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# **CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN THE ARAB WORLD**

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# Contemporary Islamic Architecture In The Arab World

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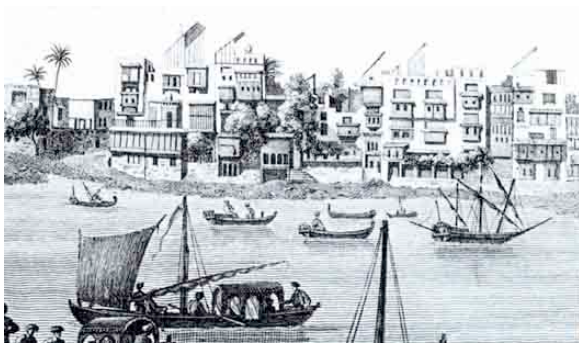
## **Introduction: Problem of Identity and the Role of Architecture**

Architecture is one of the most significant components of a community's culture, in many respects, *(i)* architecture reflects the dominant civilizational paradigm in a society including its culture, religious beliefs, and life styles, *(ii)* As the civilizational paradigm changes the social architectural style also changes, almost in the same direction, *(iii)* History of civilizations is recorded through then architectural heritage. Ibn Khaldon, a famous Arab Muslim sociologist has indicated, “ reading the architectural human behavior is best means to understand people's history” (Kura'yem, 1987). In fact, it has been widely recognized that by analyzing the architectural products of a certain civilization, one can comprehend the main cultural paradigms of such civilization. These architectural products are physical witness to quality of such civilization, and more importantly the foreign influences on its societies, which experience strong foreign intrusions, tend to reflect them in their architectural products.

The Arabs were no exception to these generalizations. The European imperial onslaught on the Arab world in the nineteenth century had far reaching ramifications for Arab identity and culture. The Arab-European contacts occurred under conditions of European military control of Arab counties. In same cases, as was the case of North Africa, especially Algeria, the European settled and built communities which were in essence mirror-images of them in their homeland. Further, Arab architects became highly influenced by the architectural thought in Europe. They began to shift away from the traditional Arab Islamic architectural designs, which were made to fit the local environment, towards borrowing heavily from an alien environment. Increasingly, Arab cities lost their traditional identity. Today, one can no longer find an Arab city with a specific architectural local identity. However, one can detect a recent movement in the Arab world to return to the architectural Islamic roots. This was eventually in response to the crisis generated by the inability of the Euro-style building to cope effectively with the local environment.

The objective of this paper is to:

(i) review the concept of Islamic architecture and its applications in different places and times. (ii) Outline the main encroachments on the concept of Islamic Architecture as a result of the European imperial onslaught, and; (iii) to introduce the concept and movement of Islamic architectural revivalism.



Nile Façade for multi-story houses in Cairo, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, shows a clear character that represents Islamic Identity.  
Source: Architecture of the Islamic World.



Beach Façade in Dubai, buildings belong to modern architecture with no reference to its Arabic or Islamic Identity.  
Source: Now & Then the Emirates.



Current residential zone in Cairo shows no character of the city urbanism  
Source: Aga-Khan Visual Archives.

## I

### The Origins of the Problem

When Islam emerged in the seventh century, it didn't bring a specific architectural theory. It introduced a set of values, which tended to orient architects of Muslim countries towards certain architectural design. Being a global religion, Islam could not present a specific architectural concept, as different environments call for different architectural thinking. In fact, Islam spread over a vast area extending from China to Spain. In this area, different environments existed was inconceivable to mandate a specific architectural design in this vast area. What Islam brought was a set of values and themes, which could be applied differently depending on the environment in which the values are applied. This explains the wide variety of styles that had come out under the umbrella of Islamic Architecture.

This feature continued to characterize Islamic architecture until the advent of the Ottomans to the Arab world in the early sixteenth century. The Ottomans built a highly centralized system of government, which was uniformly applied across most of the areas they controlled. This almost applied to their architectural designs. They attempted to impose a single architectural model created in Istanbul by Ottoman chief architect Sinan Agha. Sinan Agha developed an architectural design in Istanbul and copied it in other Arab cities (Bates, 1985).

