

Doğan Kuban

Symbolism is founded not in a mysterious relation between the sign and the contents of the human mind, but between an object and a gesture, and an action and its influence upon the receptive organism.

L. Malinowski

I was fortunate to read Prof. Grabar's paper before trying to put down my own thoughts. Grabar raises most of the questions relevant to symbolism in Islam with particular emphasis on Islamic architecture. I have sought to answer or elaborate and sometimes to contradict or criticize his ideas in order to clarify the orientation of the overall investigation.

Grabar begins by asking whether there is an Islamic system of visually perceptible symbols and signs, how universally Islamic such a system is, and what its variants might be. I phrase this question somewhat differently. In the great variety and wealth of forms in the Muslim world, are there universally perceptible visual symbols? A civilization as rich and continuous as the Islamic civilization has no doubt created a multitude of symbolic systems within its domain. Can such systems be considered universally valid?

A Case Example: The Minaret

We may examine the problem of the universality of architectural symbolism by choosing a prominent example: the minaret. It is emblematic of the mosque because it is a functional part of it. By extension of this function it can be taken as the symbol of prayer, the symbol of the Islamic town and ultimately of Islam itself. Yet there is no specific prescribed form for the minaret. Therefore, not the form of the minaret but the fact that it serves an Islamic function is what makes it symbolic. The particular shape of the minaret is acknowledged and accepted by those who share the culture in which it was created. For persons living outside certain cultural parameters, a minaret is merely a tower. Giralda in Seville has no religious significance for Turkish peasants.



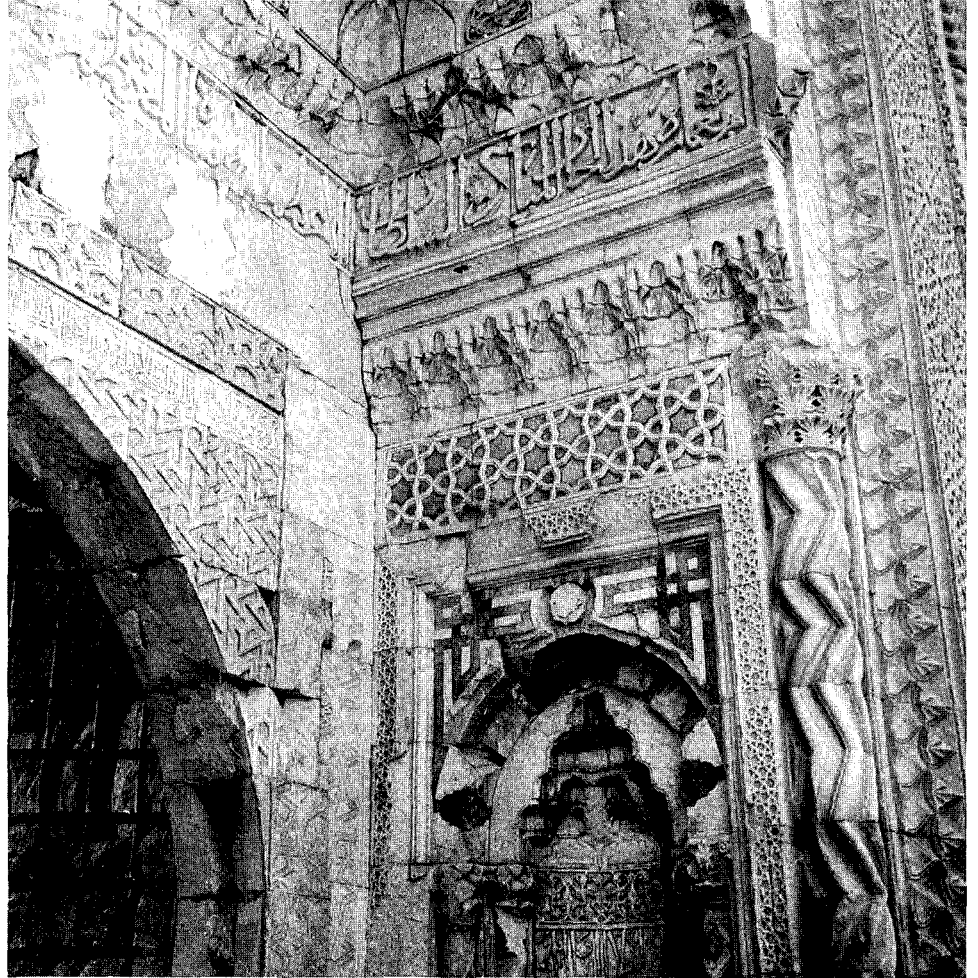
Delhi, India: detail of the Friday Mosque showing minaret and dome

