

InCEBS 2009 Shah Alam

1st National Conference on Environment-Behaviour Studies, Faculty of Architecture,
Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia,
14-15 November 2009

Islamic Architecture Evolution: Perception and Behaviour

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Abstract

The building of a mosque in this day and age is a great achievement of the Muslim community, particularly if the community is living in a non Muslim country. Technology has been the drive to improve construction method of early Muslim community that influence of values and perception towards Islam in the whole world until today. While appreciating the quantitative increase and aesthetic embellishments of many new urban mosques, several Muslim scholars, intellectuals and activists have expressed their concern and reservation regarding the function of these mosques in light of pristine world-view of Islam.

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Keywords: Mosque; perception; behaviour; sacred space; community centre

1. Introduction

The title chosen for this research is to introduce the idea of changing uses and meaning of the mosque in contemporary Muslim societies. Although, when in the mosque, the believer might expect to be in direct contact with that which he regards as sacred, in practice increasingly finds himself confronted with manifestations of altered uses of the house of worship – changes of a non religious nature which he may find difficult to understand and to relate to. As Spahic Omer said,

“To be sure, studying the Islamic Built Environment by no means cannot be separated from the total framework of Islamic: its genesis, history, ethos, worldview, doctrines, law, and practices. Any

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approach by anybody and at any point of time with recourse to disconnecting the Islamic Built Environment from that which held sway over its conception and formation would undoubtedly result in failure and , may distort the real picture of subject matter and with it the picture of Islam” (Spahic Omer, 2002)

My contentions is that the entire history of the mosque has be reconsidered and reinterpreted, with particular reference to forms and design, as well as perception and behavior related to semiological systems (i.e. signs and symbols used by members of any social group to convey shared values) which determine the study of perception of abstract concepts such as ‘sacred’ or ‘sanctity’ space in mosque in Malay modern society.

2. Literature review

Why I choose the mosque? For historians of architecture and culture alike, the answer is gratifyingly simple as Robert Hillenbrand said “This is the Islamic building par excellence, and as such the key to Islamic architecture” (Robert Hillenbrand, 1994). Moreover, the medieval Muslim world, like medieval Europe, was a theoretic society and the mosque was the natural expression of that society. The mosque as a place of worship is a building enclosing a space that is regarded by believers as sacred and distinct from its secular surroundings, and that by virtue of its sanctified status it can enhance the meaning of the words and actions of the believer while he is present there. If any change is made to the traditional concept of the mosque and its sacred character, the main function of the building is distorted (M. Arkoun, 2002). It is for this reason that the design, the forms and the special features of the building, including the dome, the minaret, the mihrab and the mimbar, are usually reproduced in accordance with the familiar architectural imagery which has been instilled into the minds of individuals as the result of constant repetition down the centuries.

In the case of the mosque, aside from the traditional and well established attitudes of believers towards what they regard as sacred, there is the modern approach to the meaning of the ‘sacred’ based on reason, revealing aspects and changes which remain beyond the understanding of those whose faith is founded only on unquestioning belief (Nasr, 1981). The choice, then in making a study of the place of the mosque in contemporary Muslim society is between merely accepting the tradition bound viewpoint of believers – one which simply repeats what they regards as being ‘sacred’ or attempting to analyze perceptions and beliefs by placing them either in their historical, sociological, anthropological or psychological perspectives (M. Arkoun, 2002).

2.1. A historical appraisal

In any attempt to define and understand the role of the mosque it is necessary to take note of the situation that prevailed in Medina in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad ¹. As was true of every new religion, the question of the ‘sacred’ and its cognitive and ritual status was relevant issue in the earliest years of Islam; the act of building a mosque for the emerging Muslim group in Medina was seen as both a political and a religious gesture. The Quran makes an explicit reference to a rival group which built its own place of worship to compete with the ‘true’ mosque founded by the Prophet and including the shifting of the direction of the qibla from Jerusalem to Mecca ².

