

indicate that there are certain limits to the effort some of us make to ascertain how religious public buildings function in the Islamic world and the way Muslims experience these buildings. Furthermore, at least some great religious public buildings are themselves "works of faith," and this fact again indicates that there may be limits to an effort at understanding their spirit if we do not participate in the faith of the

builders. There may be differences of opinion among us on how severe those limits are, and on the extent to which they can be overcome. But surely serious architects and their consultants, however creative or learned, need to confront these questions and constraints when called upon to design and build public buildings in the Islamic world that are meant to have religious functions.

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## SYMBOLS AND SIGNS IN ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

### OLEG GRABAR

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*Interpretation is still obviously the central and most difficult problem. In principle, we can always bring up the question of the validity of a hermeneutics. Through cross-references, clear assertions (texts, rites, representative monuments) and half-veiled allusions, we can demonstrate precisely what such and such symbol "means." But we can also state the problem in another manner: do those who utilize symbols realize all their theoretical implications? For instance, when studying the symbolism of the "Cosmic Tree," we say that this tree is located in the "Centre of the World." Are all individuals belonging to societies that know of such Cosmic Trees equally conscious of the integral symbolism of the "Centre"? But the validity of the symbol as a form of knowledge does not depend on the degree of understanding of such and such an individual. Texts and representative monuments prove extensively that, at least to certain individuals of an archaic society, the symbolism of the "Centre" was transparent in its totality; the rest of society was satisfied with the act of "participating" in symbolism. Moreover, it is hard to state precisely the limits of such participation; it varies according to an indeterminate number of factors. All we can say is that the actualization of a symbol is not mechanical; it is related to the tensions and alternations of social life and ultimately with cosmic rhythms. —M. Eliade*

Much of what follows consists in rambling views, opinions, and interpretations developed over the years by an outsider trying to understand a world which is not his own. They tend, therefore, to seek general and abstract meanings in what had been a concrete and personal experience. This is not wrong by itself, but its danger is that unique cultural experiences can much too easily be transformed into meaningless and obvious generalities. The opposite dangers are either that a unique experience becomes so specific as to be unavailable for sharing and even explaining or that an artificial search for presumably universal values falsifies the truth of any individual's culture or experience. I hope I have avoided these pitfalls, but my main concern is that what follows be construed as a statement of the truth or of a doctrine. They are merely partial and ques-

tioning signals toward the formulation of a way to understand symbolism in a specific culture. At the end an afterword puts together some implications of my remarks which have worried me as I read and reread them. It seems more and more evident to me that discussions of symbols and signs are far more complicated than, in our managerial aloofness, we imagined them to be.

*The Problem.* There are two reasons, one general, the other specific, for raising the question of symbols and signs. The general reason is that the act of symbolisation and cultural or personal attachment to whatever we call symbols are recognised modes of behaving, feeling, thinking, associating, and understanding. There may be now and there may have been in the past more than one "Islamic" symbolic or semiotic system, but whether one or a multitude, they form a discrete group which must by definition be, at least in part, different from comparable groups at other times or in other places. The question derives from nearly two years of deliberations and discussions in the context of the Aga Khan Award seminars about what, if anything, within contemporary architecture in Muslim countries can legitimately be considered Islamic. Furthermore, can this something be defined with sufficient clarity to be used as a criterion for evaluation?

When we dealt in the second seminar with restoration and rehabilitation, the problem did not arise, for the criterion of having been part of Muslim history was sufficient to justify the consideration of any old remains. The concerns were or could have been technical (is a given monument or ensemble accurately restored?), social (what should be preserved and why within the context of contemporary culture?), informational (how should one present and exchange knowledge about monuments?), economic (how does rehabilitation relate to tourism or to urban mobility?), aesthetic (what is a good restoration?), or ideological (what is the purpose of preserving and whom does it profit?), but the value of the activi-

ty within the context of enhancing Muslim self-awareness was not questioned. It could have been, for the argument can be made that monuments, like people and cultures, may best be left to die, that antiquarianism in architecture is a peculiarity of a very limited Western elite and that preservation is a form of congealing a meaningless past, at best useful for flag waving. But the discussion did not go that far.

Housing, the topic of the third seminar, was a much more complicated matter. It seemed clear to me that there were two extreme positions. One maintained that there is a definable Islamic typology of housing, whether its definition should derive from historical forms created in order to make an Islamic way of life possible or from a prescriptive system of religious and social requirements determined by the Koran, the Traditions, and Law. The other extreme maintained that housing is independent of the prescriptions of the faith, either because contemporary problems require solutions independent of religious and cultural allegiances or because Islam itself is prescriptive in behaviour, not in form. These extremes allow for a very extensive range of intermediate possibilities, but what was important about the debate itself was that the pertinence of Islam for housing—the system of belief and ways of life—could be questioned, while no one questioned the right of Muslims to a setting for whatever forms their lives may take. It was interesting that the texts quoted consisted either of very general statements (usually from the Hadith) about good behaviour and cleanliness or legal sources in which complex local practices and traditions were given a broad sheathing of theoretical jurisprudence. Statements attributed to the seventh and eighth centuries (for which we have few available forms) and contemporary urban requirements are difficult to correlate, unless one tries to delve much more deeply into the evolution of Islamic law over the centuries. But even if unanswered in any way approaching coherence, the correct question was asked: what is the pertinence of Islam to architecture, now or in the past?

