

Transcendent Soul of the Muslim Architect and Spiritual Impact of the Islamic Architecture: Islamic Architecture and *mundus imaginalis*

Fatemeh Nasrollahi¹

Abstract

This paper represents the exploration of the transcendent soul of the Muslim architect and the spiritual impact of the Islamic architecture. It demonstrates that Islamic architecture is a sacred form of transmitting the Divine message, which originates from the Spirit, surpasses time and space, and manifests itself in the physical world. In this sense, Islamic architecture is a perennial consequence of an imagination which opens up the soul to certain possibilities of perceiving and understanding that are not available to the rational mind. The paper investigates examples from Islamic architectural tradition that engaged in the crystallization and expression of the *mundus imaginalis*, the realm where invisible realities become visible and corporeal entities are spiritualized. In order to examine the materialization of the world of symbols in architecture, the paper first addresses the crucial place of the Imaginal World in spiritual development of the Muslim architect and creation of the Islamic architecture. It also demonstrates the fundamental aspects of the soul and characteristics of the Muslim architect in the frame of Islamic mysticism. Second, the paper discusses how Islamic architecture embodies and achieves the utmost degree of spirituality.

Keywords: Imaginal World (*‘ālam al-mīthāl*, *mundus imaginalis*), Islamic Architecture and Spirituality, Muslim Architect, Symbolism

1. Introduction

The human spirit is a microcosmic embodiment of innumerable possibilities of outward manifestation within itself. Thus, the recognition of the existence of an imaginal world is necessary to situate the soul in a place of synchrony with the cosmos. "Cosmos" here denotes not only the whole universe, but also the inherently perfect order embedded within it. It is a profound unity of balance and harmony between various forces, events and elements which all ancient civilizations were concerned with. On the basis of this cosmological scheme, the doctrine of the Imaginal World corresponds to an intermediary world connecting this physical world to the worlds above and man to higher realities and ultimately to God. In regards to the architectural traditions of the Islamic world, the idea of the Imaginal World plays a significant role, for it is through the imaginative faculty that the architect is capable of depicting forms.

1.1. Background

The conception of the human soul, its existence, nature, and ultimate objective, possesses an extremely important position in Islamic intellectual thoughts. The state of the soul, which is exposed to Intelligible Beauty, follows the harmonic laws of nature and gives access to the divine order. In this sense, human being is, potentially, able to reflect the Beauty of God. The reflection of the Beauty of God in the realm of Islamic architecture is the task of the Muslim architect. In this respect, the Muslim architect must be capable of actualizing his potentiality through his imagination.

¹ Second -Year Graduate Student, Islamic Studies Program, The George Washington University, Address: 2400 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Apt#103, Washington, D.C., 20037. Email: fatemeh.nasrollahi@gmail.com, Telephone: +1-5715278409

The purified soul of the traditional Muslim architect was able to journey from the highest, metaphysical or spiritual plane, from the plane of archetypes to the physical, material or terrestrial plane. As a result, he was inspired by this "ideal" or "imaginal" plane, and was able to manifest it in the plane of forms. Thus, every earthly object or artifice that he creates, embraces a symbolic meaning to the degree that it reflects its heavenly archetype.

In this construct and on the basis of Islamic cosmological thought, the universe or the macrocosm, consists of a hierarchical order which is divided, majorly, into five principal states, the five "Divine Presences:" the earthly world of matter (*mulk*), bound by space and time; the intermediate world of the heavens, the "imaginal" plane (*malakūt*); the spiritual or archangelic world (*jabarūt*); the world of the Divine Names and Qualities (*lāhūt*), and the Divine Essence itself (*dhāt* or *hāhūt*).² Respectively, these levels, in the human microcosm, correspond to the body, the soul and the spirit. Based on this hierarchical series of layers of the cosmos, in the creative process, first the Divine attributes and qualities are reflected as archetypes on the realm of the Spirit or the ideal plane. Then, on the second level, these reflections are understood as the pure forms in the Imaginal World, and finally materialized into natural and man-made objects on the earthly dimension of the universe.

Moreover, a human being is a microcosm, a reflection of the entire world-order in miniature; therefore, understanding the cosmos is fundamental for self-recognition. In this regard, traditional Muslim architects were completely aware of the mind's essential kinship with its archetypal nature and understood the deep structure of the world. Through profound spiritual training and meditation, his heart, God's Throne,³ became reflective of the Divine Light and consequently he was able to access the Imaginal World, the intermediary between the abstract and the material worlds. The role of the Muslim architect is, thus, not just imagining, but cleansing the imagination so that it can progressively attain richer, brighter, and more elevated images. The Muslim architect must be capable of translating imaginal forms and ideas, the invisible world, into tangible forms, which are then set free into the corporeal world. This process of purification of the heart and elevation of the soul, of the Muslim architect, results in an emulation of Divine Creativity as *al-musanwir*, through a perennial and transcendent manifestation of the Islamic principles, an effective means of exalting matter.

2. Imaginal World

The acknowledgement of the existence of an Imaginal World is essential to situate the soul and the realm of unconscious. It is through the emergence of an imaginal perception that one can go beyond mere symbolic representations of archetypes where "new senses perceive directly the order of (supersensible) reality."⁴ Man is bestowed with faculties for perceiving tangible and intangible worlds; he is given the faculty of sense perception (*hawwās-e-khamsa*) for perceiving the physical world, the imaginative faculty (*quwwat-al-mutakhayala*), capable of producing imaginal forms, for perceiving the Imaginal World and the intellect (*ʿaql*) for perceiving the intelligible forms.