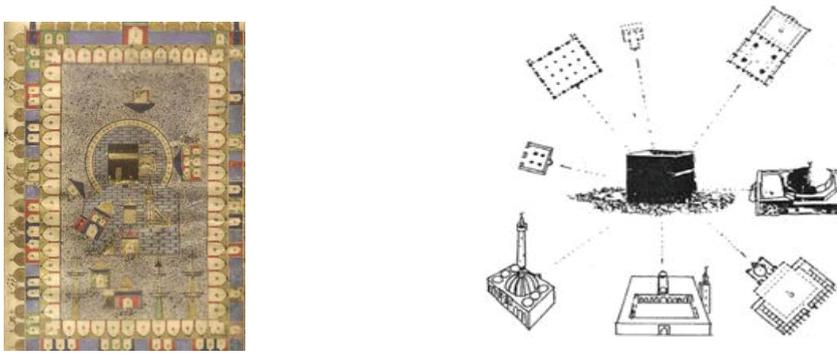


Fig. 1. Kaabah at Mecca as a 'qibla' (direction) for all Muslim in the 'Solat'. Source (a): *Islamic Architecture*, (1973) and Source (b) *Architecture of the Islamic Cultural Sphere*, (1986)

¹Perhaps the best example of the historical approach to the mosque is the article 'Masjid' in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, which provides a chronology coverage of period from the time of Prophet in Medina until the Ottoman era, with particular emphasis on functions of mosque during classical age.

²The Quran (9:108-9) refers to 'those who have built themselves a mosque for opposition, and unbelief and division among believers, and for refuge for him who in the past fought against God and the Prophet.

The early mosque form – a hypostyle hall with adjacent courtyard – acquired a 'sacred' quality not because it was build or designed in a certain style, but because in the course of time it became sanctified by virtue of the functions it fulfilled for believers. Even Creswell comments, "Such was the house of the leader of the community at Medina. Nor did Muhammad wish to alter these conditions; he was entirely without architecture ambitions, and Ibn Sa'd records the following saying of his: The most unprofitable thing that eaten up the wealth of Believer is building" (Creswell,1968). The concept of sacred was a product of common perceptions among Muslims and of the solidarity shared by members of the groups.

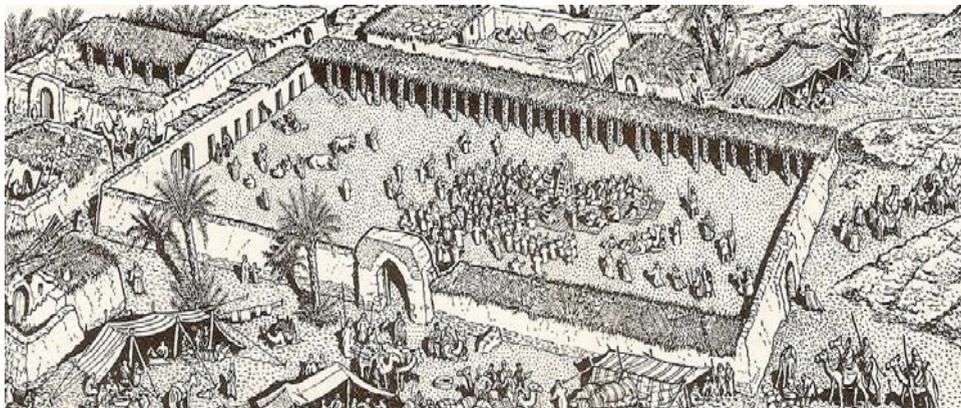


Fig. 2. Illustration of Prophet Muhammad's House, Medina Saudi Arabia A.D 622; Source: *The Buildings of Early Islam*, (1976)

