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The Evolution of Mosque Architecture and the Distinctive Characteristics of Its Structural Elements

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of mosque architecture within Islamic civilization by analyzing its structural components, functional roles, and symbolic significance. It highlights the mosque not only as a sacred space for worship but also as a central institution in the social and urban fabric of Islamic society. Despite undergoing architectural transformations across centuries, the mosque has retained its spiritual essence and distinctive identity. Through a descriptive and comparative approach, the study investigates defining architectural elements, including domes, minarets, *miḥrābs*, *minbars*, and ornamental motifs using selected examples from the Islamic East, the Maghrib, and *al-Andalus*. Central to the inquiry is how mosque architecture has maintained its foundation in Islamic religious principles while engaging with diverse cultural and artistic traditions. The findings suggest that mosque architecture embodies a dynamic and adaptive tradition: deeply rooted in Islamic values yet responsive to historical change and regional context. This reflects the broader character of Islamic civilization, open to external influences without relinquishing its unique identity.

Keywords: Islamic Architecture; Mosque Evolution; Architectural Identity; Miḥrāb; Minbar; Dome; Islamic Civilization

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Introduction

The primary aim of scientific research is to study the conditions of societies, the environments in which they exist, and the mutual influences between the two, in order to extract insights that can enhance human well-being (Klaina, 2024a; 2024b). It also seeks to connect these findings to the identity of each society, preserving cultural distinctiveness (Klaina, 2023; Klaina & Ansusa, 2024c; Klaina, 2024d; Klaina & Kmichou, 2025). This does not imply rejecting interaction with other civilizations; rather, it encourages benefiting from global human achievements—as long as they do not compromise individual or collective identity, but instead contribute positively to development and progress. It is within this framework that the study of Islamic architecture is situated.

Islamic architecture is marked by a balance between universality and specificity. It is rooted in principles that encompass all areas of life, yet it also attends carefully to matters of faith through symbolic and spiritual detail (ʿUthmān, 1988, p. 21). Widely regarded as one of the most refined traditions in global architecture, it finds its most prominent expression in mosques—though its stylistic features extend to palaces, civic structures, mausoleums, and fortifications.

Over time, Islamic architecture evolved into a sophisticated reflection of cultural and urban development. Muslim architects established a distinctive language based on geometric harmony, structural precision, and seamless integration of key elements such as arches, domes, courtyards, and columns. These components created cohesive environments where beauty and function aligned (al-Sarrāj, 2015, p. 19).

This heritage was shaped by visionary architects whose work, at times, reached levels of remarkable ingenuity. Their designs adhered to three guiding dimensions: the intellectual (relating architecture to human thought and societal context), the functional (aligned with intended purposes and spatial efficiency), and the physical (responding to geography, climate, and the surrounding environment). Architecture thus becomes meaningful when it fosters harmony between space and values (Marcié, 1987, p. 12).

Despite the diversity of styles across regions and eras, Islamic architecture maintained a sense of unity in both layout and interior structure. New building types emerged in response to evolving social demands, underscoring the tradition's capacity for adaptation and renewal (ʿAliyāʾ, 2008, p. 23).

Significance of the Topic

This research offers critical value on multiple levels. It provides a deeper understanding of the historical and aesthetic evolution of mosque architecture and engages with current discussions surrounding Islamic identity, heritage preservation, and urban planning. In an era where globalization and modernity increasingly reshape traditional religious spaces, revisiting the architectural legacy of the mosque helps reimagine its role as a spiritual and unifying center for Muslim communities.

Specifically, this study contributes in the following ways:

• It highlights the mosque's essential religious function—as a space for worship, prayer, spiritual growth, and the teaching of Islamic creed, the Quran, and the Prophetic Sunnah.

• It illustrates how mosques historically guided Muslim societies toward development across various fields, serving initially as centers of education before the emergence of attached formal schools.

• It emphasizes the mosque's significance as a hub for social and political engagement within the Muslim world.

• It showcases the mosque's impact on the spread of Islamic civilization and its enduring influence on architectural and artistic traditions, through features such as the *Minbar* (pulpit), *Mihrab* (prayer niche), *Minaret*, dome, and distinctive arches.

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To emphasize the role of mosques in unifying the Islamic Ummah and disseminating the message of Islam globally.
- To document the historical development of mosque architecture—from its early simplicity to its culmination in some of the most sophisticated architectural achievements in world history.
- To identify the key factors (political, economic, aesthetic, and cultural) that contributed to this transformation.
- To analyze how architectural changes in mosques correlate with the rise of Islamic civilizations, socio-economic prosperity, and evolving artistic tastes.

Research Problem

The evolution of mosque architecture is not merely an artistic or engineering development. It reflects the broader transformations that have shaped the Islamic world. As mosques evolved from simple, functional spaces into grand expressions of power, piety, and cultural identity, important questions arise:

- To what extent has this architectural evolution influenced the form and function of mosques?
- Has the mosque maintained its spiritual essence and noble mission over the centuries?