While this issue was aired in very broad terms at the first seminar and has reappeared from time to time, this fourth seminar seems to be the proper moment to try to be more specific and more concrete. But, even here, it is impossible to consider in one swoop the impact of Islam on architecture from Spain to the Philippines over fourteen centuries—hence the choice of a series of questions dealing with only one aspect of the impact. One could have chosen something as concrete as inheritance law and the development of building space in cities, but the information would not be easily available and the subject is hardly exciting. In proposing to deal with signs and symbols, the assumed social and psychological need to symbolise provides a different framework within which to consider Islamic architecture.

The questions can be formulated in the following way: Is there an Islamic system of visually perceptible symbols and signs? How universal is such a system and what are its variants? What are the sources of the system, the revealed and theologically or pietistically developed statement of the faith, or the evolution of visual forms over fourteen hundred years? In what fashion and how successfully were signs and symbols transformed into building forms? How valid is the experience and memory of the past for the present and the future?

*Old Approaches.* The need for an approach comes from existing literature. To my knowledge, only two studies deal overtly and formally with symbolism and signs in Islamic culture and claim, at least in theory, some kind of completeness.

One is Rudi Paret's *Symbolik des Islam* (Stuttgart, 1958). Modestly restricted to "observation on the meaning of symbols (*Symbolik*) within the sphere of the Muslim world" (p. 9) and limited to religious matter, it tends to be descriptive rather than interpretative. Paret does, however, make an important distinction between primary and secondary symbols, the former being direct and immediate transformations of whatever is being symbolised (a complete set or system), the latter being more fragmentary or diverse, at times a synecdoche (part used for the whole) and at other times in multiple layers (as when a mystic headgear made of two pieces symbolises *all* binary opposites such as paradise-hell, life-death). It is only when dealing with mysticism that Paret, under the impact of Hellmut Ritter (to whom I shall return below), moves beyond the descriptive to the visual symbolism of the Arabic alphabet. He does not, however, talk about visual architectural implications.

The second study is Jacques Waardenburg's "Islam Studied as a Symbol and Signification System" in *Humaniora Islamica*, Vol. II (1974). A theoretical essay on method, it asks appropriate questions (note in particular an interesting query about Islam as an ideology rather than as a religion) but loses itself by being so methodologically abstract that it fails in providing answers and even in indicating how these answers could in fact be found. Not even a nod is extended in the direction of visual forms.

Much more work has been done with the uniquely rich subfield of Islamic, and especially Persian, mysticism. The grand master of the field is Hellmut Ritter, whose *Das Meer der Seels* (Leiden, 1955) is one of the most elaborate and difficult systems of interpreting mystical thought. His successor, hardly less complicated, is Henri Corbin, some of whose works exist in English. An excellent introduction to all mystical matters is Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975). An interesting and occasionally provocative discussion of related issues around a single theme and with a broader base than Iranian Sufism or Ibn al-'Arabi can be found in M. Arkoun and others, *L'Etrange et le Merveilleux dans l'Islam Medieval* (Paris, 1978), the proceedings of a lively colloquium. The most interesting aspect of these studies for our purposes is that they extend beyond traditional theological or esoteric interpretations into science and technology (S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Science*, London, 1976) and architecture (N. Ardalan and L. Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity*, Chicago, 1973). They owe little to broad symbolic theories except to an implied (Jungian, I guess) assumption that certain kinds of formal transformations (i.e., not only the visible form but its finite or infinite modifications according to one or more logical or paralogical methods) are innate within the psyche and often affected by certain physical or cultural circumstances (e.g., the land of Iran with its ecological properties, Muslims brought up in Sufi traditions).

In most of these studies, just as in several works by T. Burckhardt (*Sacred Art in East and West*, London, 1967, and *Art of Islam*, London, 1976), which are not as deeply affected

by Iranian culture, I see three inherent difficulties:

1. Nowhere is there an explicit statement of the relationship between data (measurable and quantifiable in time and space) and interpretation; in other words, as opposed to the works of philologists and even philosophers such as Ritter or Corbin, there is an absence of scientific precision. Therefore, many of the conclusions seem premature.

2. The specifically Islamic character of forms is rarely clear or specific enough, except for calligraphy, which is mentioned as unique but never described; in other words the Islamic component is either absent from what are basic human needs conditioned by local limitations (no stone in Iran, colder weather in Anatolia than in Egypt, and so on) or else it is simply a sheathing, a removable skin which is an expression of *taste*, not a symbol of the faith or the culture; this last point may be further strengthened by the undeniable fact that buildings (as opposed to objects in metal or paintings) were constantly repaired and refurbished to fit a prevalent taste and by the more debatable theory of earlier decades that visual expression was a sin in Muslim eyes.

