

# The Islamic Debate

## Architecture in Pakistan



**T**oday, when for a variety of reasons “Islamic” architecture is a focus of discussion, it is necessary to clarify some of the terms and concepts used in the debate. To distinguish, for instance, between the terms, “Islamic” and “Muslim”, and to recognise that “architecture”, be it Islamic, Muslim, or Pakistani, contemporary or traditional, is a complex of several sub-categories.

If “Islamic” pertains to the religion of Islam, and “Muslim” to the people who profess Islam, then the term “Islamic architecture” would apply to buildings inspired by Islamic religious thought and practice, and intended to serve an Islamic religious purpose, whereas, “Muslim architecture” would be the more appropriate term applicable to all buildings associated with Muslims as a people or peoples.

Terms such as “Saracenic” and “Islamic” were introduced by the Orientalists as catch-all phrases which they applied to the architecture of the Muslim world from “Mogul India” to “Moorish Spain”. Western-educated Muslim architects were among those who protested most strongly to such labels. Fired by the “scientific” theories of culture current in a post-Darwinian, post-Marxian world, they rejected the notion of architecture defined on the basis of religion. Architecture, as much as religion, they argued, was part of the superstructure of any culture. The base was economic and material. Architecture as much as everything else evolved in progressive stages. But terms like “Islamic” suggested a fossilised view of their national cultures. Their own architecture had to be understood in terms of climate, materials, social relations and economic bases, not in terms of religion. Any attempt to do so was discredited as reactionary, obscurantist, and smacking of imperialism. In any case, they pointed out, it was difficult to find any common denominators within the diversity of Muslim cultures.

More recently, however, a new generation of scholars have begun to rediscover the “Islamic” bases of Muslim cultures. Among them are Muslims who have been schooled in the best Western academic traditions and can scarcely be dismissed as narrow-minded bigots. These scholars are discovering that there is indeed a genre of artistic expression which can only be classified as Islamic, in

the sense that it is inspired by the religious philosophy of Islam and is intended to serve an Islamic religious purpose. More specifically these forms are directly related to certain Sufi doctrines and methods, to the esoteric or mystical tendency within Islam.

Having found the operative Islamic principles behind such buildings as tombs, *khanqahs*, and mosques, and what indeed had often been important elements in many a secular design — of gardens, palaces and the like — they went on to assert that these were the principles, the common denominators which applied equally to architecture in all Muslim cultures. Their theories were immediately and easily demolished by the functionalists who could point to any number of secular urban and rural building forms which were patently not inspired by any religious sentiment. The term has, of course been further discredited by the misguided enthusiasm of lay patrons — politicians, bureaucrats and private clients alike — who have insisted on applying the term “Islamic” to certain specific forms associated with a particular period, location or dynasty, in the belief that they are thereby championing the cause of Islam.

While Islamic architecture is certainly one of the unifying factors in the diversity of Muslim cultures, not all Muslim architecture is necessarily Islamic. This fact is often overlooked both by those who recognise the reality of an Islamic architecture and try to explain all Muslim buildings as Islamic, and by those who, finding nothing Islamic in some Muslim buildings, reject the validity of an Islamic basis of architecture altogether.

Much of the confusion in the current debate has no doubt arisen out of the use of the word “architecture” itself. When used with such prefixes as Pakistani, Muslim and contemporary, it suggests a single, identifiable, homogeneous entity, capable of being identified by certain characteristics which are typical or common to all buildings in that culture. It would, however, be more accurate to consider architecture, as much as any other aspect of a given culture, as a matrix of several sub-categories. Architecture may be divided into three horizontal or hierarchic layers and two distinct vertical streams or currents. The first layer may be called the core, or mainstream or leading edge, that is, the dominant, but not necessarily pre-dominant forms in a given culture which reflect the patronage and world views or values of the socially,

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Photographs courtesy of the  
author.

politically and economically dominant elite. The second layer may be called the fringe, or flank or trailing edge. That is, the area of expression which reflects the material and intellectual condition of a class which aspires to the values and position of the dominant class without the material or intellectual resources to dominate, but with every pretension to producing architecture with a capital "A". The third layer or outer ground of vernacular traditions would refer to that area of building activity in which the primary concerns, purpose or intent is utilitarian with no pretensions or aspiration to produce "Architecture", but which employs a developed building tradition. The two vertical streams or currents spring from fundamentally different bases, world views or philosophies. One is secular, temporal and materialist; the other is religious, spiritual and metaphysical.