In addressing these overarching concerns, the research will consider the following sub-questions:

1. How did mosque architecture develop from the Prophetic era to the various historical phases of the Islamic world?
2. What role did environmental, geographical, and cultural factors play in shaping regional mosque styles across the expanding Islamic territories?
3. To what degree has the contemporary mosque preserved its identity as a religious and social institution?

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive, analytical, and critical methodology to address its research questions and objectives. It begins by examining the historical development of mosque architecture, with a particular focus on material choices, spatial organization, and key design elements. Central architectural features—such as domes, minarets, prayer halls, and decorative motifs—are analyzed in relation to both their symbolic and functional roles.

The research further traces the architectural evolution from the Prophet's Mosque in Medina through successive Islamic periods, including the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman dynasties, up to contemporary practices. In doing so, it highlights how regional contexts, cross-cultural exchanges, and technological advancements influenced the adaptation and transformation of mosque architecture across time.

Mosques in Islamic Architecture

1. The Significance of Mosque Archietecture

The significance of mosque architecture in Islam is profoundly emphasized in the Qur'an, where numerous verses reference mosques in a variety of contexts. One such verse states:

> "The mosques of Allah are only to be maintained by those who believe in Allah and the Last Day, establish prayer, give zakah, and fear none but Allah. It is they who are expected to be on true guidance." (*Surat At-Tawbah, 9:18*)

This verse serves as a commendation for those who take part in building and maintaining mosques—whether through their physical construction or their ongoing preservation and care.

The very first house of worship established for humankind on earth was the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, as mentioned in the Quran:

> "Indeed, the first House [of worship] established for mankind was that at Bakkah—blessed and a guidance for the worlds." (*Surat Aal 'Imran, 3:96*)

This verse affirms that the first space designated for communal worship, devotion, and pilgrimage—where believers perform *Tawaf* (circumambulation), prayer, and spiritual retreat—was the *Ka'bah*, built by the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), peace be upon him.

In the urban fabric of the Islamic city, the congregational mosque (*al-masjid al-jāmi'*) was one of the most vital public institutions. While primarily a space of worship, its function extended far beyond religious rites to include governance, education, public discourse, and community development ('Uthman, 1988, 234).

As history progressed, the role of mosques and the motivations behind their construction evolved. No longer solely spaces for prayer, mosques came to symbolize political authority and cultural prestige. Rulers and elites often commissioned grand and architecturally elaborate mosques as expressions of power, as exemplified by the Mamluk rulers in Cairo, who competed in building monumental structures that reflected their influence and legitimacy (Abd al-Baqi, 1982, 33).

With the expansion of the Islamic empire, mosques increasingly assumed the role of official state venues. Governors would deliver inaugural addresses from mosque pulpits, articulating political programs, ideological orientations, and outlining the responsibilities of both rulers and citizens. These sermons often functioned as de facto constitutional declarations, as was notably the case with Ziyad ibn Abih in Basrah (Ibn Qutaibah, 2008, 2: 265-269).

One of the first acts undertaken by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) upon his migration to Medina was the establishment of his mosque—a model that would come to define mosque architecture across generations (Suad, 2019, 1: 16). Numerous Prophetic traditions underscore the spiritual merit of mosques and the virtue of building them. Among the most well-known is:

> "Whoever builds a *Masjid* for the sake of Allah, Allah will build something similar for him in Paradise." Muslim, 2007, 2: 27, No. 533).

These religious texts, combined with the Prophet's practice and the enduring role of mosques in Muslim societies, underscore the central place of mosque architecture in the broader context of Islamic civilization—both in its physical manifestation and in the spiritual and communal life of the Muslim world.

2. Criteria for Site Selection and Mosque Construction

Mosques, as the earthly houses of Allah, may vary in size depending on the needs of the community. Their sanctity, however, is not determined by scale or ornamentation, but by their orientation toward the *Qiblah* and their dedication to worship. Whether architecturally grand or modest in form, a mosque retains its sacred status equally (Mu'nis, 1970, 55).

Nevertheless, mosque construction must adhere to a set of foundational principles that constitute non-negotiable architectural and religious standards (Waziri, 1999, 18). These are not context-dependent but represent universal constants in mosque design. Chief among them is the selection of a site that is both physically and morally pure. It is impermissible to construct a mosque on unlawfully seized land or without the legitimate consent of the owner.

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) set a definitive precedent in this regard. When he chose the site for his mosque in Medina, it belonged to two orphans. Although they offered the land as a gift, he insisted on purchasing it for ten dinars, thereby affirming the ethical imperative behind mosque construction. At that time, the mosque was no more than a walled enclosure with no roof, and its initial *Qiblah* was directed toward Jerusalem (Al-Zarkashi, 1999, 223).

Proper orientation toward the *Ka'bah* is a non-negotiable element of mosque design. As stated in the Qur'an:

> "Verily! We have seen the turning of your (Muhammad's PBUH) face towards the heaven. Surely, We shall turn you to a Qiblah (prayer direction) that shall please you, so turn face in the direction of Al-Masjid-Al-Haram (at Makkah). And wheresoever you people are, turn your faces (in prayer) in that direction. Certainly, the people who were given the Scripture (i.e. Jews and the Christians) Know well that, that (your turning towards the direction of the Ka'bah at Makkah in prayers) is the truth from their Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what they do" (*Surat Al-Baqarah, 2:144*).

