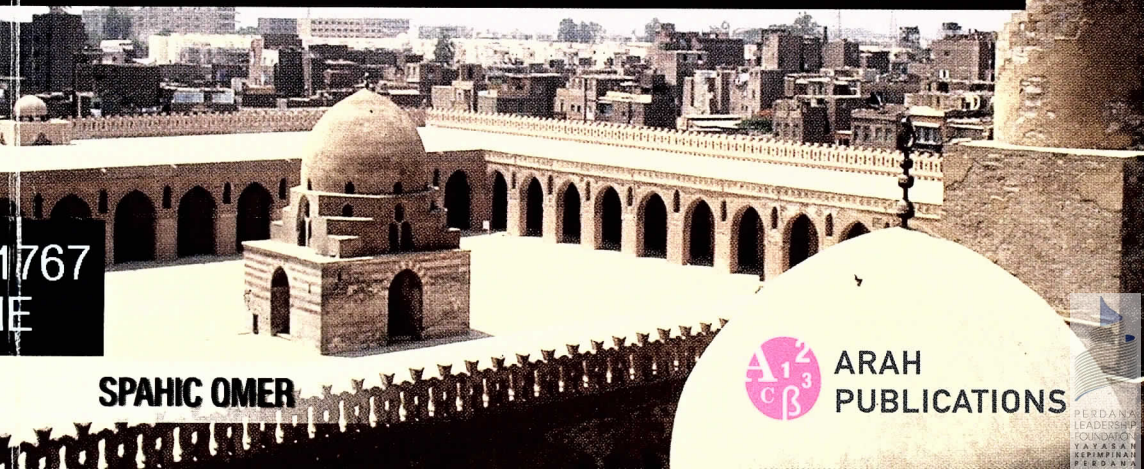




The History and Character of the
**ISLAMIC BUILT
ENVIRONMENT**



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SPAHC OMER



**ARAH
PUBLICATIONS**





DR. MAHATHIR

The History and Character of the ISLAMIC BUILT ENVIRONMENT



*With Compliments
from*
Malaysian Institute of Planners

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*To my wife, children, parents, and
parents-in-law*





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INTRODUCTION

The first buildings produced by the Muslims were extremely simple in their forms. Neither ornaments nor decorative patterns were applied to any of their sections. This trend knew no exception worthy of consideration. However, as the first *Hijrah* century was approaching its end, things drastically changed. It was not long before a number of awesome masterpieces in architecture, city planning and even landscaping, started dotting the Muslim lands. Also, decorating buildings - including places of worship - in many ways was increasingly making its way to becoming a permanent and for many the most appreciable feature of the Islamic fine arts. A set of factors, such as the rapid development of Islamic eclectic culture and civilization, as well as the ever-increasing need for intensifying and diversifying the methods and media for propagating Islam in the lands opened to Islam and its government - to name a few - contributed directly or indirectly to the birth of this phenomenon.

In Islam, the built environment with all its aspects and dimensions is but a means, an instrument, a carrier of the spiritual, not a goal itself. It fulfills an honorable mission. The Muslim planners, architects, designers and structural engineers - worthy of their professions - are, first and foremost, concerned about how the end result of their efforts will fare when juxtaposed with the existing universal setting - a result of heavenly artistry - in terms of both function and, to a lesser extent, outward appearance: will it go well with it; will it reinforce it; will it appear as if something of a misfit, oddity, or even offensiveness?

The whole of nature - Allah's physical realm - incessantly voluntarily sings in unison Allah's praises and celebrates His glory, i.e. worships Him. Nature, furthermore, is a perceptible sign of the Creator's will and presence, which is as evident in the most trivial as in the most splendid. Hence, every component in the spheres of the Islamic built environment is meant to become, as much as possible, a "sign" itself - a manmade "sign", so to speak - lest the same should become irreconcilable with both nature and the spiritual and psychological disposition of the users. The function and form of the built environment are always to adhere to the existing spiritual patterns underscoring the existence of the natural environment.