Photo: D. Sareen/Aga Khan Awards

private residence is vested in its owner. In the case of individual houses, therefore, the necessary prerogatives of daily life are greater than any symbolic importance. Any symbolic value inherent in a house form comes from its long use, from its becoming a paradigm of some experience or quality of life. When this form, whose value is so overtly experiential, does not fulfill the exigencies of changed circumstances, it is difficult to interfere with the demands of its owners that it be changed.

In the past, this change in demand as reflected in form occurred smoothly because the additions or replacements were of a similar and familiar quality. Today, however, the replacement is likely to be totally foreign in nature. The superiority of the Western image in architecture is not, however, a product of the experience of generations. It is derived from the political and economic superiority of an alien world which imposes itself by sheer force. This is clearly a different kind of symbolism.

When we speak of implicit symbolism in the forms of the past, we refer to the intrinsic quality of the native building process which developed very slowly. This development may even have been imperceptible in a normal human life span. With modern symbolism, the story is entirely different. Therefore, any argument about architectural symbolism will be on sure ground only if all participants in the debate share clear and common definitions of the meaning of symbolism. Symbolism is subject to temporal and spatial delimitation and should be considered only in proper context.



*Aksaray, Turkey: Sultan Han, a Seljuk caravanserai.
Detail of main portal*

Photo: M. Niksarlı

It is clear that the symbolic importance of the minaret was borrowed from pre-Islamic cultures. The minaret is first a sign and only becomes a symbol on a higher level of appreciation. Its form is therefore defined culturally, not religiously. I want to emphasize here that if we cannot identify a specificity of form even for the minaret, we are not likely to locate such specificity in other building elements. A practical corollary would be the observation that the tower form, stripped of its cultural context, cannot properly be deemed of "universal" importance to an Islamic landscape. We recall that in early Islam there was no minaret, and even in later Islam there have been mosques which totally lack minarets or whose minarets are not towers.

From this we can conclude that no "universal" Islamic architectural forms exist without a degree of ambiguity. Nor can we expect to attain a modern and universally valid Islamic architecture through the repetition of such forms. On the other hand, there are elements of Islamic life and culture where continuity is an important concern. The quest for cultural continuity and cultural identity requires identifying the necessary linking elements. In architecture these links are presumed to be the old forms.

If one wishes merely to imitate an old mosque, the problem of continuity can be solved in a straightforward way; no discussion is required except to determine the methods of imitation. As far as purely formal aspects are concerned, I can imitate the Qayrawiyyin mosque in a new mosque at Rabat or a copy of the sixteenth-century Süleymaniye at Ankara. Such imitative solutions are actually being employed. This demonstrates that although there are no universally adopted forms in Islamic architecture, regionally identifiable ones do exist and are accepted as symbolic.

Plurality, Continuity and the Function of Forms

The universal, all-encompassing characteristics of Islam as a way of life have not been sufficient to create an all-embracing world of forms. The number and variety of forms, therefore, is not a product of an Islamic world view but the outcome of varying regional and cultural interpretations. Changing attitudes and a plurality of traditions have found different expressions in various phases of Islamic history. There is no doubt that universal Islamic values are incorporated into the life of every Muslim society. These values, in the form of social behaviour, emanate from the Koran and Sunna. Nevertheless, as Grabar discusses, no body of writing attests to the symbolic content of any architectural form. In a sense this is proper, because a dependence on any implied value in forms is inherently anti-Islamic. Forms are transient. Only Allah, who is formless, is eternal. Thus the perception of any continuity of form is not a religious but a cultural attitude.