3. Mosque Ornamentation

In the earliest Islamic period, ornamentation in mosques was discouraged. Architectural simplicity—both in form and in surface treatment—was a guiding value. However, as Islamic architecture encountered diverse cultural influences over time, decorative elements gradually became integrated into mosque design.

This evolution is evident in early Islamic monuments such as the Dome of the Rock (Creswell, 1979, 2:119-137) and the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, where large wall surfaces were adorned with geometric and vegetal motifs, as well as Quranic inscriptions in Kufic script (Grafman & Ayalon, 1999). These mosaics, composed of intricate patterns and stylized forms, are among the earliest manifestations of Islamic decorative arts.

In the Great Mosque of Damascus, for example, decorative schemes featured landscapes of trees and flowers, notably avoiding any depiction of living beings in adherence to Islamic aesthetic principles (Creswell, 1979, 2: 119-137). Ornamentation took many forms: gilded inscriptions, plaster-carved reliefs, calligraphy on the *Mihrab* and *Qiblah* wall, and the application of Quranic verses (Al-Sadlali, 2008, 23).

Under the Umayyads, the first formal artistic schools emerged—particularly in Baghdad—introducing refined decorative vocabularies. The Dome of the Rock, in particular, demonstrates an early synthesis of Byzantine and local styles, setting a precedent for Islamic ornamentation.

In Córdoba, the *Mihrab* of the Great Mosque was embellished with mosaics made of colored glass and stone, echoing Greco-Roman techniques but adapted to Arab artistic sensibilities. Similar techniques had been used earlier in Damascus (Tarshawi, 2007, 190).

One recurring feature in mosque interiors was the inclusion of Quranic verses inscribed in Kufic script above windows and along walls, most notably:

> "The mosques of Allah shall be maintained only by those who believe in Allah and the Last Day..." (*Surat At-Tawbah, 9:18*)

This verse, frequently repeated in mosque décor, reinforced the sanctity and spiritual role of the mosque in the community.

In North Africa, especially Morocco, the development of *Zellij*—a form of glazed tile mosaic—became a hallmark of both residential and religious architecture. Egyptian usage of this art, especially during the Ottoman period, referred to it as *al-zlizli*. Floral compositions, with interlacing branches, serrated leaves, and carnation motifs, became prominent elements in tilework, forming rhythmic patterns and abstracted representations of nature (Khalifa, 2004, 60).

Over the centuries, the purpose of mosque architecture gradually shifted. What began as spaces for worship and religious instruction evolved into monumental expressions of power and royal patronage. Mosques became symbols of prestige and sovereignty, particularly under the Mamluk rulers of Cairo, who commissioned grand edifices to reflect their political and spiritual authority (‘Abd al-Baqi, 1982, 33).

4. The Evolution of Mosque Architecture

The development of mosque architecture has long been the subject of orientalist interpretation. Among the most prominent voices is the French orientalist K.A.C. Creswell, who argued that early mosques were architecturally derivative of Persian and Byzantine religious structures. He based his claim on the idea that Arab conquerors imported many elements of governance, monetary systems, and architecture from the civilizations they encountered, asserting that they themselves lacked an architectural tradition. Creswell cited

the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus as a prime example of this influence, suggesting it drew heavily from the layout of the Christian basilica, and further maintained that early Islamic mosques bore resemblance to Persian palatial forms (Creswell, 1926).

The Spanish orientalist Manuel Gómez-Moreno expressed a similar opinion. He argued that the mosque was inspired by the design of the Christian church. According to him, elements such as the *Mihrab* resembled a smaller version of the apse, used to hold the Quran during recitation. He also interpreted the *Minaret* as a reinterpretation of the church's bell tower. Both features, he claimed, were borrowed from ecclesiastical architecture. Furthermore, Gómez-Moreno contended that the mosque's strict adherence to Islamic religious doctrine limited its potential to reach the same level of architectural and aesthetic sophistication found in the Christian basilica (Moreno, 1968, 340).

These views, however, fail to account for the distinctiveness of the Islamic architectural tradition, both in its doctrinal foundations and in its cultural-historical context. They overlook the architectural legacy of pre-Islamic Arab civilizations—notably those in Yemen and Hadramaut—and disregard the emergence of an independent Islamic aesthetic that cohered with the religious, social, and urban values of Muslim communities (Shafi'i, 2002, 401).

While cross-cultural influence is an undeniable feature of architectural history, the notion that mosque design is merely derivative is a reductive and ideologically motivated claim. Islamic architecture was not simply the product of appropriation, but rather the result of a deliberate and creative synthesis rooted in Islamic theology and worldview. This is evident in essential features such as the orientation toward the *Qiblah*, the avoidance of figurative imagery, and the emphasis on Quranic calligraphy, geometric abstraction, and non-representational ornamentation—all of which align with Islamic theological tenets and distinguish the mosque from other houses of worship.

Furthermore, the prophetic directive to maintain distinction from Jews and Christians reinforces the idea that early Muslims consciously avoided adopting the religious forms of other traditions, especially in core institutions such as the mosque.