While this matrix presents us with several categories which are more or less distinct, there is also a continuous process of cross-fertilisation between them. Moreover, of the two streams, secular and religious, sometimes one and sometimes the other tends to prevail as the dominant current in a particular culture, with the roles changing from time to time. Thus until about a hundred years ago the ethos of Pakistani culture for example and society was religious. It was not conceivable, for example, that a person should be educated without first being schooled in the Qur'an and Sunna. In the case of the master builder and building craftsman this would imply, in addition, the formal induction into a Sufi order. It is not surprising that the building activities based around the Sufi circles, the *khanqahs*, mosques and tombs, became the laboratories and powerhouses which generated so many of the dominant architecture forms, structural systems, and decorative techniques of the period. Thus even the most secular of buildings were seldom without elements which owed their inspirations to the mainstream of religious architecture. Today, however, the secular materialist current exercises the dominant influence over a significant section of our culture, particularly that of the educated professional elite. Thus the design of many religious buildings today is based on concepts of architecture derived from the secular mainstream.

That there seems to be as yet no consensus on the definition of Islamic architecture may be due in part to a problem

of methodology. Attempts at defining Islamic architecture have often employed either a "formal" framework or the evolutionary framework of the environmental determinists and functionalists. That is, generalisations based on formal characteristics, such as plan, massing, structural elements, materials, and so forth, which establish a definable "style". A more accurate understanding or appreciation of Islamic architecture requires some other framework than the formal, stylistic or historical. It needs the framework of Islamic cosmology and ritual. This is no less true of the various other art forms. For example one of the strongest living traditions in Pakistan's culture is the gnostic or *arifana* poetry of the Sufi saints. An analysis of the literary style, structure and poetic form can no doubt help explain the poetry of Lal Shah Baz or Khawaja Ghulam Farid but will bring us no closer to an appreciation of its beauty, power and ecstatic evocative effect unless we are familiar with the meaning and content of its message and purposes. This requires the framework of the Islamic concept of *Wahdat* and *Haq*, of Reality and man's role in the universe.

Islam views reality as existing on two planes or levels — two worlds — the apparent and the hidden, the transient and the permanent, the physical and the metaphysical. Underlying the apparent physical reality of discrete phenomena it sees a Divine Unity. The unique role of man in this cosmology is to reflect, to contemplate, to know and, through enlightenment, to be united with the Absolute, the One Reality. While other religions conceive of the Absolute as an unattainable mystery or tend to divorce the path to that mystery from the conduct of life in this world, in Islam unity with the Absolute is attainable, and the path is revealed through knowledge, love and correct conduct of life in this world. In other words, Islam integrates the dual aspects of reality — the spiritual and material — and prescribes a ritual to help live the life of this world, yet be constantly reminded of the other.

Awareness or consciousness of the larger Reality through the contemplation of physical elements of the universe is one of the central concerns of Islam. It is not difficult to comprehend and be reminded of the Cosmic Unity through contemplation upon natural objects. To look upon a tree and be aware of its roots, the soil and the earth. To see in a flower the fruit and the seed, the process of life. To recognise the ocean in a single drop of

rain; the structure of matter in a single snowflake.