The conception of the *ʿālam al-mithāl* has a long and rich history in Islam, originating from the Quran and Hadith. It was alluded by Abu Hamid al Ghazzali (d. 505/1111) and fully elaborated for the first time and given the title of *ʿālam al-mithāl* by Shaykh al-Ishrāq Shahāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191). Even though Suhrawardī discussed the Imaginal World only in terms of the microcosm, it is Muhyi -Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) who expanded and elaborated on the doctrine of the Imaginal World, speaking of both a microcosmic and macrocosmic Imaginal World. Later on, Šadr al-Dīn Shīrazī better known as Mulla Šadrā (d. 1050/1640) further developed this theme and also profoundly applied the doctrine of the Imaginal World to Islamic eschatology.

2.1. Mystical and Cosmological and Ontological Aspects of the Imaginal World

In addition to the domain of Islamic philosophy, a large number of Sufi literature concerned with the integration of the *ʿālam al-mithāl* into the literary tradition of the Islamic world, provided a perfect poetic synthesis of the Imaginal World in the tradition of Islamic Sufi literature.

²S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). p. 181

³ "A believer's heart is God's Throne (ʿArsh)" "قَلْبُ الْمُؤْمِنِ عَرْشُ الرَّحْمَنِ"

⁴Henry Corbin. *The man of light in Iranian Sufism*. (New York: Omega Publications, 1994), p. 81

Ibn ʿArabī himself “as the greatest Muslim theoretician of imagination, was able to utilize –with perfect awareness of what he was doing- the possibilities of poetical expression gained through imaginal perception.”⁵ The large body of his writing consists of not only several hundred prose works, but also three divans of poetry and thousands of additional verses dispersed through out his prose writings. Therefore, “the ‘World of Imagination’ as a technical term in Sufism is usually associated with the school of Ibn ʿArabī.”⁶ Moreover, Rūmī explains this concept as such and illustrates a strong ontological basis for his poetry, which was revealed to him from the “World of Imagination” (ʿālam-ikhayāl). Even though his contribution to this notion is limited to “only a small number of passages, he refers to it continuously both implicitly and explicitly. In fact, once its significance in Rūmī’s teachings is understood, it becomes obvious that most if not all of his poetry is related to it.”⁷

It is significant to understand that the term ‘imaginal’ in the context of Sufism should by no means be perceived as ‘imaginary’. Terms such as ‘imaginal’ or ‘imagination’ originate from the Arabic term *khayāl*, which represents the intermediary nature of an object’s existence between the material and spiritual worlds. In this regards, Henry Corbin states that “the seriousness of the role of the Imagination is stressed by our philosophers when they state that it can be ‘the Tree of Blessedness’ or on the contrary ‘the Accursed Tree’ of which the Quran speaks,⁸ that which means Angel or Demon in power. The imaginary can be innocuous; the imaginal never can be so.”⁹ Respectively, Rūmī describes the difference between the demonic and angelic aspects of the imagination:

گر خیالاتش بود صاحب جمال*** آدمی را فربهی هست از خیل
می گدازد همچو موم از آتشی*** و خیالاتش نماید ناخوشی

The inward form of the imagination is not perceivable to all individuals. Most people concern only with the outward manifestation of imagination without being aware of the fact that all imagination, as part of the hierarchical order of the universe, is created by God and constantly reminds man of his presence.¹⁰ These forms are to motivate man to pursue certain goals, which is ultimately essential for the maintenance of the world. William Chittick elaborates, “Man’s imagination makes him choose various derivative beloveds rather than the True Beloved. As for the saint, he sees beyond the form of imagination to its meaning or “reality,” so he desires only the Beloved.”¹¹

Additionally, the imaginative faculty is a purely spiritual power free of the physical being and thus enduring it. It is the seminal power of the subtle body or imaginal body (*jism mithālī*). This subtle body itself is eternally attached to the soul, the spiritual individuality. In this regard, Henry Corbin states: This is to say that the *mundus imaginalis* the place, and consequently the world, where not only the visions of the prophets, the visions of the mystics, the visionary events which each human soul traverses at the time of his *exitus* from this world, the events of the lesser Resurrection and of the Greater Resurrection take place, but also the *gestes* of the mystical epics, the symbolic acts of all the rituals of initiation, liturgies in general with all their symbols, the ‘composition of the ground’ in various methods of prayer (*oraison*), the spiritual filiations, and equally the esoteric *processus* of the Alchemical Work.¹² Therefore, an in-depth understanding of the Imaginal World reveals how it, on one hand, “immaterialises” the sensible forms to intangible ones, and on the other “imaginalises” the intellectual forms and gives them shape and dimension.¹³

⁵William C. Chittick. *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Problem of Religious*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994). p.67

⁶Jalal al-Dīn Rūmī, William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994). p. 248

⁷Ibid. Moreover Chittick explains: “Rūmī does not manufacture or devise his imagery, but he receives it from the World of Imagination, within which the Beloved manifests Himself to lovers in ‘imaginal’ forms.” (p. 278)

⁸*Zaqqum*. Quran, xvii,60; xxxvii,62-68; xliv,43-46; lvi,52.