To differentiate a religious attitude from a cultural attitude so thoroughly shaped by religion would seem difficult. But religion does not condition all aspects of behaviour; it only sets limitations. The Tradition does not say the *hajj* must be made on donkey, on camel, on foot, by car or by airplane. If the Koran and Sunna had prescribed physical forms, nobody could ever have added to Mecca and the form of the pilgrimage would have remained unaltered; neither could the route between Şafā and Marwa have been covered nor tunnels built under the rocks to ensure that pilgrims to Mina are protected. At Mecca, overwhelmingly practical considerations totally eclipsed symbolic intent, if indeed any ever existed. It is certainly difficult to define the symbolic content of traditional Islamic forms if so radical a change in environment can occur in the very heart of Islam and in close proximity to the symbol of symbols.

Obviously there is no reason to insist on a

continuity of forms if this is rejected by the very history of Islam itself. On the other hand, the neutrality of tradition (vis-à-vis the physical forms of life) should not lead us to reject historical forms. Although they may lack deep religious meaning, traditional values embodied in some forms and spatial relationships continue to be cherished. It is to these cultural traditions, then, that we should look when seeking symbolism in the architecture of Islamic countries.

Let us consider a concrete example. Whether functional or symbolic or both, in North Africa and Spain we find dark, shadowy mosque interiors contrasted with bright courtyards. Full, massive exterior forms contrast with delicate surface textures; white or red monochrome exteriors contrast with exuberant interior surface colours. Shadows cast by high walls onto winding paths suggest a certain relationship between sun and shade. Any modern building which boasts a combination of these aspects expresses a certain continuity of spirit with the past. Is this expression of continuity enough to make the edifice symbolic of Islam for modern men? I think this evocation is possible, but not necessary.

Grabar asks in what fashion and how successfully were signs and symbols—however restricted in time and space—transformed into building forms. If we pose the question in this way, there will very likely be no answer. Symbols do not evolve into forms, but forms, through certain cultural and psychological mechanisms, earn the status of symbols. We may also ask whether there exist, in totally disparate historical and geographical settings and different worlds of regional forms, similar mechanisms for the formation of symbols. If so, what is the role of religion in this process? These are difficult questions, and I am unaware of the existence of a study or theory yielding any clue to this universal mechanism.

Obviously, every possible influence, whether of a material, personal, societal or spiritual nature, may be expected to play a part in the development of forms.

Religious regulations and prescriptions for everyday behaviour may have been initially influential, but it was their practical aspect and not their spiritual content which was influential. Religious traditions defined acts, not the forms and spaces in which these acts were to be executed. The spaces and forms are actually neutral and can serve any purpose. Only their usage invested them with meaning. Time first conferred upon them the status of a sign indicative of a function or an act and only secondly a symbolic implication.

A symbol's meaning is subject to religious or secular adaptation. In the realm of mysticism and the esoteric, symbolism is attached to every object in space and to space itself. A Bektashi convent is a case in point. Here the form of space is not shaped in accordance with any detailed symbolism; it is simply a cubic room.

Toward a Vocabulary of Symbolic Meanings

To Prof. Grabar's query about the validity of experience and the usefulness of past memories for the future, we may say that *the symbol of the present is the sign of the past*, because it is the end product of an evolved system of knowledge and beliefs. According to historical consensus, the greatest works of art are those created in the past and not the products of our own age.

Grabar remarks that in the writings of Nader Ardalan and others there is an implicit assumption that certain kinds of formal transformations with their infinite modifications "are innate within the psyche and often affected by certain physical or cultural circumstances." Even if we accept this statement, it yields no clues to the understanding of symbolism unless we define the relationship between specific circumstances and the human psyche. Here I would reiterate a pertinent remark by Grabar: *unless we take the contemporary situation into account, the use of past symbolism as the sole basis for our explanation can only be incorrect.*

Grabar observes that Islam lacks a rich vocabulary of symbolic meanings comparable to that found in Christianity. Recalling Ettinghausen's opinion about the low symbolic charge of Islamic monuments, Grabar opines that it was this low charge which made it possible for an Indonesian pagoda or a Roman temple to become a mosque. The easy transformation of any symbolically different building into a mosque may result from the particular nature of the Muslim religion. Allah is everywhere and in every act. Nothing is necessarily closer to Him than anything else since everything emanates from Him. A symbolic meaning may be attached to a given form but it does not come from this source. The meaning is derived from human necessities that may be cultural, functional or economic.

