapter 1: ‘Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf Region’ which includes examples from Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Yemen. Alternating between stunning images of surface elaboration to overall façade compositions the chapter sets the tone for the unusual curation of examples in the book. The Great Mosque of Damascus is followed by the visually complex 21<sup>st</sup> century *musallah* (prayer room) designed by Zaha Hadid in Riyadh. Similarly, the examples from this region highlight historical and contemporary buildings with Islamic visual motifs including, as would be expected: mosques, madrasas and mausoleums, but also historical palaces, citadels, and small remote contemporary prayer halls. The 14<sup>th</sup> century Mamluk madrasa of Sultan Hassan in Egypt is featured in the same chapter with small Yemeni mosques and mausoleums, the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the Louvre Museum in the UAE designed by Jean Nouvel, and the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar by IM Pei. It is interesting to contemplate the region in such a total manner and witness the juxtaposition of such a range of buildings that would fall under the umbrella of ‘Islamic architecture’.

An image from the striking Vakil Mosque in Shiraz, Iran (18<sup>th</sup> century) opens Chapter 2: ‘Iraq, Iran and South Asia’ with examples from

Iraq, Iran, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The complex brick facades of the Safavid era are situated with Great Seljuk, Ilkhanid, Abbasid, Qajar, Delhi Sultanate, and Mughal buildings alongside the 20<sup>th</sup> century Al Shaheed (the Martyr) monument in Baghdad, the Tehran City theatre and the Prayer hall at the National Parliament house in Dhaka, Bangladesh by Louis Kahn.

The 15<sup>th</sup> century Timurid ornate interior of Aksaray mausoleum in Samarkand opens Chapter 3: 'Turkey and Central Asia' which includes examples from Turkey, North Macedonia, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. A 21<sup>st</sup> century mosque in Kazakhstan is followed by a range of 13<sup>th</sup> century buildings from Turkey: tombs, a mosque/hospital, a caravanserai, madrasas, a citadel and mosques from many smaller cities followed prominent and remote examples in Turkey from the 15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The chapter continues with early-to-late examples of mausoleums, madrasas, mosques as well as a palace, a synagogue, and a jamatkhana (Ismaili prayer house) from the remaining countries in the region.

A night-lit image of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Kutubiyya mosque in Marrakech opens Chapter 4: 'Africa' which includes examples from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Comoros, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Benin and Nigeria. The brief three-page essay is juxtaposed with a 13/14<sup>th</sup> century mosque from Mauritania and an extraordinary 21<sup>st</sup> century mosque from Ethiopia constructed from what appears to be tied-stick bundles. The images in the chapter then follow the ordering of 11<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century examples of gates, madrasas, tombs, mausoleums, a small zawiya (religious educational institution) from Morocco followed by a similar range of examples from the 9<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries from Tunisia, and a range of very remote and vernacular structures to prominent institutions from the remaining African countries noted in this chapter including the 13<sup>th</sup> century earthen great mosque of Djenne in Mali and the beautifully sensitive 21<sup>st</sup> century Hikma mosque in Dandaji, Niger designed by Mariam Kamara and Yasaman Esmaili. Many of the undated small structures included in this chapter from western, eastern and central Africa are extraordinary in their shapes, materials and contemporary use and would easily warrant further in-depth study.

A dramatic image of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Minaret Mosque in Java opens Chapter 5: 'Asia Pacific' that includes examples from Indonesia, Cambodia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, Japan, Australia and China. The short chapter essay contains images of a compelling 17<sup>th</sup> century woven bamboo and palm thatch mosque from Indonesia and a 16<sup>th</sup> century Uyghur mosque in China. Like in the previous chapter, there are some very interesting images of rarely documented buildings including an underground 18<sup>th</sup> century mosque in Indonesia and several unusual modern and neo-historicist 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century mosques in Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Brunei. Also included are the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'Cigar room' in Japan (in 'Moorish revival'), and two 21<sup>st</sup> century mosques in Australia. The chapter concludes with 14<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century mosques from China.