The Islamic built environment is the one whose form, design and function are inspired by Islam, are permeated with the Islamic spirit, and stand for the embodiment of the Islamic principles and values. The Islamic built environment came about to facilitate, foster and stimulate the ceaseless *'ibadah* (worship) practices of its users. It was as responsive to material requirements as any other built environment expression, yet it never treated them apart from exigencies of a higher order. By means of skill, creativity and imagination, and by its distinctive combination of aesthetic and utilitarian ends, the Islamic built environment never appeared to be inclined to dissociating man's corporeal, psychic and spiritual needs. Function lies at the core of the Islamic built environment. Size, together with the overall physical appearance, is inferior and matters only when it comes into complete conformity with the criteria underpinning the essence of the Islamic built environment, when it – for instance – stimulates and bolsters function and utility.

This unassuming book discusses several vital, yet often misunderstood, themes pertaining to the history and character of the Islamic built environment. The themes discussed are:

1. An Introduction to the Character of Early Islamic Architecture (from 11 H / 632 CE to 97 H / 715 CE);
2. A Reading of the Philosophy of Rich Decoration in Islamic Architecture;
3. City Planning in Ibn Khaldun's Thought;
4. Some Housing Planning Policies of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh¹): the Case of the Housing Area Surrounding the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah;
5. The Significance of the Rock (*Sakhrah*) Inside the al-Aqsa Mosque;
6. Socio-Political Conditions Surrounding the Creation of the Dome of the Rock;
7. The Holy Qur'an on the Built Environment;

It is my sincere hope that the book will be able to help its readers – to a certain extent - in strengthening their understanding of the topics discussed therein. The ideas and views expressed in the book are mine and I am fully responsible for them. I welcome any constructive and intellectual suggestion concerning the book contents, especially such as pertaining to my methodology, arguments, inferences, and the nature of the collected data and my understanding and interpretation of them.

Dr. Spahic Omer

1 "pbuh" stands for "peace be upon him".

Chapter 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHARACTER OF EARLY ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE (FROM 11 H / 632 CE TO 97 H / 715 CE)

Introduction: The meaning of Islamic Architecture

Pure Islamic architecture is the one whose form, design and function are inspired by Islam, are permeated with the Islamic spirit, and stand for the embodiment of the Islamic principles and values. Islamic architecture came about to facilitate, foster and stimulate the ceaseless *'ibadah* (worship) practices of its users.¹ It was as responsive to material requirements as any other architectural expression, yet it never treated them apart from exigencies of a higher order. By means of skill, creativity and imagination, and by its distinctive combination of aesthetic and utilitarian ends, Islamic architecture never appeared to be inclined to dissociating man's corporeal, psychic and spiritual needs. If truth be told, to the Muslims their architecture evolved into permanent and quite effective a medium for expressing a higher order of value and meaning. While helping its users in discharging their terrestrial duties and honorably living up to their reputation as the vicegerents on earth, Islamic architecture always remained just a medium; it never metamorphosed into a sought goal. At the

1 Omer Spahic, *Studies in the Islamic Built Environment*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2002), p. 33

core of Islamic architecture is thus function; size, together with the overall physical appearance, is inferior and matters only when it comes into complete conformity with the aforesaid criterion. Islamic architecture never appeared to be inclined to dissociating man's corporeal, psychic and spiritual needs. If truth be told, to the Muslims their architecture evolved into permanent and quite effective a medium for expressing a higher order of value and meaning. While helping its users in discharging their terrestrial duties and honorably living up to their reputation as the vicegerents on earth, Islamic architecture always remained just a medium; it never metamorphosed into a sought goal. At the core of Islamic architecture is thus function; size, together with the overall physical appearance, is inferior and matters only when it comes into complete conformity with the aforesaid criterion.