⁹Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, Trans. from the French by Nancy Pearson. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977).p.x

¹⁰This is beautifully expressed by Rūmī when he says: خیالستان اندیشه مدد از روح تو دارد

¹¹Jalal al-Dīn Rūmī, William Chittick, p. 250

¹²Henry Corbin, 1977, p. xi

¹³Henry Corbin, 1977, p. xi

In other words, "the Imaginal World creates symbols on the one hand from the Sensible Forms, on the other from the Intellectual Forms."¹⁴ Beings on the imaginal realm are realities that even though transcend place and time, are as real as the physical world.¹⁵ One might say, the realm of imagination, the land of Reality, is a transitional world between the physical and the metaphysical. This plane is wherein spirits and bodies interchange qualities, spirits become materialized and bodies spiritualized. It is interpreted as "the world where all the essential realities of being . . . are manifested in real images."¹⁶ Samer Akkach adds "and while everything in our world is ephemeral, mortal, and mutable, things there are permanent, immortal, and immutable. This land contains many worlds, among them one made exactly in the form of our phenomenal world."¹⁷

Within the dimensions in the World of Imagination, the lowest levels determine the individual human faculty of imagination in which images portray themselves to the consciousness. That is to say, "each person's mental images take on a peculiar color in keeping with his own background, memories, intelligence, environment, and so forth. But in its higher levels, the World of Imagination is independent of individual man."¹⁸ Man's imagination is, thus, defined to the degree that he acquires access to the higher realm of imagination through the visions and intuitions he obtains on the spiritual path, not vice versa; for it exists on a higher ontological domain than his rational mind.¹⁹ In this sense, the soul of the Saint is the most receptive and exposed to the Imaginal World among all human beings: The Land of Reality is the *qibla* of the Sufis, the place in which their active imagination is anchored.²⁰ Those who visited this land reported what they had observed and learned there. They say that unlike things in our world, all things on that land are alive and endowed with a rational faculty. One can converse with, and learn from, gardens, animals, and minerals. "He passes near no stone, no tree, and no village, nothing whatsoever," Ibn Arabi reports after a visitor, "without talking to it, if he wishes, as a man speaks with his companion. They have different languages, but this land has the characteristic of giving to all who enter it the understanding of all the languages that are spoken on it."²¹

2.2. Islamic Architecture and the Imaginal World

In regards to the conception of the Imaginal World in traditional architecture of the Islamic world, imagination in Islamic architecture represents the real and eternal world, of which the architectural form is but a pale shadow. Explaining architectural imagination means transporting it to another world, where the architect imagines forms to the extent of his understanding. Referring to the world of colors that is highly incorporated in the effective expression of the Islamic architecture (fig. 1), Henry Corbin asserts:

...as the Imaginal world, being the pure space of symbols, lies beyond the sensible space of material bodies, similarly colors lead beyond to their subtle being, to a supra-sensible light. "Light is the Angel of color," as the spiritual Temple is the angelic form of the material Temple. Hence the Imaginal world is not simply made up of living numerical or geometric dimensions expressing the structures of the divine worlds; for those worlds are not without tone and color. Since they raise the visible world up to their own level, thereby making themselves accessible to the eyes of the soul, so they too are adorned with spiritual colors.²² Accordingly, the spatial characteristics of the Islamic architecture are rooted in the space of the "Imaginal World," where all the components of the structure from the dome, the *muqarnas*, and the fountain to the geometric forms and patterns, and arabesques, "as well as the events within the human soul, have their origin."²³ (fig. 2)

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵Mehdi Amin Razavi. *Subrawardi and the School of Illumination*. (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997). p. 87

¹⁶Samer Akkach. *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas*. (New York: State University of New York Press). 2005, p. 62

¹⁷Ibid, p. 178

¹⁸Jalal al-Dīn Rūm, William Chittick, p. 249

¹⁹Jalal al-Dīn Rūm, William Chittick, p. 249

²⁰عکس مهرویان بستان خداست *** آن خیالاتی که دام اولیاست

²¹Samer Akkach, p. 64

²²Christian Jambet, Editorial Note to *Temple and Contemplation* by Henry Corbin, Trans. by James W. Morris. (New York: KPI Limited, 1986). p. xi

²³S.H. Nasr, p. 182

The Imaginal World is in effect "both beyond this external world and within the soul of man," which is profoundly illustrated and defined in Persian Sufi poetry, as in the following verses of the *Mathnawi*, where Rūmī says:²⁴

*In the orchard a certain Sufi laid his face in Sufi fashion upon his knee for the sake of (mystical) revelation;
Then he sank deep O into himself. An impertinent fellow was annoyed by his semblance of slumber.
'Why', said he, 'dost thou sleep? Nay look at the rivers, behold these trees and the marks (of Divine mercy) and green plants.
'Harken to the command of God, for He hath said, "Look ye": Turn thy face towards these marks of (Divine) mercy.'
He replied, 'O Man of vanity, its marks are (within) the heart: that (which) is without is only the marks of the marks.
'The (real) orchards and verdure are in the very essence of the soul: the reflection thereof upon (that which is) without is as (the reflection) in running water.
'In the water there is (only) the phantom (reflected image) of the orchard, which quivers on account of the subtle quality of the water.*



Figure 1. Color in Islamic Architecture. Left: Imam Mosque, Isfahan, Right: Nasir al-Mulk Mosque, Shiraz.