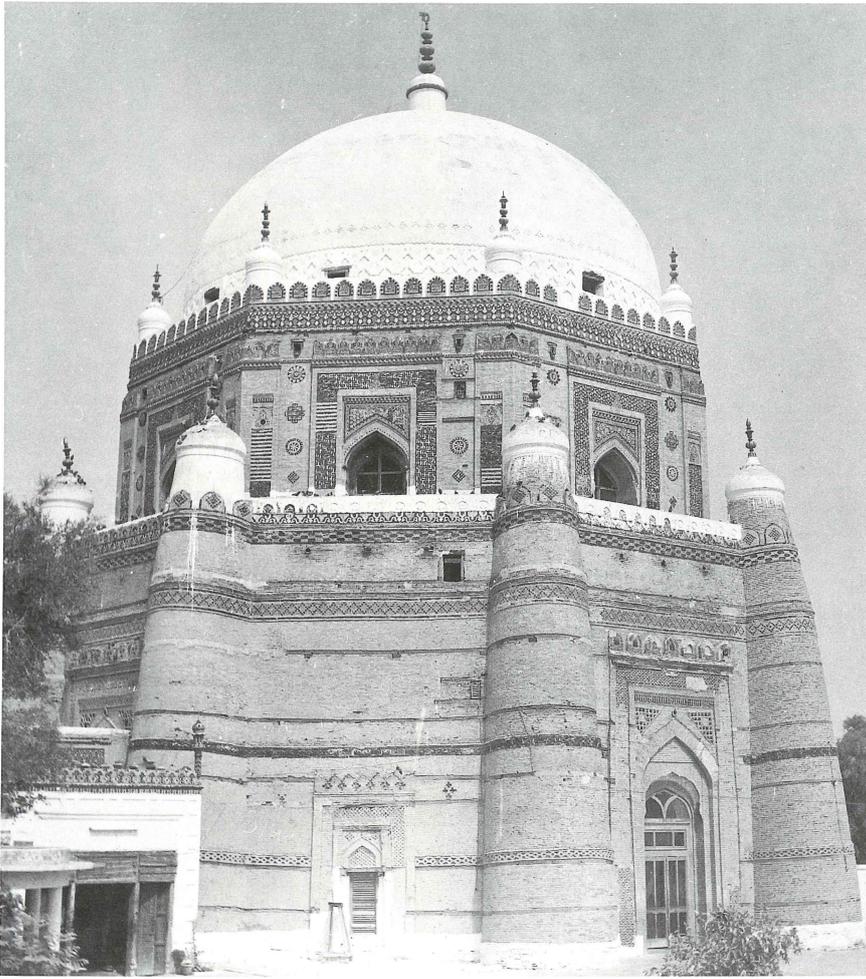
But this nexus becomes less obvious in man-made objects, materials removed from their natural environment and transformed by man. They provide nothing to help transport the mind beyond the object's own immediate materiality. Art and decoration, however, can make even of these objects an occasion to reflect to see beyond their immediate materiality, to remember and to focus upon the greater eternal reality. Thus even as he gives shape and form to material objects, the artist reminds himself, and us, that the artifact is merely a means, a prop to be used to support and sustain us on the right path to our real goal.

In Islamic architecture the formal elements (plan forms, structural elements, materials, and design motifs) are the variables that change through time and place, reflecting the diversity and multiplicity of Islamic cultures. The constants are the building types peculiarly related to Islamic ritual — mosques, tombs, *khanqahs*, *madrassahs*, *hammams*, and so forth — and the underlying meaning, message, content or purpose which derives from the cosmology of Islam.

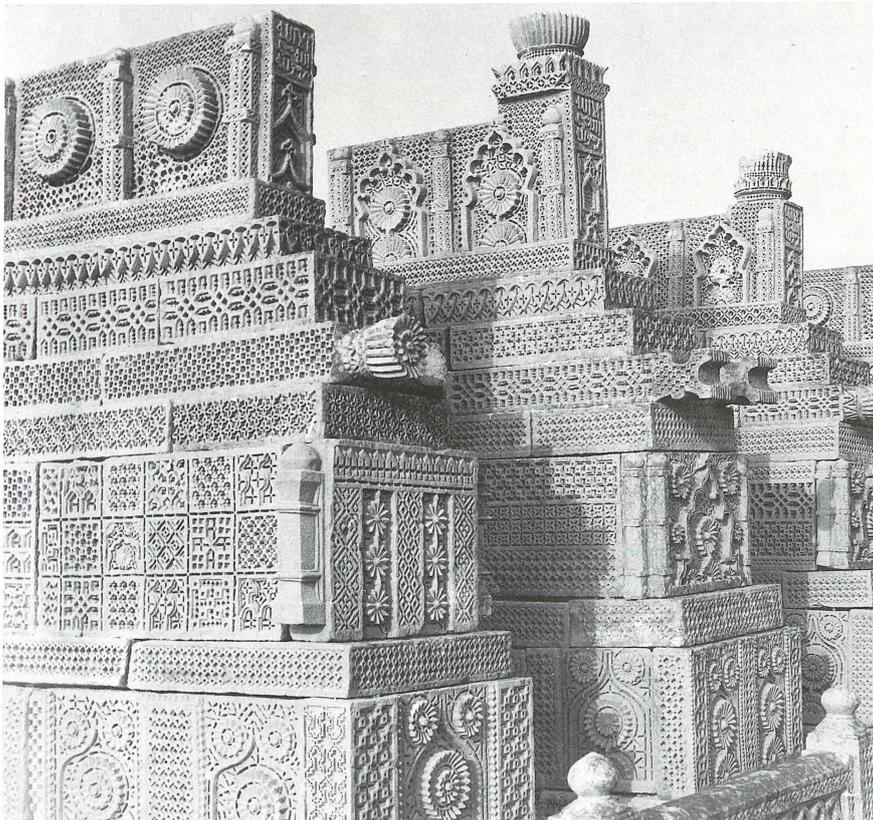
The earliest surviving structures of the Muslim period in Pakistan are at Uchch, Multan and Ajudhan (Pakpattan). At Uchch these are in the form of large rectangular, hypostyle halls with richly decorated timber columns, beams and ceilings. In the brick domed tomb chamber at Multan, (Baha ul-Din Zakaria, Rukn-i-Alam, Shams Sabzwari) we witness the introduction of Tughlaq architecture into the subcontinent<sup>1</sup>. Thus even at this early stage Islamic architecture in Pakistan is seen to employ a variety of plan forms, structural systems, materials and finishes.