In light of this, the evolution of mosque architecture must be understood as an authentic expression of Islamic principles, shaped by internal spiritual, functional, and cultural dynamics rather than as an imitation of foreign models. It represents a unique

architectural trajectory that contributed meaningfully to world heritage while embodying the values and identity of the Muslim *Ummah*.

Key Architectural Elements of the Mosque

Mosque architecture is characterized by a cohesive system of essential architectural components, many of which have become enduring symbols of Islamic identity. These elements not only serve structural and aesthetic purposes but also reflect the evolution of Islamic architectural thought. They play a foundational role in the development of various architectural schools across the Islamic world, particularly in religious buildings. Key among them are the Minaret, *Mihrab*, *Minbar*, domes, and arches, accompanied by decorative features such as columns, capitals, *Muqarnas*, and intricate surface ornamentation.

Among these, the minaret stands out as one of the most defining and emblematic features of mosque architecture. Its symbolic and functional significance has allowed it to evolve organically throughout Islamic history—beginning with the first call to prayer by Bilal ibn Rabah, and culminating in the towering and stylistically diverse minarets seen in various regions today (Tharwat, 1994, 129).

1. The Minaret (al-Mi'dhanah / al-Manarah / al-Sawma'ah)

The minaret is a vertically oriented structure, often attached to or standing adjacent to the mosque. It typically consists of a spiral staircase and small windows, designed to elevate the voice of the muezzin during the call to prayer (*Adhān*). More than just a practical element, the minaret functions as a powerful visual marker of Islamic presence and spirituality in the urban landscape.

The terminology used for the minaret varies by region. The term "*Mi'dhanah*" derives from its core function—the *Adhān*. The term "*Manarah*" (lighthouse) alludes to its resemblance to the Lighthouse of Alexandria, while "*Sawma'ah*" is a term traditionally used in the Maghreb (Belhaj, 2002, 220).

In the earliest period of Islam, the call to prayer was made from rooftops or elevated positions adjacent to the mosque, as no formal minarets had yet been constructed. With the growing need for designated, elevated structures to amplify the call, the minaret gradually became a standard architectural feature.

The mosque of *Fustat* in Egypt was originally built by ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ. In 53 AH (673 CE), Maslamah ibn Mukhallad al-Anṣārī—then governor of Egypt under Caliph Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān—oversaw its expansion and commissioned the construction of four minarets, one at each corner of the mosque (Ibn Taghrī Birdī, 1929, 1:68).

An alternative narrative—reported by the historian al-Balādhurī—suggests that the first minaret appeared in Basra following a renovation of the mosque by Ziyād ibn Abih, who had been appointed governor by Mu'āwiyah. According to this account, the minaret was constructed from stone and stood as a freestanding structure, while the mosque itself was constructed of sun-dried mudbrick and clay (al-Balādhurī, 1987: 485).

In the early phases of Islamic architecture, minarets were frequently built as independent towers or only loosely attached to mosque buildings, often connected by a single wall. This weak structural integration made them vulnerable to environmental pressures—especially earthquakes. Their upper sections and outer edges were particularly prone to decay and collapse, despite the minaret's vital role as the place from which the Adhān is announced.

These upper segments required unique design solutions, especially as fire hazards became a concern. In earlier centuries, flames were often lit atop minarets to serve various purposes: guiding ships and caravans, relaying messages across territories, or issuing warnings. At night, fire signals were used; during the day, smoke signals conveyed alerts or state communications (Al-Maqdisi, 1991, 177).

Several historical examples reflect the diversity of minaret forms. The minaret of the Great Mosque of Kairaouan exhibits a balanced square shaft with moderate height. In contrast, the Giraldah of Seville, originally part of the city's mosque before being converted into a cathedral, reached exceptional heights—its upper lantern being later altered. The *Koutoubiah* Mosque minaret in Marrakesh shares the Giraldah's square-based, brick-built design, yet has retained its original features.

These Maghrebi minarets, typically constructed from baked brick, stand out for their decorative restraint. Instead of relying on mosaics or glazed tiles, their beauty is achieved through carefully arranged openings, arches, and geometric interplays—a hallmark of structural elegance and aesthetic moderation (Shafi'i, 2002, 158).

The Minaret is not merely functional; it is one of the most symbolically loaded elements of mosque architecture, embodying both visual identity and spiritual presence. Its rapid evolution across time and regions attests to the innovative dynamism of Islamic architectural thinking—consistently responsive to environmental context, available resources, and cultural norms (Tarshawi, 2007, 15).

Minarets were typically located at the corners of mosque complexes and varied in height and style depending on regional preferences, construction budgets, and societal traditions (Lucien, 1960, 52). During the *Mamluk* period, a distinctive typology emerged: a square base, surmounted by an octagonal or circular shaft, often ending in Muqarnas-supported balconies, and topped with a lantern structure (*Jawsaq*)—either solid or openwork, polygonal or round.

Architects also addressed climatic challenges by covering the upper sections of minarets, providing shelter from summer heat, winter cold, and desert sandstorms—especially in arid regions (Belhaj, 2002, 225).

