



FAITH & FORM

THE INTERFAITH JOURNAL ON
RELIGION, ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOL. XLVIII • NO. 3, 2015 • ISSN 00147001

**Theme Issue:
Designing and
Building for Islam**

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--Qur'an 2:125 (part)

Let us visit the historic cube in Mecca to conduct a thought-experiment: Imagine you are suspended in space in a satellite directly above it. Presume also that it is night and all the lights in the world have been switched off. Now switch on the lights that shine on the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Mecca in which the black cube is located, and also switch on the lights of all the mosques of the world.

This is what you will see: directly below you will be the black square of the Ka'ba at the center of a vast concentric system of white circles that emanate from it like ripples: The innermost circles are in constant motion around it, and they are packed close together. White wheels within wheels unceasing in their motion. They are encircled by white circles that have a space between each other. These do not move around the cube but they do sway towards and away from it. Radiating away are unmoving white dots that make up bigger and bigger circles at greater distances from each other.

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Finally, you have the distant circles that are made up of white dots that are the mosques of the world: segments of great circles (were you to light up all the graves of Muslims in the world, they too would lie in concentric ripples emanating from the Ka'ba). Thus, the mosque is a designated segment of a circle whose center is the Ka'ba (the direction is called *qibla*). Any definition of the mosque devoid of the *qibla* is erroneous; any stylistic addition to the definition (that which has domes, minarets, etc.) is superfluous.

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Often there is a stepped platform to one side of the *mihrab*, called the *minbar*, for the Imam to ascend and address the congregation on Fridays. But neither are iconic objects, as the mosque is less a shell gazed upon and more a shell held against the ear. It is an acoustic space

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Mosque: Cube and Circle

Islam's arc of belief as reflected in its houses of worship worldwide

Text and photographs by H. Masud Taj



The Cube at the center of the Grand Mosque.

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The mosque is devoted to listening to the Word of God (*Al Qur'an* means "recitation" from Al Qara to recite). While listening the worshipper is at the center of the sound that envelopes; sight is restrained to the spot where the forehead touches the floor in prostration. In the realm of invocation, not depiction, vision detracts and hearing engages. Hearing inescapably implies presence.

This global concentric system made up by all the mosques in the world oriented to a single center is a geometrical analogue of *tawhid*—a doctrine of the Oneness of God and the unity of all existence. *Tawhid*

is the foundation of Islam. Hence Ka'ba is an ordering device, a marker that locates the *axis mundi* at the center of the concentric system, the solitary altar of all mosques.

Thus, while each church has its own altar, mosques have none within them but they all share the same altar that lies outside them: the Ka'ba in the valley in Mecca. The only mosque in the world that is not a segment of a circle but completes the circle is the Great Mosque of Mecca that contains the Ka'ba in its courtyard; hence the only mosque in the world with its own altar. All other mosques of the world are segments that imagination composes into circles. For instance, a mosque in New York would be a segment of the circle that passes through Canada and crosses the Arctic to Russia, Mongolia, China, Vietnam, Singapore, and



The worshipper faces the mihrab and the distant Ka'ba in prayer.

then crosses Antarctica, Peru, Colombia, and Cuba, before re-entering the US. The circle is made up by connecting the mosques--the white dots you saw from outer space.

Moreover, the mosque is more the ground than the superstructure above, as according to the Prophet ﷺ the whole earth is a mosque.¹ This is enacted each Friday in various urban centers around the world, when straight rows spill out onto streets with the mosque's inability to house the world's fastest growing religion (which, by 2050, is expected to be the largest religious group in the world).² The congregation outside a mosque is often bigger than the one inside; bodies of worshippers themselves constitute the greater mosque and when their foreheads touch the mundane sidewalk, it is hallowed ground. When millions pray simultaneously during the annual Hajj pilgrimage in the valley of Arafat, with only a fraction contained in the valley's Namira Mosque, the meta-mosque of bricks and bodies appears in the clear light of the desert sun.

The mosque being a performing art, before and after the performance of prayer, the existence of the mosque is open to question as the essential acoustic space disappears when silence prevails. Between performances, could the stage be either adapted for different performances or dismantled and put away? Just as jurisprudence checks the rear view mirror for precedents before moving ahead, we hearken back.

The precedent was set by Muhammad ﷺ, the second source of authority after the Qur'an (which does not stipulate any particular form or feature that a mosque ought to have). His mosque in Medina was a

courtyard with a verandah of palm-thatch flat-roof supported on palm tree-trunks on the *qibla* side for the worshippers, and another verandah on the opposite side for *saliks* (wayfarers). The following can be deduced from it: It made no attempts to formulate a separate style from the prevailing built context; with the house adjacent, it did not insist on being a free-standing building and except for its *qibla* orientation (facing the direction of Ka'ba in faraway Mecca) and a *minbar* (stepped pulpit) it had no other distinguishing feature. The minaret, the characteristic tower for the call to pray, evolved later, as did the *mihrab* and the unique tessellation of *muqarnas* (stalactites).

For an aniconic religion it is understandable that the minimal form of this early mosque leaves the visual trajectory of mosque architecture open-ended. "What did the Mosque look like" gets displaced by a more productive line of questioning: "What did the Mosque do?"