A shape should not have a religious significance. It should not become an idol. I am even inclined to admit that any formal symbolism in Islam is essentially anti-religious. But religion does not interfere with the cultural significance of symbolic forms, nor does it dictate their existence or nonexistence. If we accept that formal symbolism in Muslim culture operates on a level below religious significance, our problem will be easier to solve.

Grabar asks whether cultures operate in ambiguous visual systems. This is surely the case. Ambiguity derives largely from the necessity for individual interpretations. The relationship between form and symbolic content, especially in architecture, is not likely to be interpreted in the same way by every individual.

Can a mosque be more than a place of prayer for the common man? He lacks the vocabulary to attach much abstract significance to it. But it is difficult to accept that a symbolic meaning for a form can exist without a capacity for verbal explanation. Signs and symbols must have verbal synonyms or their existence cannot be proven. I believe that the discovery of a concrete terminology to explain symbolic meanings is of paramount importance. The Muslim written traditions do not provide

much assistance in regard to this aspect of Muslim life, but surely a lack of literary mention does not denote total nonexistence. The paucity of reference may only signify literary disinterest.

Another point is important in this context. Muslim culture is not as object-oriented as Western culture. When the West arrived with all its material might, with its idolatry of objects and with a great fanfare of new symbols, the nonchalant, symbolically low-charged Muslim architecture succumbed to this powerful force. If Islamic architecture had been heavily invested with religious symbolism, this sudden submission to Western forms would not have occurred. Perhaps our very search for the nature of symbolic meaning is but another example of Western influence.

We should not conclude, as does Prof. Grabar, that it is not forms which identify Islamic culture and by extension the Muslim's perception of his architecture, but sounds, history and mode of life. Only the very early history of Islam is a common denominator for modern Muslims. In Muslim countries "mode of life" suggests all possible varieties of human experience. Except for a common creed, neither history nor lifestyle can identify a unified Islamic culture. In consideration of wide stylistic differences in the great Muslim monuments, Grabar's argument is untenable. Consequently, we must reduce the elements from the universal to the regional and from the specifically religious to the cultural. We must define temporal and geographic boundaries, and look for symbolism in an existential and not a religious context.

In his third proposition Grabar states that very few architectural forms have been consistently indicative of the presence of Islam. This seems to be an incorrect approach to our problem, since it is based upon a faulty assumption of the universality of symbols. Symbolic value is present whenever a *meaning*, subject to alteration, is attached to *any* artifact in the environment. We cannot assign symbolic meaning to the mosque, the gate, the

cupola, or the *minbar*. Symbolic values in the existing environment are not assigned spontaneously, but they evolve and exist in everyday life over a period of time. The common people perceive symbolic values, but they seldom have the desire or the ability to express them.

The next issue is whether form itself is a manifestation of the symbolic. Here the detailed study of esoteric symbolic meanings will prove unproductive. For practical purposes the symbolic value of architectural forms lies in their visual impact as perceived by ordinary people.

Decoration as Symbol

Grabar's fourth proposal is to seek Islamic symbolism in decoration. I think that apart from calligraphy intimately connected with architecture, it is difficult to ascertain the

Islamic content of decoration. I suspect that when Grabar says "symbol," he actually means something more on the order of a sign. There is indeed a characteristic Islamic approach to decoration but every culture within the Islamic world follows its own style.

Does an inscription on a Sheraton Hotel make it Islamic? In a sense it would, because the presence of calligraphy is an immediate reference. By this reasoning, an Arab-owned bank in London would be Islamic. But when Grabar says that "one of the most striking 'un-Islamicities' of contemporary architecture is its failure to make aesthetically appealing utilization of calligraphy," he leans toward a dangerous generalization.

Admittedly, calligraphy does not play the same role in the modern as in the historic Islamic building. But do we really want to write the names of Allah alongside Coca-Cola signs on the balconies of stadiums?