*'The (real) orchards and fruits are within the heart: the reflection of their beauty is (falling) upon this water and earth (the external world).
'If it were not the reflection of that delectable cypress, then God would not have called it the abode of deception.'*²⁵

²⁴S.H. Nasr, p. 182

²⁵Ibid

صوفیانه روی بر زانو نهاد^{***} صوفی در باغ از بهر گشاد
شد ملول از صورت خوابش فضول^{***} پس فرو رفت او به خود اندر نغول
این درختان بین و آثار و خضر^{***} که چه خسیی آخر اندر رز نگر
سوی این آثار رحمت آر رو^{***} امر حق بشنو که گفتست انظروا
آن برون آثار آثارست و بس^{***} گفت آثارش دلست ای بوالهوس
بر برون عکسش چو در آب روان^{***} باغها و سبزهها در عین جان
که کند از لطف آب آن اضطراب^{***} آن خیال باغ باشد اندر آب
عکس لطف آن برین آب و گلست^{***} باغها و میوهها اندر دلست
پس نخواندی ایزدش دار الغرور^{***} گر نبودی عکس آن سرو سرور
هست از عکس دل و جان رجال^{***} این غرور آنست یعنی این خیال
بر گمانی کین بود جنت کده^{***} جمله مغروران برین عکس آمده
بر خیالی می کنند آن لاغها^{***} می گریزند از اصول باغها
راست بینند و چه سودست آن نظر^{***} چونک خواب غفلت آیدشان به سر
تا قیامت زین غلط وا حسرتاه^{***} بس به گورستان غریو افتاد و آه
یعنی او از اصل این رز بوی برد^{***} ای خنک آن را که پیش از مرگ مرد



Figure 2: *Muqarnas* and Geometric Patterns. Left and Middle: Jami Mosque, Yazd. Right: Jami Mosque, Isfahan. Source: Author

2.3. Language of Symbolism

Islamic architecture, in general, is an expression of the Unity, its function is to lead man to the higher state of being, to transform the invisible ideas into a visible form, to convey the perennial Truth into the physical realm of manifestation and exemplify, through the language of symbolism, the primordial images and archetypes. With the help of symbolic elements, Islamic architecture achieves what could genuinely be called an "architectural alchemy." While epitomizing Islamic principles and traditions through the order of its diverse roles and functions, Islamic architecture developed a unique soul. That soul is best identified and valued by the Muslim architect whose own life is inspired and directed by the sources that inspire and guide Islamic architecture.

The truly abstract language of the Islamic architecture denotes, on the one hand, its role in transmitting concepts which cannot be communicated through mere physical form. On the other hand, as a result of the Muslim architect's understanding of the symbolism of forms, Islamic architecture fulfills the meaning of symbols. Physical forms characterize the metaphysical truths and it is this features which instills a timeless quality in these forms. The abstract perception of form, as seen in Islamic architecture, elevates the interpretation of reality from the corporeal realm. Therefore, a contemplative state of mind and a profound insight incorporates into the language of symbolism, of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity. As a result, the language of symbolism marks the threshold between the corporeal/physical and the abstract/metaphysical. This comprehensive vision not only embodies the heavenly archetypes of the imaginal world, but also indicates the universal harmony of the symbolism of architecture as a manifestation of the all-pervasive order of the universe. In other words, "in the same way that ordinary language reflects the partial knowledge attained through reason and sense, the language of symbolism expresses the knowledge acquired through the intellect, which is gnosis. Symbols themselves are theophanies of the absolute in the relative. Symbolic forms, which are sensible aspects of the metaphysical reality of things, exist whether or not man is aware of them."²⁶ Therefore, language of symbolism in the Islamic architecture is effectively used to connect the physical to the imaginal, the mortal to the immortal.

²⁶Nader Ardalan, Laleh Bakhtiar. *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975). p. 5

3. Qualities of the Muslim Architect

The architectural profession in Islam is extensively concerned with the relationship between the cosmic imagination and the method in which the architectural imagination is expressed and crystalized. A traditional Muslim architect, on his spiritual path, was given practices that enabled him to identify divine qualities of the soul. The spiritual journey frees the soul from the confined sense of self and ego and leads to the realization of the human's divine nature. To accomplish this state, he must engage in meditation retreats and constant invocation, *fikr* and *dhikr*.

The Muslim architect skillfully and consciously contemplates and displays the forms, patterns, harmonies, and rhythms he observes in the surrounding environment, hence endorsing that his work does not stand discretely but as part of God's creation on earth. Traditional Islamic architecture fully demonstrates this consciousness of the architect. Therefore, there was never any feeling of defiance, opposition, conflict, or conquest over the nature. Islamic architecture clearly depicts this reverence "in the curve of the dome, the fluid forms of vaults, the crenulations of the skyline and the recesses and protrusions of the walls which allow the building to interact gracefully with the surrounding space. Even the internal space of the building, the courtyard (metaphorically the heart of the building), was open to the sky symbolizing the aspiration of the heart towards heaven."²⁷