3. The contemporary context is almost always missing; we may not yet have discovered a Suger or a Procopius in traditional Islamic culture, but we do have documents of contemporary witnesses which would prevent the unavoidable impression of modern constructs, perhaps valid to modern man, applied to traditional forms.

If we turn to media other than architecture, the matching of literary evidence with works of art or the investigation of symbolic themes and ideas has been more thorough and more specific. The most conspicuous examples are various studies by Schuyler Cammann on rugs (in *The Textile Museum Journal* 3, 1972, and in P. J. Chelkowski, ed., *Studies . . . in Honour of R. Ettinghausen*, New York, 1974) and much of R. Ettinghausen's work over the last thirty years (best examples in *Ars Orientalis* 2, 1957, and in J. Schacht and C. E. Bosworth, *The Legacy of Islam*, Oxford, 1974, pp. 274–291). Over the years several other scholars have made specific contributions to this general theme (Hartner, Baer, Dodds).

Ettinghausen's conclusions or (as he would have probably agreed) working hypotheses can be summed up and slightly enlarged in the following manner:

There are in Islamic art certain themes such as the whirl, the lion, the bull, and the signs of the zodiac which are historically older than Islam and which, with vagaries of no concern to us presently, have been maintained in the new culture. Most of the identifiable symbols deal with secular themes or with what may be called "basic" religious symbols such as earth, fire, and life.

The one obvious new theme is writing; it is not merely an ornamental feature but either iconographic (E. Dodds, "The Word of God," *Berytus* 18, 1969, with the argument that it

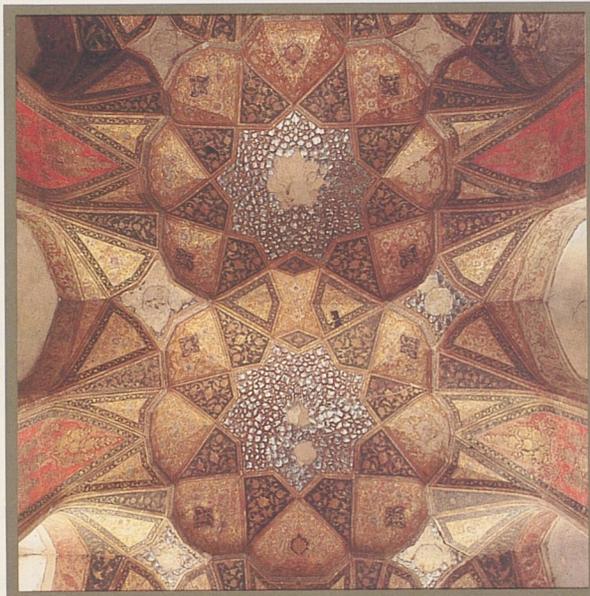
replaces images) or vectorial (Grabar, *The Alhambra*, 1978, or "Dome of the Rock," *Ars Orientalis* 3, 1957; W. E. Begley, "The Taj Mahal," *The Art Bulletin* 61, 1979) in the sense that it charges neutral forms with concrete and sometimes very elaborate meanings. But—and this is a key point—the charge was of low voltage. The Dome of the Rock, the mosque of Damascus, the north dome of Isfahan's Friday Mosque, the Alhambra, and the Taj Mahal—buildings for which a highly intense meaning can be provided for the time of their creation—all lost their specific meaning soon thereafter. It is indeed as though Islamic culture as a whole consistently rejected any attempt to compel specific symbolic meanings in architecture comparable to those of Christianity and Hinduism (with their symbolic connotation in plan, elevation, and decoration).

It is precisely this low symbolic charge of Islamic monuments which made it so easy for them to be copied and imitated elsewhere (Ettinghausen's argument). A corollary would be that the same low charge made it possible for an Indonesian

pagoda or a Roman temple to become a mosque. In reality there is a somewhat more complicated intellectual and methodological problem involved in this reasoning, as I have tried to suggest in several unsatisfactory essays (*aarp* 13, 1978; "An Art of the Object," *Artforum*, 1976; "Das Ornament in der Islamischen Kunst," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Suppl. III, 1977). The problem is that a low charge of forms easily leads to ambiguity, and it is doubtful to me whether any culture can operate with an ambiguous visual system. Is it not, perhaps, once again a question of insufficient thinking and data gathering?

Let me try to sum up this rapid and probably incomplete survey of the most recent literature (there may be much value in surveying the texts and notes of the great scholars of old (like Herzfeld, van Berchem, von Kremer). No one has tried to identify an Islamic visual sign-symbol system in any serious way, with the partial exception of an Iranian and Sufi-oriented system. Part of the reason is the factual and intellectual underdevelopment of a field of study, but a more important reason lies perhaps in two aspects of Islam's historical destiny. First, it inherited many symbolically rich cultural traditions but could only preserve symbols which were not religiously charged and, to avoid the temptations of idolatry, preferred to restrict or even to stifle the growth of its own visual symbolism. Second, secular art was less affected by this restriction, but then secular art is by its very nature definable for the most part in social rather than cultural terms.