The design process followed a deliberate and technically informed methodology, beginning with soil analysis to ensure long-term stability. Soils were classified as rocky, clayey, or sandy, with rocky soil being preferred for its mechanical strength and chemical resistance, offering optimal protection and durability for tall structures like minarets (‘Awad, 2002, 52).

The architectural evolution of the minaret reflects the broader trajectory of Islamic architecture: one of adaptability, innovation, and deep responsiveness to both sacred function and physical context. Through their evolving forms, structural ingenuity, and ornamental refinement, minarets have become defining icons of Islamic urban skylines—unifying spiritual symbolism with architectural sophistication.

2. The Mihrab (Prayer Niche)

The *Mihrab*—a recessed niche set into the *Qiblah* wall of a mosque—is one of the most recognizable and symbolically charged elements of Islamic sacred architecture. Functionally, it marks the direction of Mecca, guiding worshippers in prayer. Symbolically, it represents the position of the *Imām*, who leads the community, thus embodying both spiritual leadership and communal cohesion (Tawfiq, 1969, 252-253).

Linguistically, the term *Mihrab* is thought by scholars of Semitic languages to have South Arabian (Himyaritic) origins, and to have entered the Arabic lexicon via Ethiopian Christian usage, where it referred to a shrine or apse containing a saint's image (Mu'nis, 1981, 67). While this may reflect the broader phenomenon of linguistic borrowing, its architectural function in Islam developed independently, shaped by distinct theological and spatial imperatives.

The first *Mihrab* (prayer niche) in Islam dates back to the Prophet Muhammad's time. Initially, he would deliver the Friday sermon while standing beside a palm trunk. Later, some Companions proposed constructing a pulpit (*Minbar*) for him. Ibn ʿUmar narrated:

*"*The Prophet used to stand by a tree or a date-palm (trunk) on Friday. Then an Ansari woman or man said, "0 Allah's Messenger! Shall we make a pulpit for you?" He replied, "If you wish." So they made a pulpit for him and when it was Friday, he proceeded towards the pulpit [for delivering the *Khutba* (religious talk)]. The date-palm cried like a child! The Prophet descended (from the pulpit) and embraced it while it continued moaning like a child being quietened. The Prophet said, "It was crying for (missing) what it used to hear of religious knowledge given near it*"* (al-Bukhārī, 1997, 4: 475–476, ḥadīth no. 3584).

The Prophet (PBUH) later mentioned the *Minbar* in another hadith, stating:

*"*Between my house and my pulpit there is a garden from amongst the gardens of Paradise*"* (al-Bukhārī, 1997, 2: 171, ḥadīth no. 1195; Muslim, 2007, 2: 27, ḥadīth no. 1190).

The earliest known recessed (concave) *Mihrab* in Islamic architecture is that of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. It was introduced by ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz during his tenure as governor of Medina under the Umayyad Caliph al-Walīd ibn ʿAbd al-Malik (Al-Zarkashi, 1999, 363).

As mosque architecture matured, the *Mihrab* evolved into a standardized and stylistically rich element. Its forms diversified: some were semicircular, others slightly elliptical, while the horseshoe-shaped *Mihrab* of the Great Mosque of Córdoba stands out for its depth, resembling a small chamber.

Artisans employed diverse techniques to decorate *Mihrabs*, including carved plaster, stone relief, and intricate mosaic inlays using marble or colored glass. A common

typological feature included recessed corners within the niche, crowned by an arch supporting a half-dome. In some Abbasid and Mamluk mosques, such as those in Samarra and Ibn Ṭūlūn Mosque in Cairo, flat, non-recessed *Mihrabs* were used—offering alternative spatial interpretations (Shafi'i, 2002, 152). A distinctive decorative convention also emerged: an inverted shell motif in the *Mihrab's* upper section, as seen in Córdoba, became widespread in Islamic architecture (Fikri, 1965 a, 59).

Despite claims by some orientalists suggesting that the *Mihrab* was borrowed from Christian apses, Islamic historical records offer compelling counter-evidence. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have placed a stone marker indicating the *Qiblah* in *Qubbāh'* Mosque, and his companions further formalized this spatial indicator into the recognizable architectural niche. Misalignments in *Mihrab* orientation—such as those found in 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ Mosque and Imam al-Shāfiʿī's Mosque—were largely due to early limitations in astronomical knowledge, not conceptual ambiguity.

Ultimately, the *Mihrab* emerged not as a product of architectural borrowing, but as a purpose-built Islamic innovation, harmonizing spatial clarity, ritual function, and aesthetic refinement. It remains a defining feature of mosque architecture, reflecting both the unity of the *Ummah* and the centrality of direction in Islamic ritual life (Al-Zarkashi, 1999, 363).

3. The Dome (*Qubbah*)

In Islamic architecture, the dome (*Qubbah*) is a central structural and symbolic feature, commonly used to crown square prayer spaces by transforming their geometry into a circular or octagonal base. This transformation is typically accomplished through squinches or *Muqarnas*, which serve as transitional devices between the angular base and the curved dome above (Rizq, 2000, 221).