The buildings of the Mughals and more specifically of Shah Jahan have become synonymous in the popular mind with Islamic architecture. They are indeed magnificent and impressive, as no doubt they were intended to be. But they were also, after all, built for one imperial dynasty over a relatively short span of time in one part of the Islamic world and cannot be equated with or taken as the model for Islamic architecture generally.

<sup>1</sup>Brown, Percy, *Indian Architecture (the Islamic period)*. Taraporevala's Bombay, 3rd Edition, p. 34. See also Chughtai, Dr. Abdullah, *Muslim Architecture in West Pakistan*, pp 3, 4.



Left: The tour de force and the finest achievement of the Multan builders is the Mausoleum of Shah Rukn-i-Alam. Its octagonal plan and battered walls provided the model for Tughlaq architecture at Delhi. The structural system of thrust and counter thrust of the dome and buttresses is emphasised by the exaggerated slope of massive rounded corner turrets. Left, below: Chaukandi Tombs, Makli. The remarkable carved sandstone tombs demonstrate the existence of an independent building tradition in the lower Sind. These buildings have a trabeated form of construction in which domes are not true domes but corbelled and the arches likewise are not true arches. Their chief merit lies in the excellence of their carved decoration.

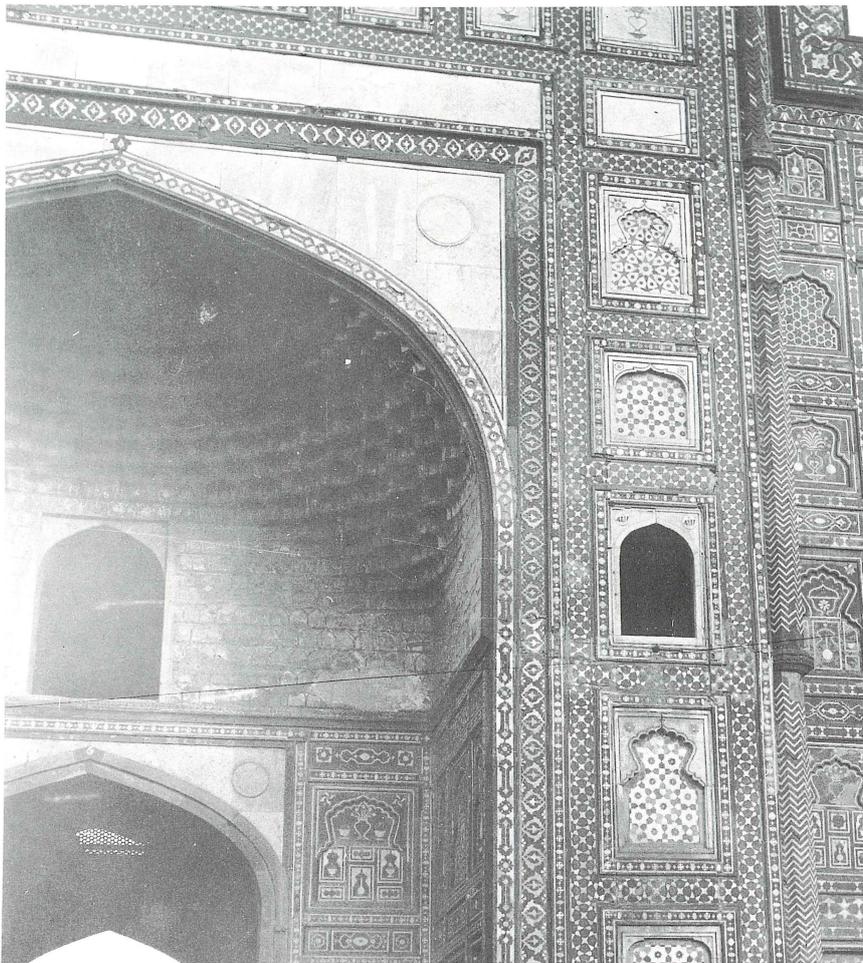


We cannot forget that Mughal architecture in Pakistan was restricted essentially to the monuments in and around the Lahore Fort, Shahdara, Sheikhpura and Attock. More typical of the architecture of the same period in Pakistan are the buildings constructed in the numerous local or provincial styles. These include the glazed-tile mosaic, brick architecture of Lahore, of which the mosques of Dai Anga, and Wazir Khan, and several garden gates, pavilions and tombs are well-known examples. The more flamboyant, sculpturesque style of the lower Punjab, with its use of patterned blue and white glazed tiles, is well illustrated by the tombs of Bibi Jawindi at Uchh and Tahar Khan Nahar at Muzzaffargarh. The two distinct styles of the Lower Sind, the one employing a trabeated structural system with richly carved limestone, and the other, glazed tilework with arcuated brick structures, are seen in the Chaukandi and Makli tombs and the Jami Masjid at Thatta. The taller-proportioned brick and glazed-tile architecture of Upper Sind is best preserved in the tombs of the Mirs and the Kalboras, and in the group of monuments at Sukkur, associated with the family of Ma'sumi Sayyids<sup>2</sup>.

The concern of the Muslim artists and craftsmen with the Islamic concepts of *Tawhid* and the essential nature of Beauty, of apparent and hidden Reality, and of man's quest and goal, and the relation of these concerns with the motifs and schema of Islamic art and design, have all been convincingly established and demonstrated in recent literature by Burchkhadt, Nasr, el Said, Ardalan, Bakhtiar and others<sup>3</sup>. The metaphoric