As the Ottomans began to decline, Europe intruded into virtually all the Arab possessions of the Ottoman Empire. The Europeans built in their Arab colonies buildings modeled along the architectural designs in their homeland. In fact, one can easily detect that in virtually all-Arab metropolitan areas, where one finds buildings built by European architects along the European designs. . Further, Arab students were sent to European universities to learn modern architecture. These students were heavily influenced by European architectural designs. When they returned home, they almost echoed the theories they were taught in their societies without necessarily modifying them to suit the local environment. The emphasis was on modernity and advancement rather than on suitability. Meanwhile, these students became the educators of a new generation of Arab students in local Arab universities. They focused on teaching Western architectural theories and models. There were few attempts to theorize about Islamic architecture, or to create a local identity for the Arab city. This in turn, reinforced the trend, which began under the Ottomans of the Arab city losing its architectural identity. A leading Arab architectural critic commented...

*"Considering this strong bound; it is easy to perceive how deep has Arab cities reach in loss of identity. These cities have adopted foreign style of buildings that are entirely different, if not opposite, to their traditions and culture. So, through its trials to get involved with modernity, the Arab city has lost its values and identity from having buildings not produced by their community or workmanship but made by thinkers who had got their academic degrees from the west trying to apply theories they have learned without reference to the usage, which is one of the properties of the twentieth century's architecture, specially the second half". (Khattab, O., 2001)*

Having outlined the historical origins of the present Arab architectural dilemma, we will turn to establish the main elements of the concept of Islamic architecture with an emphasis on its philosophy and its impact on Arab cities.

## II



## **The Philosophy of Islamic Architecture**

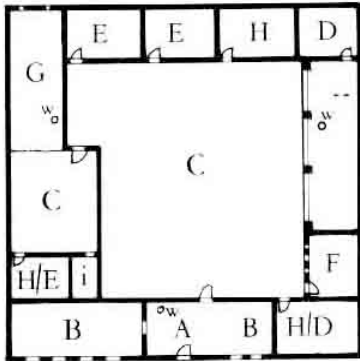
The philosophy of Islamic architecture is derived from the general philosophy of Islam and is a reflection of that philosophy at the same time. Islamic philosophy focuses on the internal dynamics of the human entity in relationship with its external manifestations, integration between that entity and the Creator, and that the basic values of life are those related to the submission to the Creator, and equality among human beings.

Such philosophy was reflected in the field of architecture in the emphasis on simplicity of the buildings and their integration with the environment. Further, there is an emphasis on the absence of external vernacular designs, and complex details, and that the buildings should enable the Muslim to achieve its ritual and spiritual obligations to the Creator, and its social commitments without impinging on the privacy of his life. The building itself is not the target. The real target is the fulfillment of the Muslim's spiritual and social obligation. The buildings should enable the Muslim to achieve these objectives rather than to show richness and grandeur.

Islamic architecture is best articulated in its focus on the interior of the building, and the central arrangement of spaces around the internal open courtyard, with solid external wall containing a door. Such wall rarely contained small size openings, or showed any structures, as the emphasis was on separating guest movements from the family's private zone. The major objective of this design was to secure family privacy. Further, Islamic architecture discouraged the use of congregational forms in the design of buildings. It always emphasized on the simplicity of the composition of the building. If all people are equal before their Creator, then it logically follows that there should not major differences in their life styles and the styles of their buildings. This explains the compatibility between the features of the external facades commonly produced by Islamic architects.