The term *Qubbah*, over time, has acquired broader architectural connotations. Historically, it referred not only to domed roofs but also to royal audience halls, prayer enclosures, and even cisterns. Within the context of mosque design, the dome became a visual and spiritual anchor, especially when placed in alignment with the minaret, offering vertical balance and symbolic elevation. Functionally, domes contribute to the amplification of sound, diffusion of light and passive ventilation (Waziri, 1999, 79), facilitating the rise and exit of warm air through clerestory openings.

The earliest Islamic dome is that of the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Ṣakhrah*) in Jerusalem, constructed in 691–692 CE. Initially, domes were constructed using lightweight materials, such as timber covered with brick. Later developments, especially under Byzantine influence, introduced stone and reinforced masonry, though Muslim architects eventually favored baked brick for its structural advantages: lightness, plasticity, and the ability to span large voids.

Through geometric experimentation and refined construction techniques, Islamic builders developed spatially complex domes using intersecting arches and ribbed frameworks. These domes typically culminated in a keystone or central apex that ensured even distribution of structural loads (Basilion, 2005, 2: 272). To transition from a square base to a circular or octagonal plan, builders employed corner squinches or Muqarnas. The outer shell of the dome was typically smooth and elevated, while the interior surface was often enriched with ribs, channels, or concave fluting, supported by pendentives and spherical triangles.

A key example of this approach can be seen in the dome of the bathhouse adjacent to the Dome of the Rock, where elegant vaulting and clerestory windows provided both illumination and ventilation, enhancing user comfort (Zaghlul, 1986, 402). Domes were often adorned with intricate vegetal and geometric patterns, applied to both interior and exterior surfaces. These decorations contributed not only to visual splendor but also to a sense of spiritual elevation, emphasizing the dome's symbolic connection to the heavens.

While the form of the Islamic dome drew upon Sassanian, Persian, and Byzantine influences, it ultimately evolved into a distinctive architectural type tailored to Islamic cosmology and ritual function. Positioned above the Mihrab or central prayer hall—and often paired with a minaret—the dome created a vertically oriented, harmonious composition that reinforced both spiritual focus and architectural balance (Lam'i, 1984, 82).

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem stands as the earliest extant example of domed Islamic architecture and remains among the most iconic monuments of the Islamic world. Although it reflects the formal inspiration of Byzantine design, its spatial organization and decorative language mark a clear Islamic reinterpretation. Built on an octagonal base and surmounted by a gilded wooden dome, it differs notably from later Islamic domes, which more frequently employed pendentives to transition from square bases to circular domes.

The central dome spans 20.44 meters in diameter, supported by a drum pierced with 16 windows, resting on four massive piers and twelve columns arranged in a circular configuration—three columns between each pair of piers (Al-Ribat, 2002, 99). The octagonal plan measures 20.59 meters per side, with a height of 9.5 meters. Each upper wall contains five windows, and four entrances are distributed along the cardinal directions, each measuring 2.55 × 4.35 meters (Raef, 1983, 71).

The interior and exterior of the structure are lavishly adorned with marble panels, glass mosaics, and inscriptions, integrating elements from Arab-Islamic, Persian, and Roman design vocabularies. The building stands as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, widely recognized as a masterwork of early Islamic architecture for its harmonious proportions, symbolic composition, and refined ornamentation (Creswell, 1984, 35).

Muslim architects employed arches in dome construction, a technique marked by the emergence and widespread adoption of pointed arches, which became characteristic of Islamic architecture in the eastern regions of the Muslim world. Over time, continuous development and innovation transformed domes into architectural masterpieces with distinct aesthetic and structural qualities, reflecting the ingenuity of Muslim artisans.

A prominent example of domes with convex exterior ribs and concave interior forms emerged during the Fatimid era in Egypt, particularly in mausoleums. Numerous instances of this type can also be found across North Africa, such as in the mosques of Tlemcen and Taza (Tawfiq, 1969, 19-20). Domes vary in their construction materials, including wood, stone, and reinforced concrete.

Beyond their structural role, domes possess significant aesthetic value. Muslim architects excelled in emphasizing the beauty of domes, both through their unique forms that contrast with the surrounding architecture and by incorporating intricate decorative elements on both the interior and exterior surfaces.

Functionally, domes also contribute to natural ventilation. Located at the center of the mosque's prayer hall, they help expel warm air from the lower space upwards through windows facing the heat source. Simultaneously, cooler air enters from shaded windows, creating a cycle of fresh airflow throughout the prayer area (Shafi'i, 2019, 180).

The domes evolved and diversified, giving rise in al-Andalus to various forms such as quadripartite domes, octagonal domes, *Muqarnas* domes, scalloped (lobed) domes, semi-domes, and other intricate variations (Daqmaq, 2016). Structurally, these domes connected

the walls of chambers, entrances, towers, staircases, corridors, bathhouses, and cisterns, while also fulfilling their primary architectural purpose.