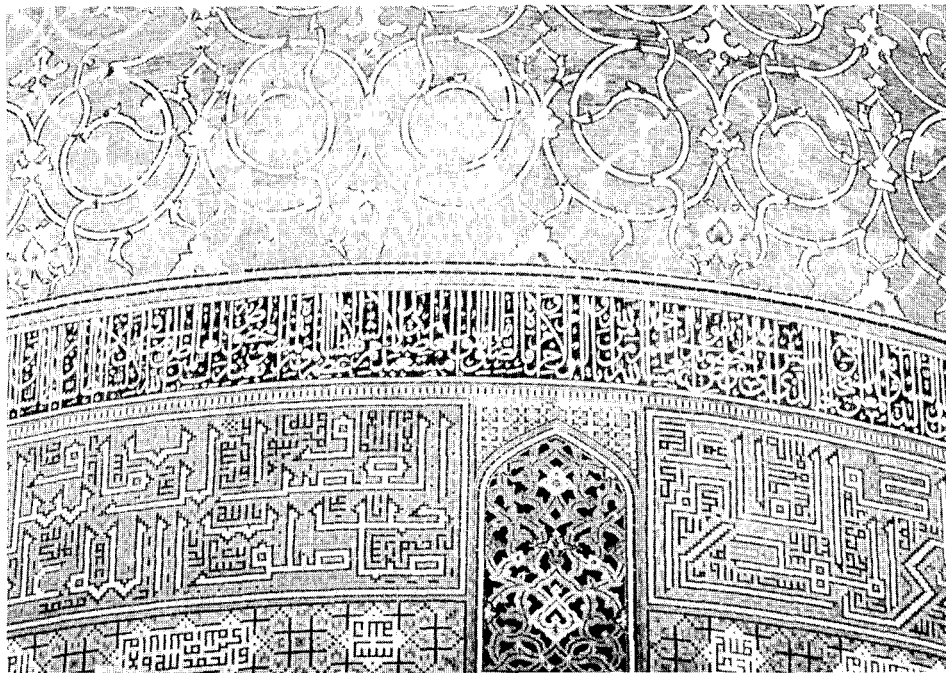
In Turkey we use the Latin alphabet. Should we decorate our façades with Arabic script?

Until now, no body of research has sought to elucidate the correspondence between architectural form and its inner meaning. An evaluation of the form of the most sacred of Muslim buildings, the mosque, reveals little correspondence between Muslim prayer ritual and the mosque form. No satisfactory answer has yet been offered to the question of what confers symbolic meaning upon a form. Is it formal quality or function? I suggest that we look in the realm of function as precisely defined by time and space.

From Past to Present Tense

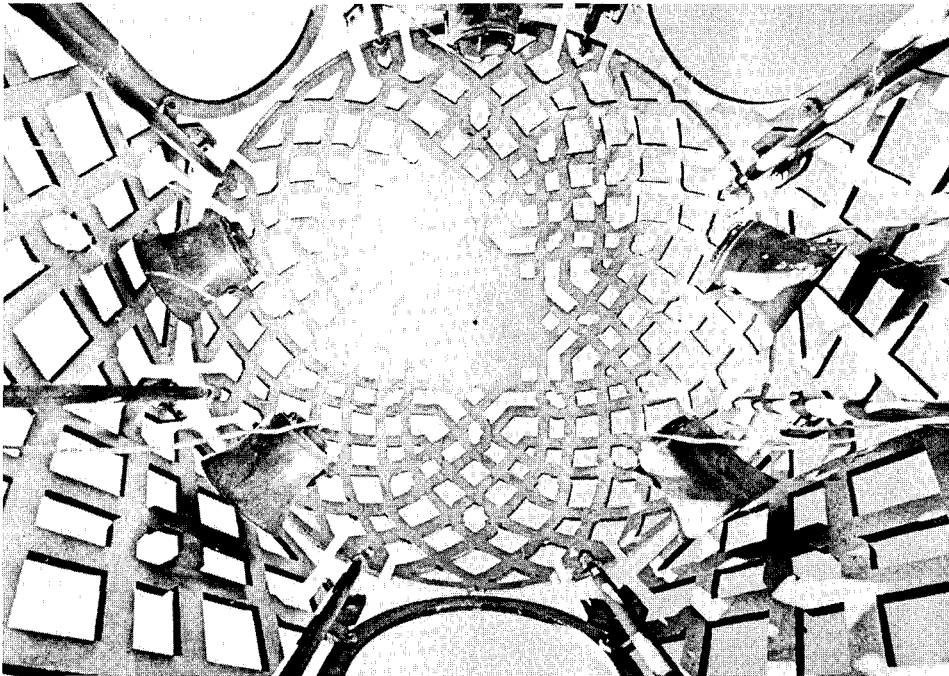
To what extent should we seek historical antecedents of modern, symbolically-imbued form? My own inclination is that there is no need for an historical perspective at all. For those who believe in the validity of such a regeneration, I cite the following cautionary example. The Prophet's house in Medina served as a mosque. There was no minaret, no *mihrab*, no *minbar*. Since the life of the Prophet represents the ideal life for a Muslim, all the auxiliary forms which are now associated with a mosque may be taken as superfluous. Of course, no Muslim will accept this, because in Islamic tradition the accretion of forms and changes in their symbolic content are accepted. Our problem lies in our capacity to control the rate of change of this symbolic content. If it is too fast, a vacuum in symbolic meaning will result. A lack of communication between past and future accounts for the veritable cultural chaos of today's Islamic world. But neither should we retard changes in symbolism by looking longingly to the great monumental buildings of the past or by excessively cherishing domes, arches and courtyards.

