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Serene synthesis

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THE tint of turquoise is achingly beautiful. The onlooker can but stop and stare, as at a bird so rare and so lovely that, beholding it, his breath catches in his throat.

Paradoxically, it strikes a familiar chord in the hearts of Muslims unaware that they have seen a similar image, somewhere ... is it the Shah Mosque of Isfahan, in Iran? Is it the Sultan Ahmet Mosque of Istanbul, in Turkey? Is it the Taj Mahal of Agra, in India?

No.

It is, in fact, the Masjid Wilayah Persekutuan of Kuala Lumpur.

Inspired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the creation of the Federal Territory's own mosque was entrusted to the Department of Public Works. By 1996, the project was put out to tender, and piling began at a 13.4ha site at Jalan Duta.

Construction proceeded on a conventional fastrack basis; as work progressed on the drawing board, structural elements took shape on site.

"Fastracking enabled us to begin without waiting to complete each and every architectural drawing; with this method, you draw as you go," says PWD architect Mohd Amir Mohd Dali.

He hastens to explain, however, that he can in no way be regarded as the architect of the Masjid Wilayah Persekutuan.

"When you say PWD, you are saying there is not ONE architect involved - there are many. When the project commenced, it came under the purview of the Buildings division; two architects - who have since left the department's service - and their assistant manager toiled over it. As construction began, the project was taken over by the group of which I am a part. The current team consists of myself, assistant manager Mariani Noor and division director Noorishah Abdul Shukor."

This praiseworthy cooperation is echoed in the mosque itself. The arabesques (a design of intertwined leaves) on its turquoise domes, picked out in cream and gold, bear an uncanny resemblance to those adorning the Shah Mosque (Masjid-i-Shah) of Isfahan. This breathtakingly beautiful structure, erected in 1628-1629 during the reign of the Shah Abbas I, is thought to be the work of Bahauddin al-Amili, the celebrated architect and mathematician who was also Sheikh al-Islam - the city's supreme religious authority - and Minister of the Awqaf (religious foundations).

"The muqarnas which adorn the minarets and central portal, too, are the work of Isfahani artisans," says Mohd Amir. These craftsmen cast the muqarnas (architectural devices of great refinement, resembling stalactites) in GRC (a reconstituted concrete), and assembled them on site.

But the shape of the domes is reminiscent of Istanbul's Sultan Ahmet Mosque - popularly known as the Blue Mosque, for the tint of the tiles adorning inner walls. Here, as there, a central dome rests upon a rectangular base, in a theme developed by Turkish Ottoman architecture. And the Grand Prayer Hall, with its massive medallions inscribed with the name of Allah, powerfully calls to mind the Hagia Sophia.

When the Turks conquered the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, they were confronted with the marvel of the Cathedral of Saint Sophia, with its dome "suspended from the sky". The grandeur of this sanctuary surpassed anything Muslim architects had built - it is only in Muslim India that much larger domed buildings saw the light - and it took on new life as a

mosque after the siege of the city by Mehmed II. The Hagia Sophia took to her new role as though born to it; her very name, invoking Wisdom (sophia), is universal.

"The mimbar is in the Ottoman style," says Mohd Amir, "though its materials and execution are local." Coming to a characteristic point, this pulpit - from which the khatib, or preacher, delivers the khutbah - is decorated in typically Malay motifs, wrought of cengal.

But the mihrab (prayer-niche, indicating the direction of Mecca) owes its inspiration to the 17th-century mausoleum of Mumtaz-i-Mahal, consort of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. This ivory marble tribute to a timeless love itself derives from Persian models.

"The inlay technique adorning the mihrab," says Mohd Amir, "was executed by descendants of the artisans who fashioned the Taj Mahal - Indians from Jaipur and Makrana." Perhaps it is proprietary pride which prompts his presumption when he pronounces: "The inlay work on our mosque, though, is more refined than that on the Taj."

Or perhaps it is inexperience; Mohd Amir readily reveals that his acquaintance with the architecture of the Muslim World is limited to a recent visit to Agra.

Nevertheless, the Masjid Wilayah Persekutuan is indeed magnificent. In keeping with the Muslim belief that a mosque is not only for formal worship, but for living and learning, too, this is a multifaceted, multifunctional mosque. Designed to be both mosque and madrasah, it allows both devotion and diligence. It is even equipped with a 'VVIP' room, for the comfort and convenience of exalted guests!

This departs from the moderation of Islam. Persian carpets of silk and wool -from Tabriz, Kashan and Nain - adorn floors of Langkawi marble in Dayang Grey; walls are faced in Antique White. It is one thing to adorn a mosque to glorify God - and another to adorn it to glorify Man.

The mosque is encircled by a moat boasting a cascade. This, though it incorporates an important element of Islamic architecture - water, representing physical and spiritual purification - also departs from the traditionally modest channels and discreet fountains which characterise, for example, that Moorish masterpiece, the Alhambra of Granada. Rather than overwhelming the visitor with a gushing roar, they welcome him with an intimate tinkle.

Accorded the status of a State mosque, the Masjid Wilayah Persekutuan is a serene synthesis of Persian, Ottoman and Mughal architecture; it melds Malay with the rest of the Muslim World, marries ancient and modern.

Cutting-edge, up-to-the-minute, state-of-the-art materials - GRC, solid-surface, glass fibre - are cast in the traditional forms of ages past.

The turquoise of Persian decoration is achieved with mosaic tiles from France; an Ottoman dome is shaped with a glass fibre - epoxy resin composite. From Mughal to Moor, from minaret to muqarna - this is indeed a marvellous mosque!