The distinctive identity of Islamic architecture, easily recognizable amid the architectural schools and movements of the world, was developing gradually. It was natural for Islam – as is for any other religion or ideology – that a certain amount of time was required in order for the purest forms of its art to manifest themselves.² As far as building is concerned, what Islam was primarily interested in during the early stages of its existence was correcting people's perception of life, of space and time, of the world, of reality, of man: his role and position on earth, and the like – for if these are perverted, man's approach to building would be proportionally perverted and corrupted as well, and *vice versa*.

By virtue of being the last revelation to mankind, Islam, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), was not solely concerned about inventing and initiating new systems of living. It focused as much on the present and future, charting a just and fair course of man's demeanor, as on the past where most of the *tawhidic* schemes revealed to other prophets had been corrupted and tampered with, setting the things right in the process and occasionally naming the culprits. Sets of Islamic principles and values, as well as

2 Nasr Seyyed Hossein, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 14.

the Islamic philosophy of man, life, reality, time and history, were that real and the most valuable new thing which Islam and the Muslims instantly offered to the world in the fields of culture and civilization. This applies to the fields of art and architecture too, as no art or architectural movement or school can be devoid of a philosophy, or a value system, which precedes and inspires it.

Having said this, if one wanted to understand Islamic architecture, one, first and foremost, must possess an intimate knowledge of Islam whose major precepts and values Islamic architecture exemplifies. Next, one ought to disengage oneself for a moment and as much as one can from whatever one has formerly perused, or has been told about Islamic architecture, exerting an effort to experience it in its totality as if he/she is one of its users. One is to try hard really via hands-on experiences if one wanted to feel the spiritual and sensory aura Islamic architecture exudes both within and immediately without its realm. Not to one or a few of its aspects, and not to a single and static moment of time, should one's comprehension and appreciation of Islamic architecture be restricted. Rather, one's thoughts and interest must encompass all its aspects and dimensions, honoring in the process its remarkable spiritedness and dynamism which the clout of the time and space factors failed to thwart or get the better of. Finally, whatever one's approach in studying Islamic architecture might be, one should never try to extricate it from the contexts that governed its commencement, rise, dominance and survival. Islamic architecture ought to be viewed as a revolutionary world phenomenon as universal, omnipresent, perpetual and revealing as the standards and values that gave rise to it.

We must bear in mind that the undying *tawhidic* spirit of Islam was the sole force that furnished the Islamic architecture with both its essence and identity, relegating lots of the indigenous geographical, climatic, social and other inherited factors and features rather to nonessential. As we must remember, furthermore, that Islamic architecture, which originated with the advent and assertion of Islam on the world scene, never existed prior to the emergence of Islam, even though the communities that later became instru-

mental in molding and perpetuating its conspicuous identity had lived where they came into contact with Islam and the Muslims for centuries before embracing Islam and had possessed cultures and civilizations of their own. To be sure, studying Islamic architecture, by no means, can be separated from the total framework of Islam: its genesis, history, ethos, worldview, doctrines, laws and practices. Any approach by anybody and at any point of time with recourse to disconnecting Islamic architecture from that which held sway over its conception and formation would undoubtedly result in failure, and, worse yet, may lead to distorting the real image of the subject matter and with it the image of Islam.

Building was a significant phenomenon in Islamic civilization. From the first day of the existence of the Islamic community in Madinah, building pursuits played a vital role in meeting the increasing economic, religious and socio-political requirements of the ambitious and fast expanding Islamic state. The Prophet (pbuh) himself was an active builder. During his time, *Yathrib* (the old name of Madinah), consisting of several loosely interrelated settlements, was transformed into the City (the literal meaning of Madinah). Madinah was then considered as a rising wonder which the surrounding tribes and communities were increasingly spawning their interest to be on familiar terms with.