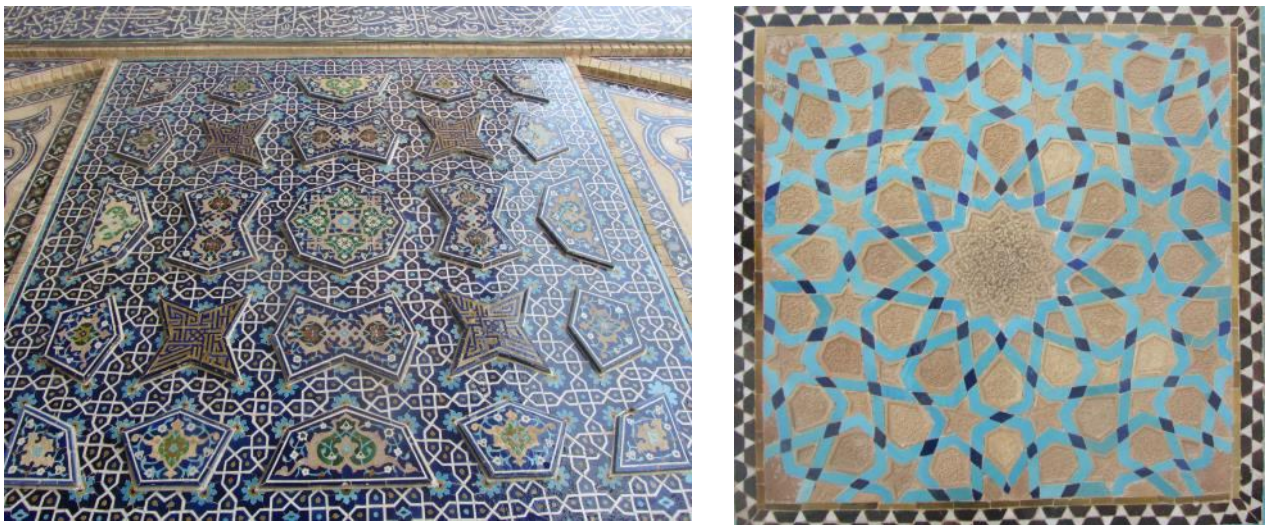


Figure 3. The embellishments on the elaborate surfaces of Islamic architecture. Left: Jami Mosque, Isfahan. Right: Jami Mosque, Yazd.

Source: Author

Furthermore, the traditional Muslim architect has a great desire towards heaven which is manifested in his work, primarily, through the lightening of the materials and physical mass. The embellishments on the elaborate surfaces of Islamic architecture make them invisible and lead to the planes of color, geometric patterns, arabesque and biomorphic forms. The architect employs decoration to manifest a higher order of being and not simply a superficial application of colors and patterns (fig. 3).

In this respect, Islamic architecture never became the stage for individual conflicts and experiences. The Muslim architect on the way of self-purification and spiritual perfection practices the discipline of the spiritual path under the guidance of his master. The more the soul of an architect is purified and polished, the more he reflects Divine Light and qualities through his art. It is here that the architect's soul "becomes illuminated and strong through the rays of divine light."²⁸

²⁷Khaled Azzam. *The Universal Principles of Islamic Art*. "Presentation at Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies," 16 May 2002

²⁸Mehdi Amin Razavi, p. 84

Since the soul is both light and darkness, the human must fortify the spiritual light and dilute the bodily darkness.²⁹ Thus, it is of great importance for the Muslim architect to strengthen his divine nature and illuminate his heart. His purpose is to make the unconscious conscious and to reconduct form to its source, to its archetype, to its true reality. He is aware of the eternal relations between the materials, symbols, and archetypes concealed beneath the accounts of the exterior happenings. He employs the possibilities of instruments such as geometry to express invisible realities in the physical world.

According to the Islamic perspective, which accentuates the absolute supremacy of the Creator over the creature, architectural creativity is nothing other than a predisposition which God has placed in man to afford him the path towards Him. The profession of being an architect, thus, does not define an exceptional category in Islam, rather is one among others of the servants of God. In order to accomplish his servanthood in the utmost degree, Muslim architect should himself, become, by means of effacement and disinterested service, as transparent as possible interpreter of the Tradition to which he subscribes. Whence the relationship that has always existed with Muslim artists between the practice of virtues and the excellence of professional work. The Prophet said: "God loves that when one of you does something, he does it thoroughly." And one can confirm that this advice has been followed to the letter, in particular by the artisans of the guilds and brotherhoods of the entire classical period for whom the artisanal pact was a unanimously respected professional code of honor.³⁰

Additionally, for the Muslim architect, his work is an impersonal statement to remind man of God. The Muslim architect, "by his very Islam, his 'surrender' to the Divine law, is always aware of the fact that it is not he who produces or invents beauty, but that a work of art is beautiful to the degree that it obeys the cosmic order and therefore reflects universal beauty"³¹

Architectural trainings would represent more than just an education for eyes, hands and mind; it has an impact on the architect's soul. It not only inspires the architect, but also gives an insight into the perennial principles which he applies to create architectural expressions. This kind of education differentiates from that of the modern one; it is not centered on the architecture as the work of the individual, but on the particular demonstration of a universal principle that is the result of the architect's imagination. In the imaginal sense, "an architect conceives of a building in his heart. In his imagination its breadth is so much, its length so much, its floor so much, and its courtyard so much. This is not called 'imagination,' for the reality of that building is born and derived from this imagination. True, if someone other than an architect should conceive such a form in his imagination that is called 'imagination.'"³²

The Muslim architects' awareness of the higher reality of the architectural form and the endless reference to the world of transcendent archetypes for inspiration, imbues in their work a sense of timeless beauty. The spatial and structural features of the Jami Mosque of Isfahan, the tiles of the Alhambra or the decorative patterns of the Taj Mahal wordlessly and in a striking manner speak of many qualities and penetrate into our being to the depth of our soul and transport us to a higher realm.³³ The experience of this architecture clearly informs us that beauty based on the sacred is universal and provides a symbolic language for the soul.

The traditional Muslim architect is aware that man is not the measure of all things and acknowledges by his surrender to the Divine will, that God is the Ultimate and Supreme Artist. Thus he relates and communicates to his surrounding space with a sense of admiration and reverence and not arrogance. As a result, "if he has to leave an imprint on this physical space then it must be done with humility and with no sense of defiance to the natural order of being."³⁴

²⁹ هر چه یابی جز خدا آن بت بود در هم شکن

³⁰ Jean-Louis Michon, "The Message of Islamic Art," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 17, No. 1 & 2, Winter-Spring, 1985, p. 4

³¹ Titus Burckhardt. *Mirror of the Intellect*, Translated and Edited by William Stoddart, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, p. 211

³² Jalal al-Dīn Rūmī, William Chittick, p.250

³³ One has to say that the same is true in the case of any truly traditional building whether it is a Hindu temple or Gothic cathedral.