Today we face a dilemma. How can Islam as a potential source of symbolism be reconciled with the modern international architectural forms which introduce their



Isfahan, Iran: Masjid-i Shāh, dome exterior

Photo: V. Prentice



Mecca Hotel and Conference Centre, Saudi Arabia interior view of contemporary design minaret
 Photo: M Al-Hariri/Aga Khan Awards

own symbolism of technology? Contemporary symbolic forms are so readily accepted that even alien techniques and foreign authorship do not appear to have slowed their adoption by Muslims. The masses are happy to destroy their old houses in favour of new apartments. The rulers are satisfied when international designers build their palaces, government offices, airports and universities. As a social consensus, nobody seems to be bothered by these forms borrowed from foreign cultures. And so against a background of acceptance, on what authority do we denounce the lack of Islamic symbolism in these buildings?

Problems of Definition

I would like to conclude by discussing problems of definition of a more practical nature. To simplify our discussion of

symbolism in architecture, two distinct aspects of the problem should be clearly separated. One is the symbolic value of traditional architectural forms, and the second is their role in architecture and in the modern environment in general. The latter aspect may also be subdivided, as it includes both entire old buildings situated in the modern environment and isolated old forms assimilated into modern buildings.

The derivation of symbolic value from any architectural form is a theoretical problem. I strongly doubt that any definitive agreement on the nature of the symbolic process in the built environment can ever be reached. But discussion is useful, because even if the symbolic values of certain forms die out, the process itself survives; new forms of symbolism replace the old ones, possibly fulfilling the same unaccountable needs of the human psyche. We can hope to understand this mecha-

nism only through an analysis of the past. Historical analysis also makes clear that different cultures have differing attitudes toward conferring symbolic value upon a given form.

Human beings have an intuitive inclination to symbolize. I believe this is an extension of the act of recognition, glorifying the capacity for memorization evinced by humans and their society. The ability to memorize and to remember past experiences has been the basis for the development and survival of human society. Simple memorization requires symbolization, and the modern world offers many examples of the use of symbolizing for practical and functional purposes.

No matter what aspect of symbolism we consider, we must take its actual usage into account. There is no stronger clue to the value of a symbolic form than its perception and acceptance by the community at large. To underline this fact is a matter of practical necessity. The Award aims at actual contributions to the shaping of the man-made environment in Islamic countries. The old relationships between form and sign or symbol concern us in the degree to which they illuminate contemporary perceptions; symbols cannot exist without perceivers.

The symbolism of surviving elements of the traditional environment exists on several levels. The great monuments have become symbols by dint of value judgments accumulated over many generations. The built environment in its totality is also symbolic of a certain way of life. But these symbols act in different ways. The great mosque as a symbol has a certain invulnerability because it does not belong to individuals; it is part of the common heritage. On the other hand, the urban landscape is composed essentially of privately-owned homes. Home and family are practically synonymous terms. Individual houses are easily replaceable elements in the urban fabric. Homes lack the symbolic value of great monuments; unless they are connected with some historical fact of importance, they are vulnerable. The absolute control over a