Many mosques have been erected inside as well as outside Madinah. Inside Madinah alone about nine mosques cropped up, besides the Prophet's principal mosque. In those mosques the people prayed based on Bilal's *adhan* (call to prayers), which sounded from the central mosque.³ In the latter, however, the *Jum'ah* prayer was only performed. Since its inception, the Prophet's mosque was a community center with activities of different types being conducted under its roof. In addition to serving as a place for congregational prayers, as well as for other collective worship (*'ibadah*) practices, the mosque likewise furnished the Muslims with other crucial social amenities: it was the seat of the first Islamic government, a learning

3 See the names of those mosques in: Al-Kattani, *Al-Taratib al-Idariyyah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1980), vol. 1 p. 77.

center, a hospital, a rehabilitation center, a welfare center, and the place for some legitimate recreational activities. There were several spatial elements in the mosque aimed to meet the requirements of its diverse functions.

Since Madinah was the home of migration (*hijrah*) – not only from Makkah but from anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula – the subject of housing was given much consideration too. Thus, the Prophet (pbuh) taught the people many lessons – in theory as well as in practice on such pertinent subjects as the significance, form and function of the house institution, privacy protection, neighbors and neighborhood, the family, etc. Such issues as market, city defense and open spaces were not neglected either, and their role in shaping the Muslim outlook on the built environment, in general, and architecture, in particular, ought to be never underestimated.

Nevertheless, the first buildings in Islam, private or public, were extremely simple in its form. Their simplicity, however, did not impinge on their projected utility. The first generation of the Muslims, guided by the Prophet (pbuh) and his personal example, showed no signs of altering the existing trend. The Prophet's mosque – for example – is said to have consisted of an enclosure with walls made of mud bricks and an arcade on the *qiblah* side made of palm-trunks used as columns to support a roof of palm-leaves and mud. There was no any kind of ornamentation or decoration whatsoever within or without it. The following is a standard description of the Prophet's mosque as given by most scholars: "In the construction method a stone foundation was laid to a depth of three cubits⁴ (about 1.50 meters). On top of that adobe, walls 75 cm. wide were built. The mosque was shaded by erecting palm trunks and wooden cross beams covered with palm leaves and stalks. On the *qiblah* direction, there were three porticoes, each portico had six pillars. On the rear part of the mosque, there was a shade, where the homeless *Muhajireen* took refuge. The height of the roof of the mosque was equal to the height of a man, i.e. about 3.5 cubits (about 1.75 meters)."⁵

4 One cubit is about 50 cm.

5 Abbas Hamid, *Story of the Great Expansion*, (Jeddah: Saudi Bin Ladin Group, 1996), p. 226.

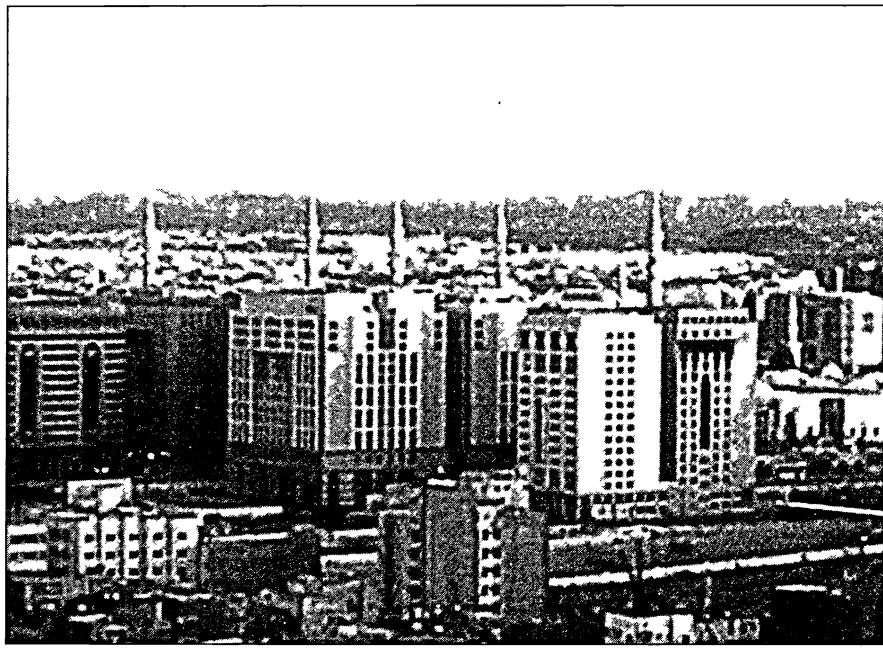


FIGURE 1 View of the city of Madinah from the Sal' hill

Islamic architecture before the Umayyads: the case of the Prophet's mosque in Madinah as an epitome of the situation

Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (11-13 H / 632-634 CE)

Following the departure of the Prophet (pbuh) things in the state were set to change little. The same people with the same attitudes and vision remained in charge of charting the course of affairs. The old ubiquitous attitude towards the subject of building remained intact and seemed unlikely to change in a foreseeable future. True, a substantial change in the language of Islamic architecture had a long way to go before it started asserting itself and became commonly accepted, however, we have to admit that it was responding favorably to the rapid growth and expansion which the juvenile Islamic community was constantly putting up with.

The first seeds of the impending and strong causal relationship between the evolution of the rich language of Islamic architecture and the growth and competency of eclectic Islamic civilization

- the latter being the cause and the former the effect – have been sown during the time of the Prophet (pbuh) himself when the first changes to the framework of the Prophet’s mosque were carried out by none other than the Prophet (pbuh) himself. Even the mosque’s first actual expansion was executed also by the Prophet (pbuh) in the 7th year after the *Hijrah* (migration) following the conquest of Khaybar. In retrospect, when first built the Prophet’s mosque was just an unroofed enclosure devoid of any worthwhile facilities. All the facilities mentioned earlier have been introduced gradually as the practical requirements were necessitating them.

During the reign of the first caliph Abu Bakr no noteworthy changes or additions in the form of the Prophet’s mosque came to pass. The only thing that historians report is that the mosque columns supporting the roof having decayed were substituted. So was the case with the roof, which was made of date-palm leaves and which rested on the said columns. The mosque retained its original configuration right through. The same building materials which the Prophet (pbuh) had earlier employed for both the columns and roof, i.e. date-palm trunks and date-palm leaves respectively, have been used by Abu Bakr.⁶

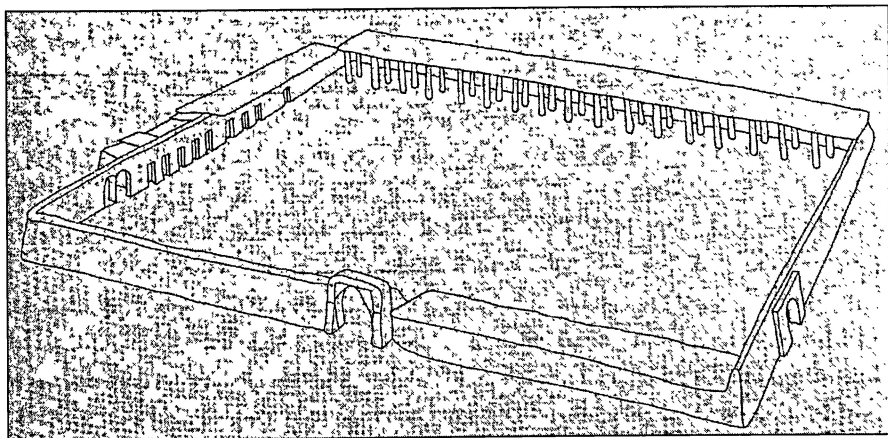


FIGURE 2 The simple form of the Prophet Muhammad’s mosque; from Oleg Grabar, “Islam, Art and Architecture”, edited by Markus Hattstein & Peter Delius, p. 41

6 Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 382.

Abu Bakr's caliphate in addition to being a pretty short affair – about two years only – was also characterized with intensive military and diplomatic campaigns aimed at further organizing, stabilizing and securing the new state, as well as at opening new territories to Islam. So, even if the caliph had intended to achieve something else more remarkable in terms of developing the language of Islamic architecture, the enterprise wouldn't have proven too viable a proposition under the circumstances.