³⁴ Khaled Azzam

He perceives traditional architectural forms as symbols on earth of the archetypes which are in heaven. Due to the essence of man's nature any activity he undertakes will have to contain an aspect which conveys the realm of the Spirit. The transcendent soul of the Muslim architect is, intuitively, connected to *alam al-gheib*. In his vision, architecture, rather than a profession, is a form of invocation and remembrance of God (*dhikr*).

As a result, he reaches a state of ecstasy when fulfills a design as he could see an emulation of the creative act of God in his work. Islamic architecture is an intuition of a spiritual realm from which the architect draws his inspirations. Thus, the more the architect practices the *Shari'ah*, gains virtues and journeys through the divine realm of the spirit, the more is inspired. The understanding that the Muslim architect has of the higher reality of this art i.e., architecture and the unbroken reference to the world of heavenly archetypes for inspiration, instills in his work a sense of timeless beauty; a profound understanding of a series of metaphysical principles that enable him to transcend his physical state and understand his direct relationship to God. The comprehension of a higher reality is explained in the passage below:

There is also a sense of ritual containing a sacred dimension which links man's activities to heaven. The traditional mind always saw the world as a reflection of heaven. It realized that everything that exists in this world, even in the realm of ideas and imagination, is a reflection of a divine archetype. In this sense the ritual of craftsmanship signifies the re-enactment on earth of a divine prototype.³⁵ The all-inclusive nature of the traditional Muslim architect, whose inspiration derived from the highest sources and whose skill and devotion created masterpieces, is the result of a profound process of instilling spirituality and an awareness of the spiritual world into the soul of the architect. Through learning the practical skills of construction and comprehension of essential principles of Islam such as Divine Unity, and simultaneously learning their significance as part of the universal language underpinning the sacred and traditional architecture of Islam, the architect was engaged in the contemplative nature of architecture. He realizes, through practice rather than merely observation, that the very intricate patterns and forms he interacts with, exalt the decorative realm and embrace a deeper order of beauty inherited in the entire universe.

4. Spiritual Impact of Islamic Architecture

Islamic architecture marks the superiority of the Muslims in this field and owes its idiosyncrasy and splendor to a faith and a perennial way of life which is based on the doctrine of Unity. As a result, the fundamental principle of Islamic architecture is to reflect the Unity of the Divine Principle and the dependence of all multiplicity upon the Oneness of God. However, the sacred character of Islamic architecture and an awareness of its spiritual world are customarily overlooked in contemporary discussions. The current discourses of architectural study seldom address the need for a comprehensive, transcendental and spiritual vision in the study of Islamic architecture which aims to create and retain a sustainable association between human and Divine Reality.

The essence of Islamic architecture is the religion of Islam itself which leaves nothing untouched by sacred and transcends the realm of ideas and imagination as well as time and space. As a result, the roots and major sources of inspirations in arts and architecture of the Islamic world must be sought in the inner dimension (*batin*) of Islam i.e. Islamic spirituality, which is originated from both the Quranic revelation and "the very substance of the soul of the Prophet."³⁶ Thus, Islamic spirituality draws its root both from the written Quran (*al-Quran al-Tadwini*) and the ontological Quran (*al-Quran al-Takwini*) in addition to the invisible presence of the Prophet that is still current in the spirit of the religion. In this respect, "the Quran provides the doctrine of Unity while the Prophet provides the manifestation of this Unity in multiplicity and the witness to this Unity in His creation."³⁷ This is clearly expounded by Dr Nasr in the passage below:

...the nexus between Islamic architecture and virgin nature must be sought in the spiritual reality of the Blessed Prophet who, as the Perfect Man, par excellence, brought to earth that rite which sanctified and continues to sanctify the earth and brought into focus the spiritual reality of that primordial substance and state which both man and nature bear within themselves.

³⁵Ibid

³⁶S.H. Nasr, p. 6

³⁷Ibid, p. 4

The spiritual significance of Islamic architecture must be sought at once in the nature of the Quranic revelation which brought out the 'supernatural' character of both the natural order and of man as well as in the inner nature of the Blessed Prophet, who not only 'sanctified' the earth upon which man stands and prostrates himself, but sanctified the space within which also man lives and orients himself with the goal of reaching that Reality that lies beyond all extension and becoming.³⁸ Islamic architecture is understood by its sacredness. This sacredness is based on the "reality of God's creation" and the "barakah" of the Quranic revelation. The relationship between the structure of the architecture and the architect's commitment to the inner dimension of the religion conveys the spirituality that is inherently grounded within Islamic architecture. The sacralization of the space situates man "in the presence of the Divine" and is attained "most of all by means of the polarization of space through the presence of the Ka'bah which is the center of the earth around which Muslim pilgrims circumambulate and towards which all Muslims turn in their daily prayers."³⁹

The traditional spaces of urban settings in the Islamic world, along with the individual buildings, express a spiritual presence and hold a symbolism that speak with a subdued voice, still can be heard clearly inside the Islamic cities. Therein a sense of peace and serenity resides, a space that is profoundly related to the world of the spirit. The celebrated Jami and Shah Mosques of Isfahan are great examples of integrating Islamic spirituality and principles in the design and structure of the building in Islamic architecture.