The hypotheses stated above are not fully satisfactory, in part for the very reasons I have used to criticise the opinions of others. They are abstract constructs for which archaeological data exist, to my knowledge, only from the seventh to ninth centuries, and I am not certain how far it is legitimate



to generalise from a few references and monuments. Mostly these hypotheses lack contemporary evidence; they have not made Muslims speak. Finally, all these hypotheses lack a clearly stated methodological premise. In what follows, I try to provide the latter by suggesting three methods of approaching the question with which we began.

*Approach One: Pure Theory.* From Plato to Wittgenstein, philosophers have talked about symbols and signs, and it is difficult not to be fascinated with St. Augustine's uses of the word "sign" (T. Todorov, *Theories du symbole*, Paris, 1977) or with E. Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (3 vol. New Haven, 1953–57) and S. Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953). These are all weighty and difficult works which rarely, if ever, attend to visual forms (music, literature, and dance predominate). Less intellectually compact and conceptually abstract are anthropological works which I have consulted: R. Firth's *Symbols* (London, 1973), M. Eliade's *Images and Symbols* (New York, 1961), and a few more concrete studies by C. Geertz or V. Turner (*The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca, 1967), or semiological ones. For our purposes the most useful are the works of U. Eco: *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, 1979; "Semiotics of Architecture," *Via* 2, 1973; G. Friedmann, "Une rhétorique des symboles," *Communications* 7, 1966; R. Barthes, "Elements de Semiologie," *Communications* 4, 1964. A very interesting summary of several books is Abdul-Hamid el-Zein's "Beyond Ideology and Theology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6, (1977).

My overwhelming reaction to nearly all of these often brilliant and always fascinating works is one of despair. This despair has two components. The first is the noncommutability of abstraction; by this I mean that, even though specific observations and concrete reasonings about individual subjects led to the theory, I rarely saw an instance which would allow me to move backwards from the theory to some hitherto unstudied subject of Islamic architecture. The second component is that all these works hover between a requirement of nearly infinite and usually not available precision of information (particularly true of semiology; I dread trying to do a semiological analysis of a monument of architecture) and an obviousness of conclusions (the wall of a holy building is a symbol or a sign of the separation between sacred and profane, restricted and public spaces). In many ways the data of the anthropologist are too commonly spread in the segment of culture he studies to explain an accidentally preserved major monument, and questions of taste rarely appear in dealing with architecture as opposed to painting or objects (for example, see James C. Faris's *Nuba, Personal Art*, London, 1972).

How can these theories be useful even if they do not provide an automatic model or paradigm? First, there are certain semantic distinctions which are consistent enough that they can be used as premises for our purposes. For instance, a *symbol* is different from a *sign*, which indicates something, and an *image*, which represents it; a symbol defines something and connotes it but does not circumscribe it as does a sign or an image; thus a swastika can be anything from an ornament to a potential incitement to hatred and destruction. Then, while a symbol is physically identifiable, it is itself not clearly circumscribed. As a tower for the call to prayer, the minaret is but a

sign suggesting a function; it becomes a symbol when it reminds one of Islam, when it appears on stamps identifying a specific country (the spiral minaret of Samarra—its spiral quality is much more an Iraqi national symbol than an Islamic one), or when it serves to design a space (the Kalayan minaret in Bukhara, organising open space between a mosque and a madrasa redone several times). In other words, while the sign attribute is fixed, the symbol attribute is a variable which depends on some charge given to it or on the mood or feeling (Langer's terminology) of the viewer (referent). Theory, therefore, compels us to identify and isolate the triple component of sign, symbol, referent. Of the three, symbol is the one which depends on predetermined conventions, habits, or agreements which are not in the object but in those who share it. Our problem then becomes one of defining the semantic field of a symbol by finding the area in time or space of its contractual agreement with a social group.

*Approach Two: Islamic Written Evidence.* There are many different ways of imagining how written evidence could be used. Others with a better knowledge of texts than I will be able to provide examples or even answers to the following set of questions accompanied by brief and partial comments.

*Is there an indication that visual symbols or signs were, at any time, accepted ways of identifying functions, defining one's own as opposed to alien aims, or providing qualitative judgements?*

Looking over major classical and very different texts like Muqaddasi's *Geography* (see P. Wheatley, "Levels of Space Awareness," *Ekistics*, Dec. 1976), Ibn Nadim's *Fihrist* (tr. B. Dodge, 2 vols., New York, 1964), and Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* (tr. F. Rosenthal, 3 vols., New York, 1958, esp. II, pp. 233ff., 357–367), or Ibn Fadlan's description of the Volga Bulgars, my answer is negative. While alien lands are at times identified by the peculiarities of their visual expression (for instance, nearly all descriptions of India in classical times), I see no evidence of concrete visual symbols which would be considered as uniquely Muslim. The exception of the minbar in tenth-century geographical texts indicates a certain kind of administrative status rather than a reference to a concrete object. The only other exception is the Ka'ba which by definition is a unique monument. This is not to say that there are no Muslim symbols and signs, but they consist less in visually perceptible features than in memories of men and events: the place where something took place or where someone did something. The literary genre of the *kitab al-ziyarat* (guidebooks to holy and memorable places) which began in the twelfth century only strengthens the hypothesis that the Muslim tradition identified what is sacred or holy to it in a *denoting* rather than *connoting* fashion, i.e., in terms of memorable associations and generalised physical shapes (oval, rectangle) rather than of concrete visual forms. In other words, and with occasional exceptions (like the *abwab al-birr*, "gates of piety" in early fourteenth-century Iran), there is no symbolic iconography of Islamic architecture to be derived from texts, as there is, for instance, in Christian architecture.