'Umar b. al-Khattab (13-24 H / 634-644 CE)

Due to the fact that the building materials used in the Prophet's mosque were quite ephemeral, they, again, during the reign of the second caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab soon became worn away. Furthermore, the number of worshippers increased to such a point that the mosque could hardly accommodate them. In spite of the reluctant and austere character of the caliph 'Umar, renovating the existing structure, plus enlarging it proportionally to the pressing needs, appeared to be the only feasible solution. Thus, doing that which seemed necessary was the caliph's instantaneous course of action and to which subsequently everyone consented.

While making his mind up concerning the matter of reconstructing and enlarging the mosque, 'Umar was encouraged by the fact that the rewards attained by performing prayers in the Prophet's mosque were not to be diminished by whatever legitimate expansion the mosque might have to undergo – as made out by some Prophet's utterances. In other words, all the benefits and boons that could be procured by utilizing the Prophet's mosque applied to both the mosque's original site and its further extensions. As did the Prophet's statement – which he had made perhaps shortly before passing away – that the mosque should be enlarged⁷ help 'Umar and the people come to their historic decision. 'Umar is reported to have said that if he had not heard the Prophet (pbuh) saying this, he, in all probability, wouldn't have acted as he did.

⁷ Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, Musnad al-'Asharah al-Mubashsharin bi al-Jannah, Hadith No. 312.

So, the houses that stood in the way of the projected mosque enlargement the caliph 'Umar purchased in a manner that satisfied their owners. However, one such house belonged to al-'Abbas, the Prophet's uncle, who was reluctant to sell it. Eventually, though, under the pressure from both the caliph and people, he gave in. But al-'Abbas declined to sell it; rather, he gave it as charity to the Muslims instead. While disputing with 'Umar about the matter, al-'Abbas remarked that the house had been marked to him by the Prophet (pbuh), who had even built some sections thereof with him. Al-'Abbas thus implied the underlying reason for his reluctance to part with the house. "The house water-spout which pours in the mosque had been installed by the Prophet's hand", revealed al-'Abbas.⁸

On this occasion too, neither new building technology nor new building materials were introduced, let alone a change or a breakthrough in structural plan and design. The new walls were built with mud bricks, the roof with date-palm leaves, and the columns were date-palm trunks. When completed, the length of the mosque was about 140 cubits and its width about 120 cubits. The roof was about 11 cubits high,⁹ a notable departure from the height of the roof in the Prophet's time, which is said to have been about seven cubits lower. Certainly, in view of the number of worshippers, as well as of the arresting role that the mosque was playing, a number of visual, auditory and aeration factors necessitated elevating the roofed area.

Only part of the mosque was roofed, that is, about four porticos on the qiblah direction, one more than during the Prophet's time. If each portico had six pillars before, now after having been extended 20 cubits (about 10 meters) one portico must have had at least two pillars or more extra. The rooftop was coated with mud so as to prevent rain from dripping onto the ground. The foundations were made of stone to a depth of 1.75 meters. The ground of the mosque was covered with gravel brought from the valley of *al-'Aqiq*. The

8 Al-Samhudi, *Wafa' al-Wafa'*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1997), vol. 2 p. 489.

9 Ibid., vol. 2 p. 493.

caliph 'Umar also introduced the use of big chandeliers and the use of incense in the mosque every Friday. Six gates were erected on the walls of the mosque, i.e. three gates were added.¹⁰

'Umar made his view of and approach to the subject of rebuilding and expanding the Prophet's mosque very clear to everybody: he did not do it except to respond to the needs of the community which was expanding at an incredible pace. And since he had no choice but to embark on such a project, the Prophet's philosophy of building had to be meticulously upheld. 'Umar said: "I shelter the people from rain (by repairing and enlarging the mosque), and by no means shall the mosque be reddened or yellowed (i.e. decorated) so that the people may be coaxed into losing concentration while offering their prayers."¹¹