If a building fulfilled these major elements, it could be described as a manifestation of Islamic architecture, regardless of the environment in which it was built. That is why; Islamic architecture took different forms depending on the environment in which it was applied. Islamic architecture in the desert was mainly different from its counterpart in tropical and polar areas. However, these forms share the major elements just outlined. One may also add

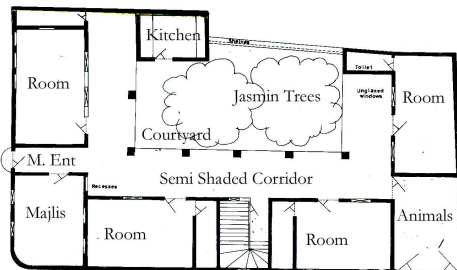
that when the Muslims developed these concepts in different area, they were influenced by local architectural pre-requisites, tastes, and technical knowledge and expertise.



Courtyard House in Qustul, Nubia, similar house planning to those in Islam beginnings.  
Source: Architecture of the Islamic World.



External Façade and internal courtyards, shows internal orientation of Bait Balit, Aleppo, Syria, 16<sup>th</sup> Century.  
Source: Aga Khan Visual Archives.



Right: Zar'ouni House, Sharjah, UAE, 19<sup>th</sup> Century  
Source: Graham Anderson

Left: Contemporary Islamic House, Egypt.  
Source: AgaKhan Visual Archives.



### III

#### Development of Islamic Architecture

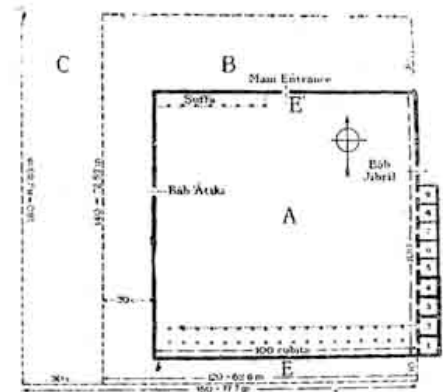
As Islam spread in different areas, and as the needs of the new Muslim communities became more complex, new types of buildings appeared, such as the religious schools (*Madrasas*), and citadels. New elements were added to the building of the mosque, such as the minarets, and water fountains for ablution. In fact, the mosque began to assume a social role, in addition to its ritual one, which required an expansion of its size, and composition. An examination of the mosque and *Madrasa* of Sultan Hassan, and the mosque and university of Al-Azhar, both in Cairo, and King Faisal Complex in Sharjah exemplifies the major development in the institution of the mosque over the years. Muslim rulers built government houses (*Dar Al-Hukm*). These houses partially reflected Islamic architecture. They were

characterized by a high level of rich decorations in order to show the strength and power of the state.

Other types of buildings witnessed similar developments reflecting the nature of the community and the available technology. The overall trend was the shift from simplicity and the use of limited technology to the establishment of huge structures and multi-story houses using advance technologies developed by local Muslims.

The Muslim world, especially in the early ages of Islam, was characterized by the freedom of movement of Muslims. There were no borders within *Dar Al-Islam* restricting the free movement of citizens. Further, Muslims are obliged to perform *Hajj* at least once in a lifetime if it was possible. As new centers of Islamic teaching and knowledge were established in different areas of the Muslim world, Muslims began to travel more frequently, either to trade, to enroll in Madrasas, or simply to perform Hajj. Consequently, new forms of buildings were established, such as the *Khans*, These were residential and commercial complexes built either inside or outside the city to host Muslim travelers. Police stations and watchtowers were also built in order to secure the movement of Muslims across the Muslim world.

The main conclusion to be drawn from this review is that Islamic architecture has been able to adapt to different environments, needs, and times. In this sense, Islamic architecture can be diagnosed a modern given its ability to adapt to modern needs. Islamic architecture is not a medieval invention that has lost its relevance to modern life.



Mosque of the Prophet, 622AD, original plan with extensions.

Source: Islamic Architecture, Abdel-Gawwad,T.



Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, 709 AD. Shows the complexity of the mosque components and design after only less than one century of the beginning of Islam.

Source: Aga Khan Visual Archives.