*Is there a Koranic or early Hadith symbolic system with visual associations?*

This is a difficult question to discuss because it is difficult to develop an appropriate method of dealing with it. Should one simply analyse the Koranic frequency of use of certain passages over the centuries? For instance, one of the most consistently used verses both in architectural inscriptions and in depicting Divine Power is the magnificent Throne Verse (II, 256). But it is not the only instance in the Revelation of strikingly effective depictions either of Divine Might or of God's Throne. Some of them were occasionally used on monuments, as, for instance, VII, 52, in the north dome of Isfahan or LXVII, 1–5, found in the Hall of the Ambassadors in the Alhambra. In both instances the use of an unusual verse serves to explain the cupola's meaning, but can one conclude that these architectural meanings are inherent in the Koranic passage or that the monuments served to represent or otherwise symbolise the Holy Writ?

Another interesting passage is XXIV, 35–8, the “verses of light,” which do suggest a symbolic physical setting reflecting Divine Presence. The passage was frequently used in mihrabs, but the later traditional Muslim mosque vocabulary hardly ever used the terms of the Koranic passage. This peculiarity does not preclude the existence of a Koran-based symbolic system; it merely questions its consistent validity for architectural history.

We know very little about the frequency and consistency of Koranic quotations. I propose the hypothesis that the symbolic or iconographic use of the Koran in Islamic art nearly always *followed* the development of a symbolic or iconographic need. Symbols, signs, or meanings were discovered in the Koran but, at least as far as the arts are concerned, do not actively derive from it; in other words, I suggest there is no “iconography” of the Koran. Matters are obviously quite different in theology or law.

*How culture-bound is the rich Islamic literary tradition of opulent princely dwellings?*

A story from the *Thousand and One Nights* such as the “City of Brass” reflects an unbridled imagination about a magnificent palace. It contains, no doubt, the esoteric meaning of a difficult quest for truth or reality through secret and mysterious doors (like the ubiquitous *ya miftah al-abwab*, “O Opener of Doors,” in later Persian miniatures), but its details and its external mood are all of a brilliant secular world. Should one interpret such stories as simply stylistically Islamic, i.e., as universal archetypes which have acquired culture-bound details? Or are they key reflections of a uniquely Muslim vision of sensuous beauty—paradisiac perhaps, but more likely fruits of a unique imagination formed by the confluence of an egalitarian faith and the reality of rich and isolated dynamic centres such as Samarra or Topkapi?

*How should we interpret technical and especially mathematical treatises applied to architecture or decoration?*

Few of these texts have been properly published or translated. Where they are available, however, as in the very recent book by M. S. Bulatov, *Geometricheskaiia Garmonizatziia v Arkhitektury* (Moscow, 1978), what is striking to me is that the subtle and complicated mathematical formulae are not presented as illustrations, symbols, or signs of a faith or even

of a cultural identity, but as practical solutions to architectural and ornamental requirements.

*Hence, is it legitimate to suggest a culturally accepted symbolism for visual forms as long as, in the highly verbal culture of traditional Islam, written sources give it explicit mention so rarely and require an esoteric approach to literature for demonstration?*

The obvious exception lies in the art of writing, where, thanks to the work of A. Schimmel and F. Rosenthal among others, it can clearly be demonstrated that a whole range of meanings, from direct sign to most elaborate symbol, had been developed, thought out, and accepted. I am far less certain whether such matters as theories of colour in mystical thought (Corbin), for instance, actually did correspond to the uses of colour in artistic creativity. But this, perhaps, is simply a matter of insufficient research.

To sum up these remarks on written sources seems fairly easy within the present state of our knowledge. Except for the Arabic alphabet, there was no coherent, consistent, and reasonably pan-Islamic acceptance of visually perceived symbols; there was no clearly identifiable sense, even, of forms considered to be one's own, culturally discrete. It may, therefore, be possible to propose that traditional Islamic culture identified itself through means other than visual: the sounds of the city, the call to prayer, the Word of the Revelation but not its forms, the memories of men and events. If valid (and it is, I am sure, subject to criticism), this conclusion would suggest for the contemporary scene that it is not forms which identify Islamic culture and by extension the Muslim's perception of his architecture, but sounds, history, and a mode of life.

