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To cite this article: A A Macca and T Aryanti 2017 *IOP Conf. Ser.: Mater. Sci. Eng.* **180** 012092

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The Domes: El Wakil's Traditionalist Architecture of Quba Mosque

A A Macca, T Aryanti*

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

*tutin@upi.edu

Abstract. Quba Mosque stands as it is today after being rebuilt and renovated several times, as the sacred and historical place built by Prophet Muhammad PBUH in the first day of his emigration to Medina. Being the first architecture following his hijra, it reflects the will of the people in their endowment to the mosque. This paper aims at studying the changes throughout the development of the mosque, focusing mainly on the last development designed by the architect El-Wakil, his will to reforge the link between the past and the present and the significance of understanding the Islamic culture, philosophy, and architecture. This study employed a literature review to capture the mosque's architectural features developed by El-Wakil. It argues that the elements of the mosque, particularly the domes, are products of El-Wakil's vision and defence for traditionalism. His use of traditionalist approach shows his notion of what Islamic architecture is.

1. Introduction

The Quba Mosque is one of the most important Islamic monument. It was the first mosque that was erected by Prophet Muhammad PBUH on the first day of his emigration to Medina. The existing building was renovated several times prior to the recent development in 1980 because it was no longer able to serve the needs of the contemporary usage. The 1980 renovation, designed by Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, was conducted due to the new extension, in addition to the major physical cracks in the mosque's domes and arches. In contrast to the contemporary mosques found in various places across the globe that were designed to express modernity to represent the "Islamic" image [1], the Quba Mosque appears in its traditional features, consisting of the hypostyle plan, the inner courtyard, the minarets at the four corners of the mosque, and the domes.

A number of scholars have examined El-Wakil's architecture. Al-Asad examines El-Wakil's architectural vocabularies and argues that his stance on traditionalism is a reaction against architectural modernism that has been worldly influential since the beginning of the twentieth century [2]. Discussing Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, Rasem Badran, and Ricardo Legoretta in responding to cultural heritage, Steele sees that these architects propose "strategies of intentional derivation, rational historicism, and elemental minimalism" in their designs [3]. In this sense, both scholars see that El-Wakil's traditionalism is his attempt to confront modernism. Although there are extensive sources on El-Wakil and his architecture, very little we know about the Quba Mosque, despite its significance in the history of Islamic architecture. This paper discusses El-Wakil's traditionalist approach to the design of the Quba Mosque and analyze the reason behind it.



Abdel Wahed El-Wakil (b. 1943) is a prominent architect, who is known for his design of numerous buildings in Islamic society. He was awarded the 2009 Richard H. Driehaus Prize from the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture for successfully applying the principles of classicism and how to respect history, local community, and the natural environment. He was also awarded the Aga Kahn award in 1980 for Halawa House in Agamy, Egypt, and 1989 for Corniche Mosque in Jeddah. He designed eleven mosques in Saudi Arabia, spread in Jeddah and Medina. In his early career, El-Wakil apprenticed with Hassan Fathy, the renowned Egyptian architect, who stood for traditionalism.

2. Method

This article is a literature review, relying on secondary data on literatures, pictures and drawing of the Quba Mosque. The study analyzes writings on the Quba Mosque and the architect, El-Wakil in relation with the issue of the gap between the traditionalism and modernism. We further discuss his choice of featuring the domes, which have traditionally rooted in Islamic architecture, in the Quba Mosque.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. *El-Wakil's Traditionalism*

Traditionalism is often seen as the opposite of modernism. El-Wakil himself stands in opposition to modernism. Losing its context, both geographically and historically, the twentieth-century modernism is considered “confusing, alienating” by El-Wakil, and thus, does not fit the architecture of the Islamic world [2]. Architectural modernist approach is also seen to be architect’s self centered for over-emphasizing his/her creativity and the architect her/himself as the designer of the building. For him, preserving the tradition implies “borrowing and improvising on existing forms” [3].

3.2. *El-Wakil's Traditionalist Approach to the Quba Mosque*

The Quba Mosque has a hypostyle plan, the inner courtyard, the minarets, the mihrab, and the domes. From the 56 domes that seen on the Quba Mosque, three main domes above the mihrab adopted a pendentive style dome. It is a dome that is surmounted on another dome. Such a dome was first found in Persian building construction [4]. The mosque features four minarets, added by El-Wakil.