Al-Azhar university and Mosque, medieval ages of Islam, shows the different activities of the mosque components.

Source: Aga Khan Visual Archives.



King Faisal Mosque Complex, 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Shows the complexity of the mosque components: Faisal Foundation, Islamic affairs organization and the Mosque, Source: Graham Anderson.

One finds viable applications of Islamic architecture to modern societies across the Muslim world. One may refer to the case of the Sharjah Islamic Center as a manifestation of our argument. Whereas the Center is based on the application of the main concepts of Islamic architecture, it achieves the needs of a modern community to engage in different types of trade transactions.

Today, the main dilemma of Islamic architecture is not inherent in its inability to adapt to modernity. Such dilemma is mainly located in the influences of Western architectural theories and models over Muslim architects. These influences are a by-product of the dominance of the Western cultural paradigm and a result of the decay of the Muslim world during the era of imperialism. Many would-be-architects from the Muslim world were educated in the West, were only taught the Western architectural theories as the only ones capable of adapting to modern societies. This has resulted in a trend to transplant Western, architectural styles in modern Arab cities, regardless of their suitability to local needs and environments. This trend was reinforced as a result of the flow of oil in the Arab Gulf states and the influx of huge numbers of experts to engage in the business of oil extraction, which, in turn, reinforced the trend to borrow the Western architectural models. Al-Faqih has succinctly summarized these trends as follows:

*"In the Arab world during the early days of oil based prosperity, the importation of western architecturally stylized buildings was looked at as illustrating richness and ability to spend money. This was later even adopted by the local architects, to show that they were just as able as western architects, and the client in turn was made to believe that this represented a desirable modernity". (Al-Faqih, S., 1999)*

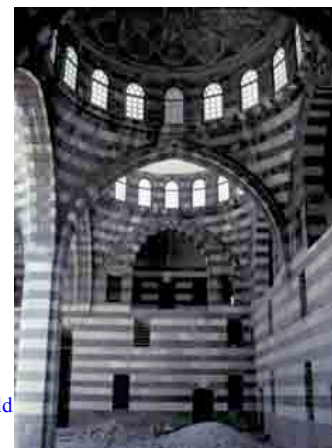
The Arab city today is heterogeneous conglomeration of buildings, which does not reflect a specific identity or a philosophy.



Citadel of Cairo "Slah El-Din Citadel", Islamic Fortification.  
Source: AgaKhan Visual archives.



Top: Weavers' Huts, southern Tunisia.  
Example of Industrial Buildings.  
Source: Architecture of the Islamic World



Right: Khan of Damascus, 16<sup>th</sup> Century.  
Source: Architecture of the Islamic World

Examples of the variety of Islamic Architecture improvement to reply all progressed needs of the Community

## **The Changing Character of Arab Cities and the Contributions of Islamic Architecture**

The injection of Western architecture in Arab cities was quite problematic. Western architecture was designed to suit the needs of an environment characterized by a climate, which totally differs from the desert environment prevalent in most of the Arab world. Almost 91% of the Arab land mass is desert. The introduction of Western architecture into Arab cities proved to be quite costly and unable to benefit from the resources available in the local environment. Western architecture was also developed to reflect a certain system of values, which is quite different from the system of Muslim values.

As the Muslim world began to witness a process of religious revivalism in the 1970, the wisdom of borrowing the Western models was questioned and local architects began to fall back to the concept of Islamic architecture, not only to restore the identity of the Arab city, and its congruence with Muslim values, but also to remedy the existential problems resulting from the adoption of Western architectural models. Increasingly, this trend gained momentum and by the late 1980s represented a full-fledged movement of Islamic architectural revivalism.