To this statement intended primarily to promote discussion, I should like to attach three codicils. One is that there is some methodological danger in assuming too easily that written sources are the paradigms by which a culture saw itself; Written sources reflect in large part the world of the literati. For example, neither St. Augustine nor St. Thomas Aquinas provides much information about the formation of early Christian art or of Gothic architecture. The importance of written sources lies in the parallelism they provide for visual phenomena and, to a smaller degree, in showing a time's characteristic concerns which contribute to the taste and the will for creating monuments. My second remark is that written sources from the early Hadith onward provide an enormous amount of information in two related areas: the vocabulary of making anything from a textile to a building and hence the basic meaningful units (the morphemes) of visual forms, an area whose study has hardly begun, and judgements on changes of taste. For instance, a comparison between Ibn Jubayr (twelfth century) and Ibn Battuta (fourteenth century) describing the same parts of the Muslim world shows the same monuments and holy places in very different ways. Written sources do help in understanding the vernacular, the common, more easily than the unique in art, probably because the highest literati were most often visual illiterates or at best visual vulgarians, a phenomenon which is peculiar neither to the Muslim world nor to the past.

Finally, I have only alluded to written sources as essentially synchronic documents, with the obvious exception of the Koranic Revelation shown as a constant and consistent inspi-

ration and justification of tastes, moods, and function. There could be a diachronic analysis of literary sources seeking to find common and repeated themes and motifs; it is a dangerous kind of analysis, for it can too easily find consistency by comparing features which are not true parallels (as, for instance, both Persian and Arabic poetry, where I have often wondered whether metric and thematic consistency over the centuries is in fact what was prized at the time of creation of a new work of art). Such diachronic analyses, which may have been attempted without my being aware of them, could be of great importance in identifying consistent cultural threads.

*Approach Three: The Monuments.* Keeping in mind the broad questions raised at the beginning of these remarks, I would like to propose four points for discussion.

*Proposition I.* The Muslim world did create a number of monuments of art and architecture which are uniquely charged with symbols: the Ka'ba, the Dome of the Rock, the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri's throne of Akbar, and perhaps a few others (the mausoleum of Oljaytu in Sultaniyah, shrine of Lutfallah in Isfahan) once someone undertakes to study them properly. But, in all instances known to me so far except the Ka'ba (which is in a way an "uncreated" monument), the depth of meaning with which the monument was created did not survive the time of its creation or was modified, as with the Dome of the Rock, which grew in religious connotations as the centuries went by, or with the Taj Mahal, which lost them. Interesting though they may be to the historian, these monuments are of secondary significance for our purposes, because their uniqueness is more important than their typological set.

*Proposition II.* There are several instances of what I would like to call restricted symbolic cultural continuity in architecture. There is, for example, the large hypostyle mosque, a unique creation of the seventh century which solved several functional requirements of Iraqi Muslim communities. This type became a regional one in some areas (Fertile Crescent, Arabia, Muslim West) but it also became symbolic of the introduction of Islam into new areas. Early Iranian mosques (this is a somewhat controversial topic at the moment for complex archaeological reasons not pertinent to this discussion), early Anatolian ones, and early Indian ones tend to adopt a form identified with early and pure Islam. Another example is the classical Ottoman mosque, whose large dome flanked by minarets and usually preceded by a courtyard became a symbol of Ottoman cultural and political prestige and power from Algiers and Serbia to Egypt and Iraq.

The reason I used the word "restricted" for these examples is that specific historical and cultural conditions—the Ottoman empire or the Islamisation of new lands—led to the symbolic quality of these forms; it was not a matter of their intrinsic value. The Ottoman mosque can become a national or romantic symbol and the building today of a hypostyle mosque in Tunisia is merely continuing a regional tradition.

*Proposition III.* There are very few architectural forms which are consistently indicative of the presence of Islam. The most obvious one is the minaret, whatever actual function it has had over time and whatever reasons led to its creation. I must admit that I am not satisfied with any of the

traditional explanations of the minaret and its appearance, not only in the skyline of Cairo or as the elegant framer of Iranian facades or Ottoman volumes, but as a single monument in the Iranian countryside, at Jam in Afghanistan or in Delhi. The study of Koranic quotations on minarets is very instructive, as they vary considerably from building to building or area to area. But in many cases both inscriptions and decoration lend themselves to a range of symbolic meanings which await their investigator. For instance, the use of the whole Sura Mariam (XIX) on the minaret of Jam identifies this extraordinary monument as a proclamation of Islam in its relationship to other religions, while the ornament of the Kalyan minaret in Bukhara can be understood as an expression of the central Muslim tenet of the Unity of God, since its different designs are in reality versions of the same motif.

Are there any other similarly obvious and constant forms? There are the mihrabs of sanctuaries, of course, but their symbolism is, with a few exceptions (Cordoba, some Fatimid examples in Cairo), an obvious one, and the object itself became automatically functional rather than emotionally or intellectually symbolic. There are traces of a symbolism of gates in cities or even buildings, especially palaces, but this symbolism expresses itself more frequently in the names of gates than in their forms, a few exceptions as in Jerusalem's Haram notwithstanding. And anyway, I am not certain that the symbolic meanings which can be attributed to the gates of Abbasid Baghdad or Fatimid Cairo remained significant symbols much after their creation. I am hesitant in attributing a symbolic rather than a socially functional meaning to traditional physical constructs of the Muslim city like the mosque-market-maidan unit.

I have mentioned primarily architectural symbols, because the seminar deals with architecture. Nonarchitectural visual symbols certainly existed as well, but to my knowledge none has been investigated in sufficient depth to know which ones were simple signs (hand of Fatima) and which ones acquired the kind of range which is required of a symbol (colour green, the Crescent).