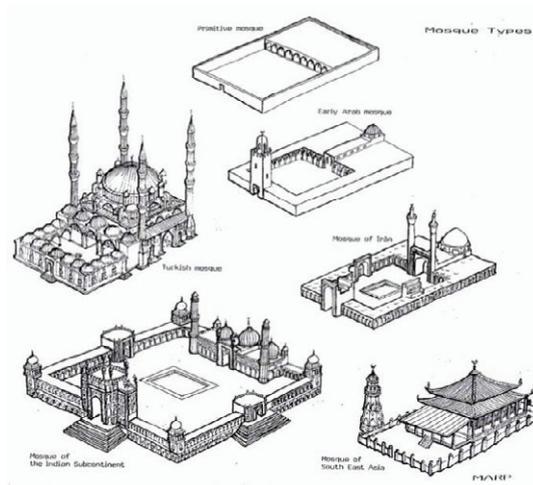


Fig. 3. The Mosque Types; Source: *Architecture of the Islamic Cultural Sphere*, (1986)

For Muslims the concept of the sacred is linked directly to the word of God (Al Quran), the revelation of His commands and teachings, as well as to the hadith of the Prophet and the interpretation of their meanings. Such a concept does not of course preclude aesthetic and architectural creativity in the design of the building, for such creativity is in the domain of the architect and thus remains quite separate from the idea of the metamorphosis of the sacred.

In historical terms mosque architecture offers a great variety of styles, resulting from the influence of such factors as cultural and geographical environment, the aim of the patron and the skills of the architect and craftsmen engaged in the building process. Each mosque thus provides a reflection perception of the particular cognitive system which gave rise to the individual perceptions and attitudes of those involved in its construction, resulting in a diversity of readings and meanings.

2.2. An anthropological approach

In the history of human psychology essentially to discuss only two stages of development to be considered, that of mythical knowledge with its integrated signs and meanings, and that of demythologized knowledge (i.e knowledge based on rational thought). The 'mythical knowledge' is concerned with the construction of 'truth' founded on imagination rather than on critical reason and logical categorization (Gottdiener, 1986). Myth is a kind of narrative (qasas, a term often occurring in the Quran) engendered by marvelous, the fantastic and the supernatural, and the 'truth' which it expresses appeals directly to the emotions and the imagination.

'Sacred places are not ordinary places, so they are places of extraordinary events, such as communication with the divine; but not being ordinary, sacred may also threaten or destroy ordinary, physical life'. (Salamone, 2004)

Thus, when the Quran states that Abraham – a prophetic figure from the distant past – visited the Kaabah in Mecca, nobody bothers to ask why, when or how. The original purpose of such an account was

to create in minds of the early followers of Muhammad the idea of a symbolic religious figure whose direct connection with Kaabah would reinforce its sacred quality for Muslims, replacing its earlier pagan associations with a new ‘true’ religious meaning. A parallel instance of such a metamorphosis of the sacred in early times can be seen in the adoption by Muslims of pre-Islamic temples, which were converted to serve as the House of Allah.

“A related paradox of a sacred place is the sense in which its holiness is eternal, intrinsic and objective, while it is also somehow constructed in time, chosen from out of other places, and proclaimed such by people.”

“...they perform the rituals that periodically purify or rededicate these places, but these structures are there only to remind humans of the holiness present there and to direct their thoughts and actions toward them in ways that are recognized and approved by the communities”. (Salamone,2004)

The process of demythologization of knowledge began in Europe as early as sixteenth century, but it was not until the great period of industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth century that there was a simultaneous process which produced a cognitive system dominated by philosophers rather than theologians, by mathematics and physical sciences instead of religious belief and applications of technology replacing familiar craft skills. The nineteenth century also saw the beginnings of a breakdown in the traditional values of Muslim societies, a process that was encouraged by external factors (European capitalism and colonization) and not compensated for by the substitution of alternative systems generated from within those societies; the effect was therefore destructive, for while in Europe secular ideas were gaining the ascendant and supplanting the traditional concept of sacred, in Islamic world its theological basis was simply undermined and not subsequently replaced with any constructive and meaningful alternative (Malik Bennabi,1968).