4. Minbars (Pulpits)

The Minbar is a raised platform—typically square in shape—elevated above the mosque floor and accessed by a staircase. It is usually topped with a decorative canopy, where the preacher (*khatib*) delivers sermons during Friday prayers and religious celebrations. Traditionally positioned to the right of the *Mihrab*, Minbars are often crafted from intricately carved wood, marble, or stone. Artisans paid particular attention to their decoration, incorporating elaborate geometric designs that reflect both aesthetic sensibility and technical mastery ('Uthman, 1988, 49). One of the oldest and most celebrated examples is the Minbar of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, originally commissioned by Nur al-Din Zanki in the 12th century and completed under Salah al-Din. It stood as a masterpiece of Islamic woodwork until it was destroyed in 1969 (Necipoğlu, 1995, 198).

To optimize mosque space, Muslim architects developed an architectural solution by assigning the *Minbar* a dedicated recess next to the *Mihrab*, ensuring that it did not obstruct the prayer hall. This design became common in al-Andalus, particularly after the expansion of the Great Mosque of Córdoba during the reign of al-Hakam al-Mustansir. A niche was created to house the *Minbar*, which was mounted on rails and brought out for Friday sermons (Salem, 2008, 344, Abu Mustapha, 1996, 43). This innovation later spread to other parts of the Islamic world, including the Maghreb.

While the concept of the *Minbar* may have roots in earlier civilizations, Islamic culture has historically embraced and reinterpreted refined artistic influences. Credit is due to Muslim artists, who developed and enriched the *Minbar* with aesthetic and structural innovations, transforming it into one of the most beautiful and iconic architectural elements in Islamic religious spaces.

5. The Prayer Hall

The prayer hall constitutes the central space of the mosque, where the five daily prayers are performed, the Friday sermon is delivered, and lessons in religious guidance and reflection on communal matters are held. It is typically rectangular in shape, as this layout is considered optimal for prayer organization and is prevalent in most mosque designs. The longer side of the rectangle is usually aligned parallel to the *Qiblah* wall, thereby reinforcing the orientation towards Mecca.

Acoustic design plays a vital role in prayer halls. Architects often rely on precise geometric proportions and dimensions that promote balanced sound distribution. This thoughtful design enhances the clarity of sermons and religious lectures, often eliminating the need for artificial amplification systems (Nawfal, 1999, 75-90).

Muslim architects also utilize structural techniques that allow for the widest possible spans between columns to maximize the prayer space while minimizing visual and physical obstructions. In designing the layout, entrances are usually placed at the rear or along the sides of the mosque. This encourages worshippers to fill the front rows from the back, facilitating orderly entry and exit while avoiding disturbance to those already in prayer. Furthermore, entrances for women are carefully designed to be completely separate from those for men, ensuring privacy and ease of access for all.

6. Mosque Ventilation

Muslim architects have historically paid close attention to the issue of mosque ventilation, as previously noted and documented. Given the high temperatures prevalent in most Islamic regions and the impact of climatic fluctuations—particularly extreme heat or cold—mosques are often exposed to environmental challenges. Therefore, it is essential to implement architectural solutions that moderate the indoor climate and enhance thermal comfort.

Designers of mosques have prioritized natural ventilation as a fundamental approach to cooling, particularly due to the adverse effects of heat on worshippers' focus and comfort. This is achieved through passive solar cooling techniques, which rely on the movement of air driven by temperature differentials within the mosque. Key elements of this system include wind catchers (*Malāqib*), often supplemented with water or moist materials to cool the incoming air—collectively known as ventilation and humidification towers. When natural ventilation alone is insufficient, architects may integrate advanced, eco-friendly mechanical systems to maintain suitable environmental conditions (Nubi, 2002, 47).

7. Ablution and Sanitation Facilities

Ritual purity—both minor and major—is a fundamental condition for the validity of prayer in Islam. Therefore, providing appropriate spaces for ablution (*Wuḍū'*) is

essential in mosque design. Architects must carefully study the spatial relationship between these facilities and the prayer hall to ensure the sanctity of the prayer space is preserved.

This design approach aims to prevent the infiltration of impurities or unpleasant odors into the prayer area. Typically, ablution spaces are physically separated but functionally connected to the mosque, and are preferably situated behind the *Qiblah* wall or on either side of the structure. Ideally, they should be easily accessible from adjacent restrooms yet separated by partitions to maintain cleanliness (Waziri, 2008, 164).

Classical scholars generally favored locating latrines at a distance from the mosque, to protect it from impurity and offensive odors. However, building restrooms in proximity to mosques was not prohibited (Al-Zarkashī, 1999, 383). In the Maghrib and al-Andalus, for example, latrines were often constructed separately but close to mosques, a fact supported by historical *Nawāzil* literature.

Scholars also recommended that toilet doors be placed outside the mosque's structure. Nevertheless, in certain climates or geographic conditions, practical considerations may require alternative solutions.

With the passage of time, greater emphasis has been placed on the functional design of ablution areas, to accommodate both the physical requirements of the ritual and the comfort of users. These spaces must guarantee the purity of water, provide ample room for worshippers to wash comfortably, and include structural features such as footrests or low platforms. Flooring should be non-slip, and the design should ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities, including ramps and handrails in toilet units built to universal access standards (Mokhtar, 2005, 20).

These considerations are central to modern mosque planning and are crucial for safeguarding both environmental hygiene and user safety. The architect bears responsibility for adapting these requirements to the specific context and constraints of each mosque project.