The iconic interior of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Great Mosque of Cordoba opens Chapter 6: 'Europe and the Americas' with building examples from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Russia, Czech Republic, Ukraine, France, The Netherlands, Germany, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, Wales, England, Scotland, Sweden, Denmark, USA, Canada, Cuba, Chile and Ecuador. This is a vast pooling of geographic areas, and may be attributed to the fact that these regions have a more recent history of Muslim construction. However, there are certainly enough examples from each of the three continents to have warranted a separate chapter for each. As a result, there is only one example from Canada, seven from the US (including four secular buildings that appropriate Islamic motifs) and four from Central and South America. The majority of examples in this chapter are from Europe. In an alternating order of historical and contemporary as well as 'Islamic' and non-Islamic, the chapter includes examples of historical mosques from Spain (12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century), Bosnia Herzegovina (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century) and 18<sup>th</sup> century Poland. Several historical churches are featured from Portugal, Italy and Russia (10<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century) and a synagogue from the Ukraine with all its feature elements inspired or influenced by Islamic design. 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century mosques from Italy, Russia, England, Scotland, Sweden, Denmark are featured in succession but without any insight regarding their ordering or decorative approaches.

I have reordered the examples to expedite this review, however, interspersed between the previously noted buildings are many secular spaces that appropriate Islamic design motives, including the Dunkirk Baths in France, a Tobacco factory in Dresden, Germany, and an ‘Arab room’ at Cardiff Castle in Wales. The system of curation of examples in this book with achronological and/or programmatic juxtaposition is more apparently fragmented in this chapter, without even the tenuous regional/continental connection, the reader is left with only the brief image captions that make the need for a narrative arc even more obvious.

An image of a woman praying in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Friday Mosque of Yazd in Iran opens the seven-page section: ‘Women in Islamic Architecture’ which only covers, briefly, a summary of historical women who have patronized landmark buildings for Islamic purposes such as mosques. No mention is made regarding the role women have played in modern and contemporary mosques as patrons or designers, and no mention is made regarding access and separated spaces for women in historical and contemporary mosques – surprising given the opening image and generalized title of the chapter.

The book closes with a two-page ‘A Waqf’ section that outlines the phenomena of dedicating personal funds that are legally dedicated to a public entity to ensure the maintenance and longevity of Islamic buildings. This definition is followed by a Glossary, List of Islamic dynasties, Bibliography, Picture credits and an Index.

As a scholar of the subject, I did enjoy seeing a glimpse of some underrepresented buildings built by/for Muslims – but I was left wanting more: images (of each building), drawings (architectural and diagrams), and informative text. I was also hoping to read any insight Broug might have had regarding the curation of the examples regionally. A thought that crossed my mind was the experience of simultaneity of ‘Islamic Architecture’ that people in each region might experience: for example, in some historic cities one might walk through a 16<sup>th</sup> century madrasa, to a humble mud brick tomb and to an Avant guard contemporary mosque in the course of a day. In this way I started to imagine a thread connecting the radically different and achronological ordering of buildings in the book. This reading could open larger discourses on what the debated

term 'Islamic architecture' really means – an issue Broug flagged in the first chapter but never addressed again. The large format of the book, minimal text and focus on beautiful images make this book accessible and attractive to the lay reader curious about buildings in or related to the Islamic world. That the photographs were not taken by the author, but openly sourced from around the world enriched (and greatly expedited) the creation of the book but also held back any potential insight that would have been gained had the author himself, or a collaborator, taken all of the photographs. The thread of connections between the buildings, either visually or experientially, might have become a part of the text of the book in a very interesting way, especially as a conclusion or concluding section which the book lacked, having abruptly ended with the brief section on women's patronage of historic mosques. Broug's earlier work *Islamic Geometric Design* was and is one of the most insightful books I have read regarding the creation and understanding of Islamic visual culture and it would have been wonderful to see some of that discourse continued in this book.

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## Endnotes

- 1 *Islamic Geometric Design* written by Eric Broug; - see review in *AJIS* Vol. 33. 2015. no.2
- 2 “The very terms used to describe the architecture of the Muslim world also stem from the colonial period, when orientalist scholars became interested in the buildings of non-western cultures. One may cite the fact that the phrase ‘Islamic architecture’ continues to be used in a world where it would seem strange to speak of ‘Christian architecture’.” Frishman, Martin and H-U Khan. *The Mosque History, Architectural Development and Regional Diversity*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994. P.11.