The aesthetic of a mosque designed and build within this sphere cannot be attributed solely to patronage and the talent of the architect; other factors to be considered in the evaluation of a building include the questions as to whether the inspirational roles of religious faith and the sacred are strengthened or diminished by the building itself. In the context of past societies based on mythical knowledge it would have been unthinkable to build mosques at some distances from centers of population, for the place of worship has traditionally always been closely integrated with the daily life of each Muslim community (Tajuddin, 1998).

We may now move on to consider the altered role of mosque s throughout the Muslim world since each country gained its independence from colonial rule. From the eighteenth century onwards, traditional attitudes to mythical knowledge had started to breakdown under the influence of the West, though Muslim society in general remained unaffected by this process; initially, only small urban elites were educated in the modern way of thinking and of perceiving and interpreting human existence and social values (Titi, 1988). This has meant that the signs and symbols of imported cultures and the views expressed by the social elite and the *ulama* often ceased to be understood by ordinary people, so leading to deterioration of social relationship.

2.3. A semiological analysis

The forms, structural elements and the various spaces and facilities are in this context less essential than the historical validation derived from the initial dedication of the first mosque to the one true ‘God’, its sanctification by the presence of the Prophet and, in mosques built since his time, of the *ulama*, whose members have always been respected for their deep religious knowledge and spirituality. Similarly, those saintly figures known as ‘friends of God’ (*awliya*) are often buried near a mosque, thus extending the concept of a sacred beyond the building itself.

The semiological context which is preserved by the mosque, which has always been a place for cultural exchanges in traditional Muslim societies, and not merely a religious building where the faithful congregate for acts of worships; in other words, as an institution the mosque has a clear social and spiritual basis. Because the mosque is a sacred space it is regarded as belonging to all members of a Muslim society.

3. Methodology

The research design and methodology approach selected to develop preliminary study of the perception of users towards sacredness or sanctity space in mosque. Quantitative research based on questionnaires are been used to gather the data from users to achieve research objective. The questions are based on perception of users on understanding solat and mosque. Modern mosque are been chosen for the site as the model of the study to determine the space. A diagram of mosque plan and picture indicated space a given with label color coding to choose the space.

4. Results and discussions

There are two categories of question based on sacredness or sanctity space in mosque, first is general questions related with mosque and second is the space related to the site. The result of the user perception towards mosque as below:

4.1. General perception

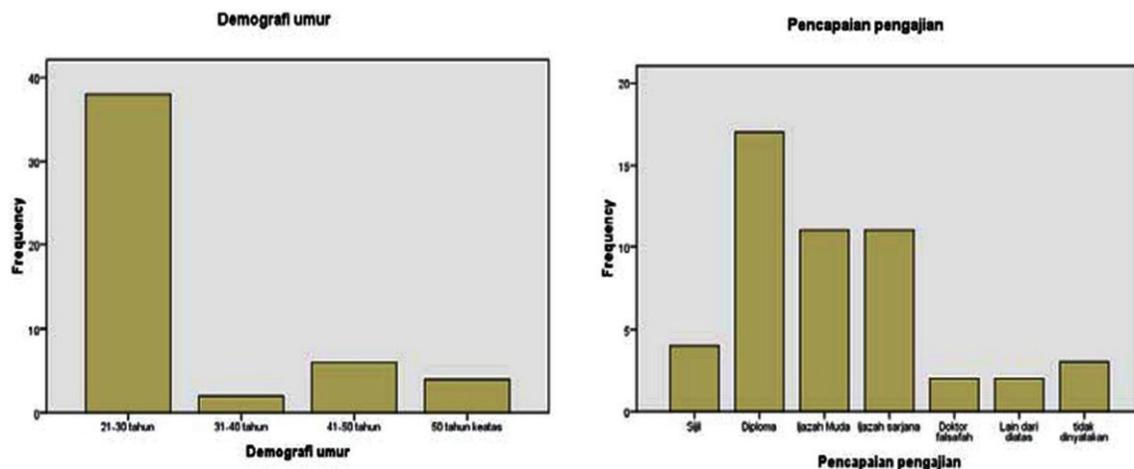


Fig.4. User age and Academic background; Source: M. Zafrullah, (2009)

The ages of the respondent that take part of this study are range from 21 to 50 years and above. 60% from its, is below 30 years old. Background race of the respondent are Malay with academic background diversify from certificate, diploma, degree, masters, doctorate and others. The higher are Diploma holders with 30% of the respondents.