With the transformation of Islamic cities into complex urban centers, characterized by distinct cultural and social functions, architectural planning likewise evolved (ʻUthman, 1988, 6). The emergence of educational institutions, Ribāṭs, and Zawayas—often associated with Sufi traditions—from the late fifth century AH onward, contributed significantly to urban development and architectural sophistication in Islamic cities (ʻUthman, 1988, 71).

8. Integrated Mosque Schools

Architecturally, the *Madrasa* (Islamic school) is a complex comprising an open courtyard surrounded by *Iwans*, a prayer hall, and residential quarters for both local and international students. Over time, these institutions evolved into highly organized centers that served not only religious and educational functions but also accommodated lodging for scholars (Fikri, 1965 b, 2: 121). Their design followed specific criteria, such as orienting the *Qiblah* wall, in addition to incorporating other previously mentioned facilities (Haidar, 1995, 26).

Madrasas first emerged in the Islamic East through the efforts of Sunni jurists. Later, the state institutionalized them, recognizing their value in preparing qualified personnel for administrative service. Both the Seljuks and Ayyubids placed significant emphasis on founding these schools, elevating them to remarkable levels of organizational structure and scholarly excellence. This is evident in the production of scientific encyclopedias, historical chronicles, and the rich manuscript collections now housed in major libraries and museums worldwide (ʿUthmān, 2005, 33–56). These institutions laid the foundation for enduring intellectual traditions across the Muslim world.

In terms of architectural design and function, madrasas shared many features with mosques, though they were more comprehensive in fulfilling educational objectives. Typically, a madrasa would include lecture halls, accommodations for students and teachers, a library, and various ancillary facilities such as baths and latrines (Ghāzī, 1989, 113).

Although madrasas have a similar architectural style to mosques, their interior design allows for more extensive educational purposes. Lecture halls, teacher and student housing, libraries, and auxiliary areas like restrooms and showers are usually included. As demonstrated by al-Qarawiyyin University, founded by Fatima al-Fihri and acknowledged as the oldest continuously running university in the world, this integration reflects the deep Islamic commitment to universal education, accessible to both locals and visitors.

Conclusion

Mosque architecture represents one of the most striking manifestations of creative excellence in Islamic civilization, having evolved significantly across different historical

eras. Since the establishment of the first mosque in Islam, this architectural form has undergone multiple transformations, shaped by the social, cultural, and technological conditions of each era. Throughout Islamic history, mosques have exhibited a rich variety of styles—from early prototypes modeled on the Prophet's Mosque in Medina to distinct architectural traditions such as the Moroccan and Andalusian schools of architectural design.

An in-depth study of key architectural components—such as the *Mihrab*, *Minbar*, dome, columns, parapets, and Muqarnas—reveals that these were not merely structural elements, but symbols carrying spiritual and cultural significance. These features enriched the spiritual atmosphere and embodied the religious and aesthetic ideals of Islamic society. For example, the dome symbolizes the heavens, while the *Mihrab* indicates the direction of prayer, imbuing the space with spiritual orientation.

During the Ottoman period, mosque architecture reached a high level of refinement. It was marked by central domes, slender minarets, and intricate ceramic decoration. In Morocco, architects introduced innovative designs that combined Eastern and local elements. This fusion gave rise to a unique style that reflects the region's cultural and religious identity.

The study of mosque architecture and its evolution offers more than an understanding of its artistic or technical aspects. It fosters awareness of Islamic cultural heritage and underscores the richness and diversity of Islamic civilization. These structures—adorned with intricate forms and decorations—serve as enduring monuments to the intellectual and spiritual achievements of Muslims and continue to inspire architects and scholars worldwide.

Furthermore, Islamic architecture has always been open to external influences, selectively adopting what aligns with its principles and reinterpreting it through its own cultural lens. It remains responsive to modern-day challenges—such as accommodating individuals with disabilities by ensuring universal accessibility to places of worship, and integrating contemporary technologies in ventilation and digital infrastructure. This flexibility affirms that Islamic architecture is not only rooted in tradition but also open to innovation, offering promising possibilities for future creativity.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Comparative Research on Architectural Styles.

To highlight both shared influences and the diversity of design, it is recommended to conduct in-depth comparative studies of mosque architectural styles across various historical periods and geographic regions—particularly between the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds.

2. Strengthen Documentation and Conservation of Historic Mosques.

Greater emphasis should be placed on the documentation and preservation of historic mosques, ensuring the safeguarding of their original architectural elements. This will help transmit them to future generations as vital components of Islamic cultural and civilizational heritage.

3. Safeguard the Architectural and Spiritual Identity of Mosques.

Restoration, maintenance, and new construction efforts must respect and preserve both the architectural integrity and spiritual character of mosques, ensuring that their historical and symbolic identity remains intact.

4. Promote the Use of Digital Technologies in Mosque Preservation.

It is essential to adopt modern digital tools—such as 3D scanning, digital modeling, and augmented reality—to document, present, and disseminate mosque architecture. These technologies contribute significantly to academic research, heritage education, and public engagement.

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