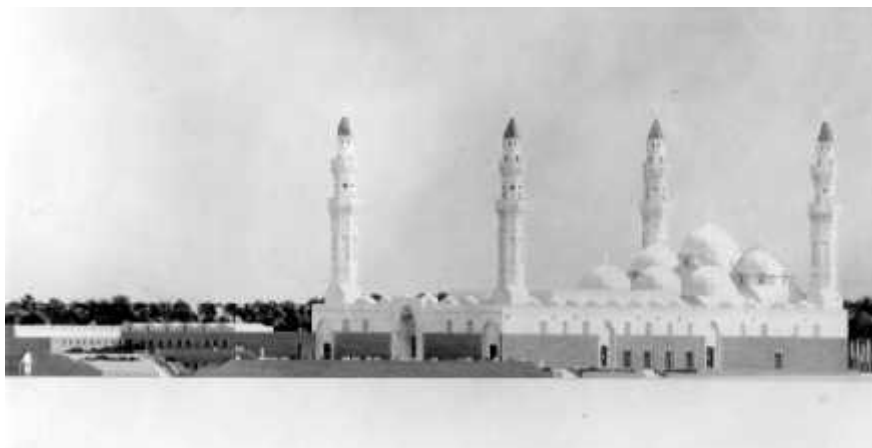


Figure 1. Quba Mosque : Perspective by Edwin Venn

The Quba Mosque employs the traditional approach, in both the construction and architectural design. It is constructed of brick, which is not only as the exterior elements, but also as the structural elements. The use of concrete is limited to the mosque’s foundations and platforms. In terms of forms, El-Wakil’s Quba Mosque heavily borrows elements from various traditions in the Islamic world, including Mamluk, Seljuq, and Ottoman. As such, El-Wakil follows eclecticism, which according to Al-Asad, effectively connects the present and the past [2].

In his construction works, El-Wakil also employed a majority of local unskilled Bedouins, in addition to skilled craftsmen. It was revealed that besides the demand from King Fahd, it was also El-Wakil's will to carry out traditionalism to the mosque design. Abdel Wahed El-Wakil is known for his firm belief of how traditional method and construction should be basis of the design process. This is reflected in the major and differentiated forms of the mosque like the domes and minarets of the Quba Mosque and his other designs. El-Wakil first intended to blend his style with the pre-existing mosque but the client requested that the old building was demolished and the architect designed a newly building.

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3.3. *El-Wakil's Traditional Symbolism in the Quba Mosque*

One of the main and most notable characteristic of the use of domes in the design of the Quba mosque. It shows the traditionalist way of El-Wakil and evidence of his agreement of the dome as an essential element in Islamic architecture. The dome is seen as a symbol of the sky (in Arabic "*asma*" - "the sky") and the dome-shaped space underneath it is the personification of the earth. The chambered dome shape represents a communication circle between the heaven and the earth, manifested in prayer.

The use of the dome in the Quba Mosque demonstrates what Grabar asserts as a "generative grammar," a structural pattern that includes visual symbols and forms that are followed and passed on through generations and societies in Muslim community [5]. The internal decoration of the dome, in most cases features elaborate floral decorations in red and gold, as well as various inscriptions. According to ancient ideas the Dome of the Rock and its arch symbolizes heaven. In this image the essence of connection of the existing world with God is represented [6]. In Quba mosque the domes adopted the same characteristics, the horizontal inscriptions around the lower part of the dome's interior found in all the big and the small domes.

His eclectic style can also be observed in the domes exterior adapted from the Cairo's Mamluk architecture that is the carved decoration on the domes, although in the simple form [7].

These variations of domes architectural features of the Quba mosques logically connects the theology of the mosque in a way that shows El Wakil also believed in the traditional symbolism of those architectural features.

El Wakil writes, "Variation, development and originality in the architecture of the mosque evolve through continuity and perpetuation of a tradition, expressing unity and universal truth through the multitude of forms, as abundant as those in nature, growing and evolving in time. His literal eclectic transposition of typological fragments like facades, minarets, and domes and his grouping of them without homogeneous syntactic structure, belies the claim of historical continuity and typological development [8].

4. Conclusion

El-Wakil's methodology aligns with the scientific methodology that uses the former inventions and discoveries as the base to proceed more in the development of that specific issue. El-Wakil's base to innovate architecturally is the tradition that we believe somehow if implemented to the extent that he reached can solve the gap between the modernity and tradition. By that we mean a modernity without tradition is hollow form of innovation and the tradition without modernity is a static development. Without tradition there is a break of chain in the inheritance of knowledge. Architecture is a knowledge

that transcends form the culture and belief of the people so it is compulsory to consider the intangible aspects of the design.

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