If the proposition of the previous section that self-recognition within the Muslim tradition was primarily auditory and social is acceptable, this difficulty in defining an overall Islamic visual system need not be considered as troubling. In fact, it may simply demonstrate two secondary propositions. One is that symbolic systems may indeed tend to be most easily perceivable in time rather than across time. The other one is that in the actual perception of the environment such items as clothing, objects used, and spoken accent are more significant than architecture.

*Proposition IV.* Symbolic and sign systems are to be sought not in architecture but in decoration, decoration being understood in its widest sense as those parts of a building which are not necessary to its physical utilisation or structural stability.

If my earlier suggestion of symbolic systems as richer synchronically than diachronically is acceptable, this proposition is strengthened by the fact that decoration could and did change in kind (continuous additions) or in meaning (the reinterpretation of the mosaics of Damascus by later writers). Furthermore, while nearly all architectonic units or even combinations and developments of units in Islamic architec-

ture are easily relatable to the morphology and growth of other architectural traditions, this is much less so with decoration, whose motifs and combinations are nearly always culturally unique. To dismiss this decoration as “mere” decoration is a Western imperialist reflex from a society which equates meaningful decoration with representation and which for half a century has rejected decoration within its own so-called progressive architecture.

But how are we going to find meanings in it? There is something troubling, for instance, in looking at a series of thirteenth-century portals in Anatolia which are formally very difficult to distinguish from each other yet which serve as entrances to mosques, madrasas, hospitals, and caravanserais. Is this decoration unrelated to the purpose of a monument except in the very general way of beautifying, at best attracting to, an unexpressed function? Within the synchronic scheme proposed earlier, the answer may be positive, as one can easily argue that the contemporary did not have to be told by a facade whether a building was a warehouse or a hospital.

Yet it is unlikely that we will be satisfied with such an answer for three reasons. One is that a series of studies on objects and miniatures, for which similar explanations have been provided, tends to show that a close examination demonstrates in almost every case a complex iconographic and symbolic meaning. A second one is that it is hardly reasonable to expect enormous efforts on meaningless forms. And third, the study of major monuments of architecture almost always demonstrates great depth of meaning. In other words, we have not taken a proper look at these monuments and their decoration. Let me outline two possible approaches for dealing with this problem.

The first approach would be morphological, seeking to find such themes of decoration as have meanings. The most obvious one is writing, as monuments as diverse in quality and importance as the Taj Mahal, the Guyushi Mosque in Cairo, and Qaytbay complex also in Cairo are explained by the Koranic quotations on their decoration. One of the most striking “un-Islamisities” of contemporary architecture is its failure to make aesthetically appealing use of calligraphy. I should add that writing exists at several levels of intelligibility: direct quotation probably only available to the very literate in the past but to all in the future; rhythmic punctuation with litanic repetitions known to most, as in the clear *al-mulk lillah* (Power of God) which organises the lengthy and wordy inscriptions of Persian mosques from the fifteenth century onward; simple statements of God and His Prophet, known to all, which adorn the outside walls of madrasas in Khargird or Samarkand. I have elsewhere discussed and, I hope, demonstrated this use of writing as a vector of meaning in architecture (*The Alhambra*, 1978).

Next to writing is geometry. I am less clear about the actual perception of geometry and hesitate to accept in full the gestalt explanation proposed by Ardalan and others for Iran, but I am convinced that the geometry of Isfahan’s north dome based on the pentagon or of Bukhara’s minaret with several hypostases of the same basic design cannot be simply a designer’s whim. But I am not sure how to approach the problem, just as methods should be devised for dealing with vegetal motifs or with a theme such as the *muqarnas*, which involves

nearly all morphemes of decoration.

The second approach would be syntactic and would consist in studying and explaining whole ensembles. To my knowledge, no one has attempted to do this in Islamic architecture. One example may serve as a conclusion to this essay. I have long been puzzled by what seemed to me to be the arbitrary location of tiled panels in classical Iranian mosques of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Yet, in the Masjid-i Shah’s main dome, the progression to the burst of light at the apex of the dome seems to me to be an extraordinary attempt at symbolising the Revelation not as the static and learned order of a Gothic portal or of a Byzantine church but as the dynamic and sensuous illumination of a faithful praying. The symbolism of the decoration is not inherent to the design but is the result of man’s prescribed action in the building.

Can one extend the point to propose that the true uniqueness of the Muslim visual symbolic system lies not in the forms it takes but in the relationship it creates, indeed compels, for its users? A celebrated Tradition is that wherever a Muslim prays there is a mosque. Symbolic or signifying identity lies in setting and man, not in form. Is this a possible challenge for contemporary architecture?

*Afterword.* What follows is a series of questions and concerns derived from the preceding pages which may in themselves merit further consideration.