Table 2. Mosque is ritual prayer and meditation centre for Muslim; Source: M. Zafrullah, (2009)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Totally agree	42	84,0	84,0	84,0
Strongly agree	3	6,0	6,0	90,0
Agree	3	6,0	6,0	96,0
Disagree	2	4,0	4,0	100,0
Total	50	100,0	100,0	

From the Table 2, 96% of the respondents agree with the propositions that mosque is ritual prayer and meditation centre for Muslim. Only 4% not agree with that statement.

Table 3. Mosque as a Centre for Community for Muslim; Source: M. Zafrullah, (2009)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Totally agree	37	74,0	74,0	74,0
Strongly agree	8	16,0	16,0	90,0
Agree	4	8,0	8,0	98,0
Disagree	1	2,0	2,0	100,0
Total	50	100,0	100,0	

The figures at Table 3 showing 98%of the respondents mostly agree with the propositions that mosque as a Centre for Community for Muslim. Only 2% disagree with that statement.

Table 4. Can other activity been operated in Mosque; Source: M. Zafrullah, (2009)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Totally agree	16	32,0	32,0	32,0
Strongly agree	15	30,0	30,0	62,0
Agree	15	30,0	30,0	92,0
Disagree	2	4,0	4,0	96,0
Totally disagree	2	4,0	4,0	100,0
Total	50	100,0	100,0	

The data at Table 4 showing 92%of the respondents agree with the propositions that mosque can operated other activity in Mosque. Only 4% not agree with that statement.

Table 5. Design of the mosque give a psychological impact to sacredness of the space; Source: M. Zafrullah, (2009)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Totally agree	20	40,0	40,0	40,0
	Strongly agree	14	28,0	28,0	68,0
	Agree	14	28,0	28,0	96,0
	Disagree	2	4,0	4,0	100,0
	Total	50	100,0	100,0	

Mostly the respondents agree with the element of design of the mosque give a psychological impact to sacredness of the space. Only 4% disagree with that statement.

Table 6. Size, light and material used give some impact towards sacredness space; Source: M. Zafrullah, (2009)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Totally agree	14	28,0	28,0	28,0
	Strongly agree	14	28,0	28,0	56,0
	Agree	13	26,0	26,0	82,0
	Disagree	5	10,0	10,0	92,0
	Totally disagree	3	6,0	6,0	98,0
	Not mention	1	2,0	2,0	100,0
	Total	50	100,0	100,0	

82% of the respondents agree with the element give some impact towards sacredness space. Only 16% not agree with that statement and one of them not mention anything.

Table 7. Mosque area must be fence to protect the sacredness of space; Source: M. Zafrullah, (2009)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Totally agree	8	16,0	16,0	16,0
	Strongly agree	7	14,0	14,0	30,0
	Agree	15	30,0	30,0	60,0
	Disagree	10	20,0	20,0	80,0
	Totally disagree	10	20,0	20,0	100,0
	Total	50	100,0	100,0	

According to the respondents 60% agree that the mosque area must be fence to protect the sacredness of space. Only 40% disagree with that statement.