We have already stated that at the time of the Prophet (pbuh) the fabric of his mosque was extremely rudimentary containing a modest amount of components meeting sheer utilitarian ends rather than those relating to aesthetics or excessive comfort and convenience. However, even then, such was the dynamic evolution of the first Islamic society that occasionally the function and form of the mosque had to be subjected to some though minor yet significant in many ways and unmistakable alterations and enhancements. For instance, at first the ground of the mosque was bare, but before long it was strewn with pebbles.¹² Small mats made of palm branches and big enough to accommodate the face and hands to be put on during the prostration were later also introduced.¹³ Some slightly bigger ones were soon to follow suit too. Thereafter, the situation did not change until the reign of the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab when some carpets were brought into play at least for *Jum'ah* Prayers, i.e. on Fridays. The significant development notwithstanding, what kept preoccupying the people of the day was the sheer utility of the novel element. Not a soul gave a thought to adding an ornamental or aesthetic quality not only to the mosque floor but also to any

10 Abbas Hamid, *Story of the Great Expansion*, p. 227.

11 Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Salah, (see the introduction to the Book, i.e. Kitab).

12 Al-Samhudi, *Wafa' al-Wafa'*, vol. 2, p. 655.

13 Al-Kattani, *Al-Taratib al-Idariyyah*, vol. 1 p. 81

other section of the mosque. This is fairly evident in the following account: “Abu Suhayl b. Malik related that his father, Malik, had said: “I used to see a carpet belonging to ‘Aqil b. Abi Talib spread out on the day of *Jum’ah* (Friday) up to the west wall of the mosque. When the shadow of the wall covered the whole carpet, ‘Umar b. al-Khattab would come out and pray the *Jum’ah* prayer.”¹⁴

The message that the caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khattab wished to convey to the people by means of his austere outlook on the subject of building was that one must not be obsessed with the same to such an extent that some major vices could be thus committed, even moderately. Everyone ought to observe his limitations, personal and societal needs, and of course the utility of whatever they erect. Via their position, function and maintenance, the erected buildings are to be an asset to the community rather than its liability.

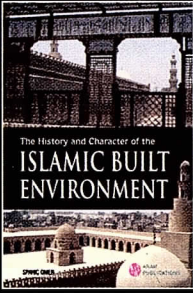
‘Umar b. al-Khattab and building in newly conquered territories

During ‘Umar’s reign, the Muslims conquered Syria (14/635), Iraq (16/637), Palestine (17/638) and Egypt (20/640). In Iraq, the conquering army was unable to succumb to the attractions of an established urban environment. At first, in al-Mada’in (Ctesiphon), the Sassanian capital, the Muslims were attacked by mosquitoes, then in al-Anbar there were so many flies that yet again a new site had to be considered. The caliph ‘Umar described the situation by saying that “the Arabs are like camels, what is good for camels is good for them too.”¹⁵ Finally, Kufah and Basrah were established as new cities originally serving as garrison bases. They were built on the compatible sites that had been identified after a painstaking surveying of the potential sites. The first element to be laid out and built was the mosque, followed by the governor’s residence. The two stood inside a square or a vast open area beyond which – on all sides – the people embarked on building their residences. In the case of Kufah, a ditch around the square was dug so that nobody could intrude on it with building.¹⁶

14 Malik b. Anas, *Al-Muwatta’*, Book I, The Times of Prayer, Hadith No. 13.

15 Al-Sayyad Nezar, *Cities and Caliphs*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 55.

16 Akbar Jamel, *Crisis in the Built Environment*, (Singapore: Concept Media, 1988), p. 85, 86.



This book discusses several vital, yet often misunderstood, themes pertaining to the history and character of the Islamic built environment. The themes discussed are:

- An Introduction to the character of early Islamic architecture (from 11H/632CE to 97H/715CE);
- A reading of the philosophy of rich decoration in Islamic architecture
- City planning in Ibn Khaldun's thought
- Housing planning policies of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)
- The significance of the Rock (*Sakhrah*) inside the al-Aqsa Mosque
- Socio-political conditions surrounding the creation of the Dome of the Rock
- The Holy Qur'an on the built environment



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