4.1. The Jami Mosque of Isfahan

The Jami mosque of the Saljuq period is the oldest congregational mosque of the city of Isfahan, a remarkable architectural expression, which has survived over thousands of years and still serves its original function. The overall structure of the mosque demonstrates specific and distinguishing features. There are many gates and entrances to the mosque which integrate its space into the urban fabric, weave it with the city's life and activities and blur the spatial boundaries that exist between the city and the mosque (fig.4). The existing structures of the Saljuq period portray numerous geometric forms in brick, which was used as the primary material in the construction of the time and was combined with the details. Jami mosque, as a celebrated representative of the Saljuq buildings, is a perfect example of masonry, specifically in the employment of the brick and patterns.

Therefore, the Jami Mosque of Isfahan embraces a symbolic language with cosmic references, which is expressed through geometric forms, arabesque patterns and calligraphic panels on its surfaces.⁴⁰ Saljuq architects advanced in mathematical and geometrical principles and accomplished clearly defined layouts of the building and congenial proportionality. They applied a profound knowledge of geometric principles and an innate sense of rhythm, which also embodies their poetry and music, to the formulation of the intricate patterns in the whole complex. The Jami Mosque is a cut from the material world around and is filled with a comforting silence that can only be captured through "the loud flight of agitated pigeons leaving a profound silence [behind]."⁴¹

³⁸Ibid, p. 44

³⁹Ibid

⁴⁰Marjan Ghandi, "A Study on the North Dome of Masjid-i-Jami Isfahan", *Meeting Alhambra, ISAMA-BRIDGES Conference Proceedings*, University of Granada, 2003, p. 480

⁴¹Marjan Ghandi, p.482

4.2. The Imam Mosque of Isfahan



Figure 4. The Jami Mosque, Isfahan.

Source: Left: JassemGhazbanpour, *Iran from the Sky: aerial photos from different cities of Iran*, Tiss Publication, fall 2000. Right: Author

The Imam Mosque of Isfahan, also known as Shah Mosque, was built on the south side of the *Naghsh-e Jabān* Square. The complex was completed in 1629, after Shah Abbas moved the capital of the Safavid dynasty to Isfahan in 1597. One of the most achieving features of the mosque is its subtle orientation toward Mecca. In the entire structure of the mosque, only the vestibule follows the exact orientation of the square (north-south). The rest of the mosque, rectangular in shape (100 by 130 meters), is rotated, skillfully, at 45 degrees to orient it toward the *qibla*. Titus Burckhardt, beautifully, describes this orientation and states: "the architect, faced by this change of direction imposed by circumstances, knew how to make the most of it; he used to express the transition from the outward to the inward world, a swift reorientation of the soul."⁴² To accomplish this direction toward Mecca, the main portal, decorated with a remarkable and unique *muqarnas*, is linked to a triangular vestibule, which connects it to the mosque's courtyard through the space behind the northeast *iwān*. (fig. 5).

Among all the spatial features of the Shah mosque, the courtyard is a highly geometric space in perfect harmony with the architectural elements surrounding it. Generally, the overall structure of a typical mosque consists of a central courtyard which is the heart and the depth of the building and has an ablution pool in the middle, reflective of all the vertical movements around it. This spacious element, which opens up into the sky and is embraced by the Divine dome, is a cosmic gate to *‘ālam al-malakūt* and transports the soul of the believer into the realm of archetypes. The fundamental role of the water in the heart of the courtyard marks a new definition of the space in a mosque, a pristine surface in which earthly and heavenly domains meet. Altogether "the courtyards with a fountain in the middle are made in the likeness of Paradise" which resemble the innermost soul (fig. 6).



Figure 5. Entrance Portal, Imam Mosque, Isfahan.

⁴² Titus Burckhardt. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, Commemorative Edition. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009, p. 184

In addition to the elaborate harmony and exact geometric proportions of the Shah Mosque, specifically the courtyard, the portal *muqarnas* of the mosque is an exceptional masterpiece of its own. *Muqarnas* is an architectural manifestation of a precise Islamic concept symbolizing “the descent of light into the world of material forms.”⁴³ It also represents an image of the sky in Islamic architecture with reference to some Quranic verses such as: “God is He who raised up the heavens without pillars” (the Quran: 13:2) and “By the sky full of adornment (with stars)” (the Quran: 51:7). Beside its symbolic language, *muqarnas* is an extensive geometric element in the Islamic architecture whose components are in perfect harmony and proportions. The expression of the *muqarnas* in the Islamic architecture is the result of the transcended imagination of the Muslim architect who is able to depict a celestial manifestation of the Imaginal World in the terrestrial realm (fig. 7).



Figure 7: Portal Muqarnas, Imam Mosque, Isfahan.
Source: Author

The Shah Mosque is a perennial and transcendent form of architecture in the heart of Isfahan, a great structure “where delicacy of modeling is combined with geometrical precision.”⁴⁴ It is a thorough example of the harmonics in which we recognize the center where heart and reason join, leading to “some inseparable wholeness in the depths of our unconscious and subconscious out of whose measure and value that “wonderful thing” –beauty–springs forth in reference to the arts primarily as the value-form of “proportioning.””⁴⁵

⁴³ S. H. Nasr, p. 53

⁴⁴ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, p. 181

⁴⁵ Hans Kayser, *Akróasis*, Translated by Robert Lilienfeld, Massachusetts: Plowshare Press, 1970, p.75



Figure 6. Courtyard, The Jami Mosque, Isfahan.
Source: Author

5. Significance of the Intellect in Islamic Architecture

It is of key importance to understand that the sense of Unity in Islamic architecture is not merely a “religious feeling” rather is a much profounder “intellectual vision.” The term Intellect, in its original sense, is the faculty in man that binds him to God and gives intuitive knowledge of his Origin, the Absolute. Thus, Intellect, or *al-‘aql* in Arabic, allows the capability to perceive the concept of Divine Unity. Islamic tradition teaches that God has bestowed upon man the supremacy of perception, inspiration and the Intellect as man’s fundamental qualities, hence the capacity of a metaphysical knowledge and the expression of an Absolute Reality. It is from this wisdom that Islamic architecture is perceived and given a sacred dimension and tied to not only the higher levels of reality, but the creative harmony of nature.