The movement of Islamic architectural revivalism was based on three major pillars. The first was the system of Muslim values and the philosophy of Islamic architecture as outlined earlier. The second was the quest to deal with the problems resulting from the transplantation of Western models in the Arab world, especially as far their suitability to the local environment is concerned. Most importantly, the movement began from an empirical analysis of the shifting character of the Arab societies resulting from the modern technological revolution, and the accumulation of wealth in Arab oil-exporting countries. It recognizes that the contemporary Arab society is quite different from the medieval one. The modern Arab society is more complex and multifaceted. It has multiple and an ever-increasing social needs. It is also characterized by acute social bifurcation. The society is divided into a small elite of owners and financiers and a large mass of limited income workers, peasants, and employees. The middle class in Arab societies is increasingly shrinking as a result of the failed development strategies, which resulted in the decay of the income of the middle class thereby increasingly joining the lower class. Further, physical and

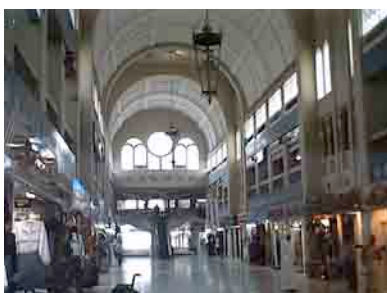


cultural interaction between these two segments of the society is limited as each segment lives in different districts. Each segment also has a different life style and needs including different housing needs. At the private level, the high class focuses on building villas, palaces, prestigious houses in restricted districts, and resorts and recreational facilities for entertainment in addition to private social and sports clubs. At the public level, the high class developed high tower office buildings, commercial centers, big markets, and hotels. Conversely, the lower segment focuses mainly on the problem of housing. As a result of the social bifurcation, and the economic deterioration of this social segment, they are increasingly confronted with the problem of the lack of reasonable and affordable housing. Governments and private sectors develop buildings, which are only affordable to the high segments of the society.

The movement of Islamic architectural resurgence aspires to deal with these issues through three main modalities, namely:

(1) Developing New Architectural Concepts:

Classical Islamic architecture dealt many with specific common public buildings, such as mosques, khans, and markets (*souques*). But new types of buildings are emerging, such as office buildings, banks, and large-scale hotels. These types of buildings require new concepts and approaches, which are deeply embedded in the philosophy of Islamic architecture, but developed enough to cater for the new types of needed buildings. Some of the most important instances of public buildings based on the new concepts developed by Muslim architects the Islamic *Souqe* of sharjah, Mejarra *souqe* in Sharjah, and Al-Basrah Sheraton in Iraq.



Architects' trials to produce new forms and concepts with respect to values and ideals of Islamic Architecture.

Top-Left: Islamic Souqe in Sharjah, UAE

lower-Left: Islamic Bank of Dubai, Sharjah.

Middle: Al-Basrah Sheraton, Al-Basra, Iraq.

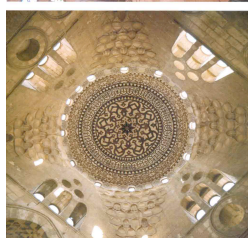
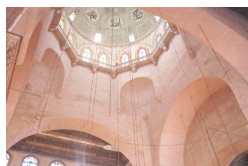
Right: Al-Azhar Administration office building. Cairo.

One may also refer to buildings, which respect local value and local tradition of the partial separation between the female and male zones in public buildings and the separation into two buildings, such as most of governmental service buildings and universities in Gulf area.

## (2) Adapting to New Trends:

The resurgence of Islamic architecture movement adopts an interactional approach towards modern construction technology, but uses that technology to achieve Islamic architectural values. For example, it uses the technology of glazing within the framework of maintaining harmony with the local desert environment. As a result, percentage of solid to void in the new products is more or less isomorphic with those in traditional designs. Also, stones were used as tiles or powder as internal finishing materials. This is in addition to use of the most updated technologies like expansion joints, insulation materials.

In general, architecture detailing is reduced due to current economics of architectural practice. But special attention is being made to those details that are important to deal with the desert climate, such as *mashrabia* (wooden screen to reduce undesirable solar energy gain and to increase ventilation effect), through using technology to develop its forms materials, which results in some new shapes made of metals.