The early mosque was multifunctional and served as a social, political, and religious center. Based on numerous *hadith* (a record of the actions and advices of Muhammad ﷺ) it was a dormitory for travelers, an educational institution, a health care facility, a temporary treasury, a court of law (even a temporary prison!), and yes, brief prayers were also performed in congregation five times a day. Because, according to Islam, all the above actions constitute acts of worship. In other words, it was a community center in which prayers were said.

This is in keeping with the Arabic word for worship in the Qur'an: *ibadat*. It is derived from *abd*: one who would strive to please his lord.




Every mosque is part of an arc of worship that encircles the world.

Hence “worship,” in Islam, is the manner of conducting one’s daily affairs. Apart from right beliefs, according to the Qur’an, to worship is to “...spend of your substance out of love for Him, for your kins, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity, to fulfill the contracts which you have made...”³

Historically, form and function bear an inverse relationship in the development of the mosque. As it shed its various functions, its form paradoxically grew more and more complex, until we are left with a highly specialized building serving a single function. In tandem with the shrinking domain of the mosque’s activities grew the demand that the sacredness of the dwelling compensate for the diminishing spirituality of the dweller; those with an identity crisis demanded that architecture fabricate an identity in a historical regression of the mosque from dynamic multi-functionality to sterile specialization.

Paradoxically we find that the basically fundamentalist maneuver of returning to origins has progressive consequences. It is analogous to pulling back on the arrow in order to launch it forward on a liberating trajectory. The future of the contemporary mosque lies in recovering the multi-functionality of an expatriate past: from mosque as a machine-for-meditation to mosque as a site-for-social-action for the community it serves.

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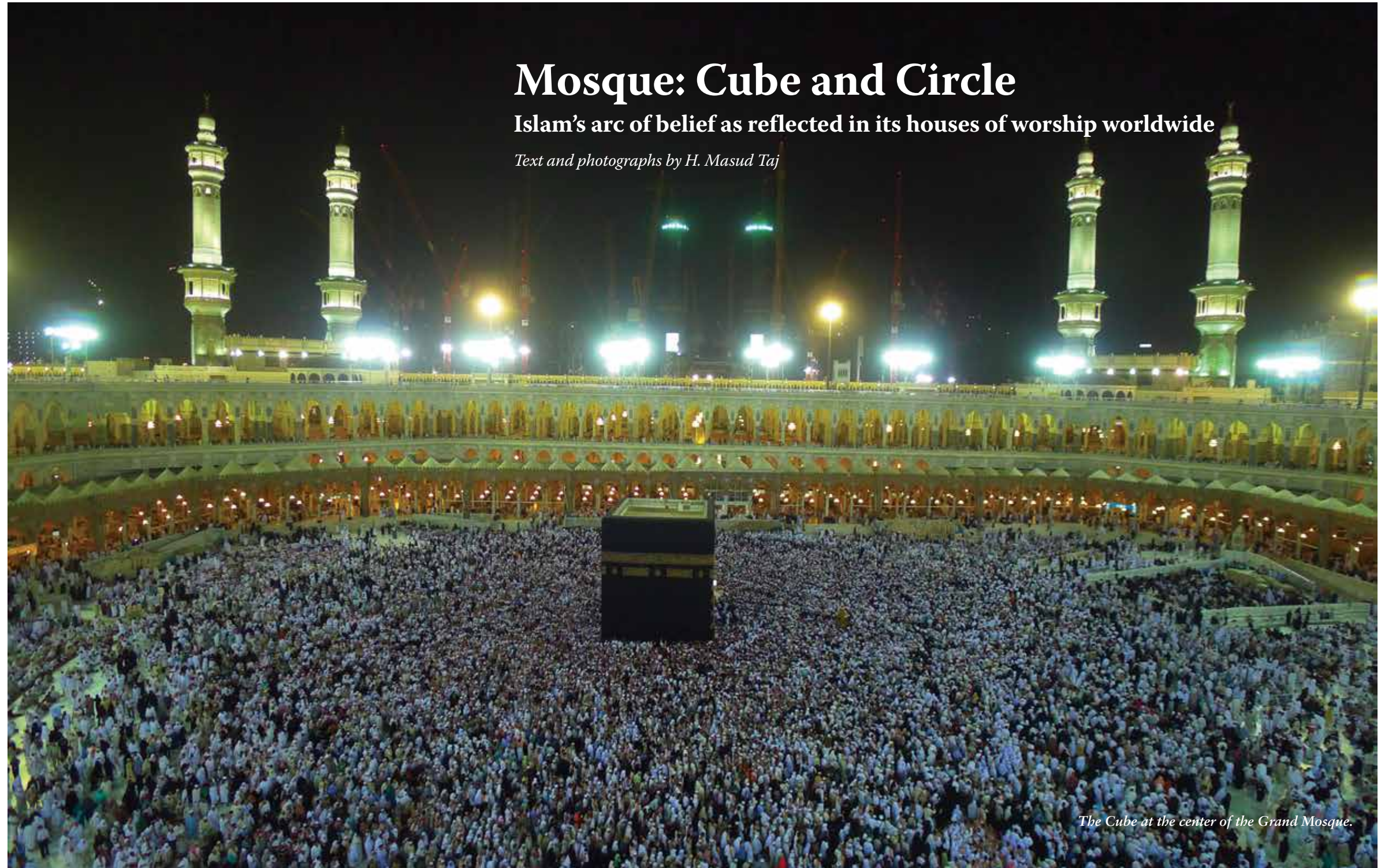
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