4.2. Perception on sacredness or sanctity spaces

The site is Masjid Negara, Kuala Lumpur with capacity reach about 15,000 people and famous as modern structure era, been build in 1968 with new concept approach. The data is based on 50 peoples that have visit and used the mosque. Below are the table, diagram and plan of Masjid Negara. The area involve are:

- A – Mihrab
- B – Mimbar
- G- Balcony
- H , K – Toilet (not indicated here)
- C – Praying Hall
- D – Hall
- I – Office
- E – Sahn
- F – Minaret
- L – Tomb
- J – Compound of the Mosque

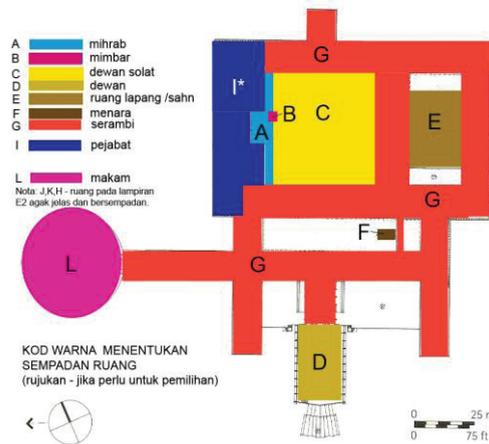


Fig. 5. Coloured zoning plan of Masjid Negara indicating areas; Source: M. Zafrullah, (2009)

Table 8.		Agree %	Not Agree %	Not mention %
Space	A	76	6	18
Space	B	68	14	18
Space	C	76	6	18
Space	D	10	72	18
Space	E	26	56	18
Space	F	18	64	18
Space	G	22	60	18
Space	H	4	78	18
Space	I	6	76	18
Space	J	10	72	18
Space	K	18	64	18
Space	L	20	62	18

According to this study, perception of respondent mostly agree with more than 65% that the space that have sacredness or sanctity with higher level are indicated as Praying hall (Zoning space A,C,B).

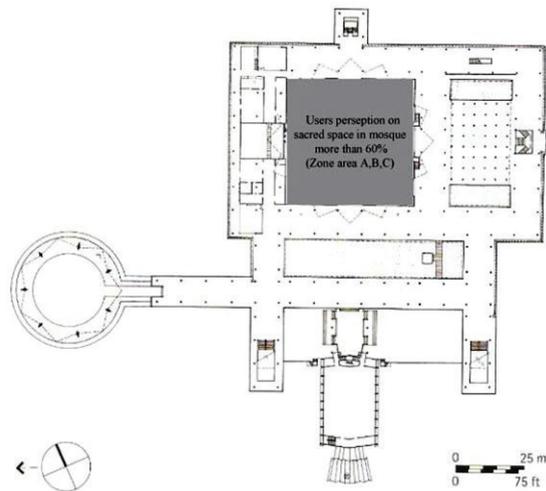


Fig. 6. User perception of space towards Sacredness / Sanctity in the Masjid Negara; Source: M.Zafrullah, (2009)

5. Conclusions

The problem of the mosque in Islam must be seen in the larger context of social engineering rather than mere exercises in aesthetics or romantic revivalism (Tajuddin, 2002). The mosque has the great potential of changing the Muslim society if it is considered closer as an educational institution than a House of Rituals that prohibits so many activities under the false guise of 'sanctity' (M. Zafrullah, 2008). We believe that over sanctification of mosque brought about by scholars of architecture and religions have deteriorated the eternal idea of the mosque as a center for community development in Islam. Rather than deal with the question of which ornament to use and how big a dome should crown the prayer space. Muslims ought to pay particular attention to the programs and functions of the mosque that would benefit the people more than it would the egoistic few.

A truly contemporary approach must take into account the needs and aspirations of the people for whom the mosque is built. The technology is the means by which it is built, and the choice of technology, to be appropriate, must depend on the conditions of a particular place. It is through an honest response to such considerations rather than through a literal expression of past style that the mosque of the future will retain their differences and remain close to the spirit of Islam.

Acknowledgement

Alhamdulillah. To my father and mom has been pass away the last ramadhan as complete a year went this paper has been written - 'Al fatihah'. May Allah bless you and may included in group of 'taqwa' people. To my supervisor Professor Dr. Mohamad Tajudin Rasdi and faculty members, Thank you for your support and patience. To my wife and family, thank you so much for been good supporter and always with me in the journey in the making of this research.

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