<sup>2</sup>Baluch, Nabi Bakhsh, editor, *Tarikh e Ma'sumi*. Urdu translation, Sindhi Adabi Board, Karachi, 1959. pp 1-26.

<sup>3</sup>Burchkhadt, T. *Art of Islam, language and Meaning*, World of Islam Festival, 1976.



*Jahangir's Tomb, Garden Entrance. Crisp geometric patterns in white marble on dark sandstone mark the turning point away from mono-chromatic towards a polychromatic treatment of external surfaces.*



use of natural forms, the more abstract symbolism of geometry, and the literal message of calligraphy are now beginning to be better understood as a result of these publications.

The brilliant painted-timber columns, beams, and ceilings of the tomb of Jalaluddin Shah Bokhari or of Makhdoom Jahania Jahangasht at Uchh, the delicately patterned brickwork of Shah Rukn-i-Alam at Multan, the lacelike stone carving of Jam Nizamuddin at Makli, the glazed-tile mosaic panels of Wazir Khan's Mosque, or the floral frescoes on the walls and ceilings of Begum Shahi Masjid in Lahore, the *pietra dura* and marble inlay patterns of Jahangir's Tomb at Shahdara, and the geometric glazed-tile patterns of the Jami Masjid of Thatta, all reveal a common concern with de-emphasising the materiality of physical surfaces, with remembrance of God through His abstract attributes and qualities, and through the Word made manifest in calligraphy.

The compositional schemes of these buildings are always designed to emphasise Unity. Thus as the observer

moves through a building, the elements in his field of vision at each stage are appropriately scaled up or down and framed to establish a single universe of members, knit into a web of harmonious relationships. A garden, a court, a facade, a panel, a rosette each becomes a microcosm of a macrocosmic, "meta-cosmic" Unity. Thus the essential concepts of Islam have provided a great reservoir of inspiration which guided and nourished the grand tradition for some thirteen centuries. Today the tidal wave of modernity has overtaken the mainstream of architecture in Pakistan, converting it into a backwater on whose surface the flotsam of the international style mingles aimlessly with the debris of the grand tradition.

Will the present interest in Islam end up in "instant" stick-on architecture from a catalogue of domes and arches, or will it lead to a rediscovery of the theoretical bases of the grand tradition? The latter will require courage to swim against the tide, patience to carry out methodical research, and conviction in the role of a genuine and vital architecture in Pakistan tomorrow.

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