1. *Synchronic versus diachronic.* I am suggesting that it is easier to identify a synchronic symbolic and semiotic system than a diachronic one which either becomes obvious and undifferentiated or requires the preliminary investigation of synchronic sets. Too few instances of the latter exist to justify many significant definitions of Islamic symbols. I should also add that the nature of a valid time frame is a very difficult problem which has hardly ever been addressed by historians of forms. I am not even sure that linguists have discussed the aspect of time in their consistent concern for semantic fields, but I may simply not be aware of some existing work.

2. *Specific forms and archetypes.* This is a delicate issue. If we were dealing with architecture in general, it would be perfectly appropriate to discuss and refine broad and universal human needs, feelings, and means of perception, as they are adapted to concrete ecological requirements. But I understand our concern for the architecture of Muslims to mean, when symbolism and signs are concerned, those aspects of architecture which are not universally meaningful but discretely significant to a certain culture. We can come to the conclusion that this discrete significance was minimal or merely cosmetic, that the contemporary world has made cultural discreteness obsolete, and that universal modes of judgement are the only valid ones. But, if we do come to this conclusion, we must be sure that we are aware of what it means.

3. *Architectural symbols and functions.* The greatest difficulty I had was in identifying those aspects of architectural creation for which it is justified to seek a symbolic significance. My answer is that the referent alone (user, viewer) decides on the symbolic meaning of an artistic creation. Hence architectural symbolism can only be demonstrated from nonarchitectural sources—written sources, opinion surveys, or whatever else may be developed. Theoretically it is possible to derive

symbolic meanings from formal consistencies, i.e., the repetition over the centuries of certain forms (E. B. Smith, *Architectural Symbolism*, Princeton, 1953), but I am not sure whether consistency of form means consistency of symbols or convenience for functions.

4. *Symbols and styles.* Can one maintain a distinction be-

tween aesthetic and taste impulses (style) and a range of associative reactions (symbols)?

5. *Visual and auditory perception.* I may have overstressed the thought that Islamic culture finds its means of self-identification in hearing and acting rather than in seeing. But I am more than ready to be corrected on this point.

## CONSERVATION OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT FOR CULTURAL SURVIVAL DOĞAN KUBAN

The Aga Khan Award has been established to encourage the formation of a specifically Islamic architecture as an expression of modern Islamic civilisation. A natural concomitant to this objective is the preservation of the Islamic image in our physical environment. The continuity of our cultural identity throughout the process of modernisation can only be guaranteed by this act of preservation.

*Industrial Ideology and Preservation.* The physiognomies of the cities in Muslim countries are rapidly becoming grotesque imitations of those of modern Western cities. This trend runs so counter to our aspirations that we must ask ourselves whether it is even possible to resist the hegemony of modern industry and communication and have a true Islamic image in a city and its architecture, as we were able to do in bygone centuries. This question is part of a larger one: will any historic culture, be it Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or any other, manage to survive as an entity distinct from the fabric of a uniform modern civilisation? Or will they all be consumed by the monopolising pressure of modern industry and mass communication? Is it conceivable to have Turkish houses or Muslim towns and at the same time to drive imported automobiles on bridges built over the Bosphorus by foreigners, to construct according to universal standards, to utilise universal electrical devices, to broadcast and to receive worldwide television programmes, and to promote tourism? How can one suppose that the maintenance of cultural symbols can withstand the onslaught of cost accounting and efficiency standards and yet be keenly aware of the fact that all nations are being used as arenas for opposing ideologies, that all markets are under the strangling influence of international corporations, and that all developing countries are subjected to the arm-twisting of international politics?

So many negative points bring into question the rationality of a proposal uniting modern industrial ideology with preservation. Support, however, is forthcoming in the enduring opposition of another group of universal—I might even say

eternal—factors that determine the behaviour of men and societies. They are less often mentioned than the exigencies of industrial development, though no less relevant, since they are intrinsic to any human situation: language, religious attitude, geographical environment, race and, perhaps most important, the inertia of cultural behaviour. The last, which accounts for a great part of our real cultural differences, has amazing and recorded staying power; it is an eternal embryo of future diversities. Compared to all these factors, the homogenising effects of industrial civilisation may quite possibly prove to be superficial and temporary.

I cannot predict the future of the postindustrial Muslim man. At the moment, Muslim countries are so busy striving for economic development that the industrial factor in our everyday lives is greatly emphasised. On the other hand, throughout the modern world today, whether rich or poor, Western or non-Western, all countries are confronting all kinds of social, economic, and political evils, often with an encouraging optimism that suggests the ability to support a struggle against prevailing conditions. The battle for the defence of the environment is evidence of this. The fight is not so much one against industry as one against the domination of an ideology that allows industry, never yet an integrated element in any developed concept of society, to roam at will, a raging creature devouring the society itself. We are aware of its power, but we are also hypnotised by it. That is why the battle for a healthy environment, whether given by nature or wrought by man, often seems to be in vain. The enemy is identified, but is neither comprehended nor confronted head on. It is the same deficiency in our perception of the human environment that works against preservation and conservation. Our willing but dumb submission only increases the rapaciousness of industry, making a desolate wasteland of human societies. Industry has no organic relationship to human life, which is a process in time; modern urbanisation and architectural practice mutilate the past because they are the outcome of a process that is lacking in any real understanding of