In this respect, although there is no compositional coding in the Quran that sets the framework of architectural expression, the original principle of the Quran becomes evident if one approaches and understands the essence of Islamic architecture through the faculty of the Intellect. As a result, the relationship between the Quran and Islamic art and architecture “must not be sought on the level of formal expression”⁴⁶ but in “formless essence” of the Quran and *primarily* in the concept of Unity (*tawhīd*). “The essence of *tawhīd* is beyond words; it reveals itself in the Koran by sudden and discontinuous flashes. Striking the plane of the visual imagination, these flashes congeal into crystalline forms, and it is these forms in their turn that constitute the essence of Islamic art.”⁴⁷

The ubiquitous sense of Unity in the Islamic architecture illustrates how the realm of emotion, which is “necessarily vague and always fluctuating”, is transcended. The heart of Islamic architecture is a deep “intellectual vision”. The term Intellect must be used in its original sense; the Intellect is the faculty in man that gives intuitive knowledge of the Absolute and timeless realities, it is thus on a much higher plane than reason. Intellect, or *al-‘aql* in Arabic, is the capacity to perceive the concept of Divine unity, and it is from this wisdom that Islamic art derives its sense of beauty.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it is the world of the “subtle bodies”, Imaginal World, which conceals the true concept of “immaterialization,” and refers forms and figures to their transcendent archetypal purity. Imaginal World (*‘ālam al-mūthāl*) or the “heavenly Earth of *Hūrqalya*” is a concretesimal realm. The subtle bodies of the intermediary *mundus imaginalis*, are comprehended not by the senses but by the active Imagination. In order to access the plane of imagination, one must take on spiritual practice, meditation and self-purification.

⁴⁶Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, p. 229

⁴⁷Ibid

Fulfilling an elevated soul, totally annihilated in the Divine, is essential for the Muslim architect for that enables him to transcend his imagination, make intelligible proportions visible and imaginal forms descended into the visible world. The body, mind, heart and the imagination of the Muslim architect, thus, become reintegrated into its spiritual source, ensuing return of the architect to his primordial nature.

Traditional Islamic architecture is an utmost achievement of a fulfilled human being who has cultivated the perfect harmony between the soul, imagination, mind, heart and hand. The true character and identity of the architect can only be grasped when he succeeds his spiritual role as a Muslim craftsman. In order to fulfil spirituality and transcendence, his means of communication is truly valid only when it springs from the Islamic principles and most importantly Unity which inspires every aspect of the architect's life.

Architecture is principal in Islamic arts since it embodies a sanctification of virgin nature; provides a symbolic representation of the utmost place of worship created by the Supreme Architect, God. Architecture is considered as the art of ordering space not only on a physical level but also on the metaphysical plane, placing man in the presence of God through the sacralization of space. The architecture of Islam is more than just an aesthetic expression or spatial experience; it characterizes a symbolic insight of a higher reality. Islamic architecture derives from a sacred tradition and extends the sense of order and harmony of the nature from physical space to an expression of a metaphysical order.

Finally, it is quite important to understand that the Muslim architects dealt with the cultural, social and climatic variations and created numerous dialects of Islamic architecture. Thus, the profound tradition of Islamic architecture accustomed to embrace a wide variety of typologies, morphologies, forms and technologies as well as ideologies, philosophies, and reflective thoughts and was responsible for the physical, social and cultural identity of the place.

Bibliography

- Akkach, Samer. *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005).
- Amin Razavi, Mehdi. *Subramardi and the School of Illumination*. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997.
- Ardalan, Nader, Bakhtiar, Laleh. *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975.
- Azzam, Khaled. *The Universal Principles of Islamic Art*. "Presentation at Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies," 16 May 2002.
- Burckhardt, Titus. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, Commemorative Edition. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009.
- Burckhardt, Titus. *Mirror of the Intellect*, Translated and Edited by William Stoddart, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Chittick, William C. *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabi and the Problem of Religious*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Corbin, Henry. *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, Trans. from the French by Nancy Pearson. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Corbin, Henry. *Temple and Contemplation*, Trans. by James W. Morris. New York: KPI Limited, 1986.
- Corbin, Henry. *The man of light in Iranian Sufism*. New York: Omega Publications, 1994.
- Ghandi, Marjan. "A Study on the North Dome of Masjid-i-Jami Isfahan", *Meeting Alhambra, ISAMA-BRIDGES Conference Proceedings*, University of Granada, 2003.
- Kayser, Hans. *Akróasis*, Translated by Robert Lilienfeld, Massachusetts: Plowshare Press, 1970.
- Michon, Jean-Louis. "The Message of Islamic Art," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 17, No. 1 & 2, Winter-Spring, 1985.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Rūmī, Jalal al-Dīn. Chittick, William C. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rūmī*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.