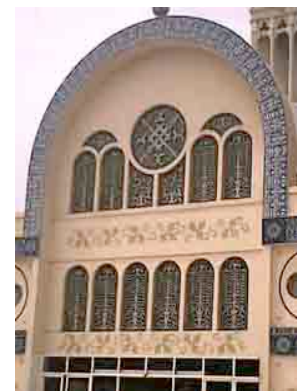
Traditional skylights (upper left & lower left) are produced currently by forming reinforced concrete to have similar elements (top).

Lower: School of Music Damascus, Syria: New form depends on available technology



Technology are used to reproduce specific details in industrial manners as per traditional wooden screens (left) to have them in new materials:

1. prefabricated lime boards (lower-left)
2. formed steel (lower)



Further, services system, which are essential to contemporary buildings, could not be ignored in contemporary Islamic architecture, but the effects of unhealthy systems, e.g. air condition, is reduced as much as possible by using special treatments to reduce the desert climate effect on thermal comfort inside these buildings.

### (3) Monitoring Spiritual Needs of the People:

Being an architecture that belongs to a certain set of values, the movement of Islamic architecture revivalism emphasizes upon the spiritual and value-oriented components of architecture. Advocates of the movement attempt to reflect Islamic values in their designs through the use of traditional shapes and Islamic vernaculars like arches, *mashrabia*, domes, and the usage of *Ablaq* (horizontal patterns in elevations). It is argued that these applications do not only remind the users of the distinctive nature of their architecture, but will also serve their needs in making the best out of their environment.



Above: Side entrance of Al-Azhar admin. Building, Cairo.  
Source: Alam-Albenaa magazine.



Middle: Electricity & Water Organization, Sharjah, UAE.  
The writer.



Right: Al-Azeezia Market, Cairo. Source: AS Collection.

Emotional abstraction of Islamic Architectural features in buildings of 1990<sup>th</sup> in the Arab World, to satisfy spiritual and emotional needs of people who look for their traditions and culture. Independent trials to have a contemporary Islamic Architecture.

One of the major contributors to this movement was the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathi, who is famous for developing his own views on the contemporary applications of Islamic architecture, and applying them for mass use at the same time. Fathi advocated an architectural philosophy, which caters to the local environment, in terms of the climate and the available construction resources, and is being applied by the local population, not for them. In response to his perception of the social bifurcation of the present Arab society and



its potential negative consequences, he presented the concept of the “architecture of the poor.” This concept refers to a cost-effective, environment-oriented, and value-laden architecture. He reflected these views in the village of New Gurna built in Upper Egypt. Alongside the old village of Al-Gurna, a new village was established in cooperation between Hassan Fathy and the local population of Al-Gurna. Fathy left a school of thought on the resurgence of Islamic architecture, which is still pursued and developed by his followers in Egypt.



Two remarkable works of Hassan Fathy representing his imagination of how Islamic Architecture would deal with community needs. Right: Akil Sami House, 1987; Left: New Gurna Village, 1943.  
Source: The Aga Khan Visual Archives

## VI

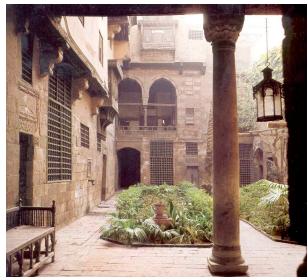
### **Conclusion: The Limitations of the Resurgence of Islamic Architecture Movement**

In assessing the movement of the resurgence of Islamic architecture one must remember that the movement is a recent one. It emerged and gained momentum during the last twenty-five. Throughout this period the movement has contributed to the preservation of classical Islamic architecture in view of the pressures of globalization and standardization. It has also contributed to the creation of architecture compatible with the desert environment and at the same time cost-effective, and mindful of the social needs of the people. On the other hand, one notices that the theoretical component of the movement leaves a lot to be desired. Apart from emphasis on Islamic values, the advocates of the movement spent most of their time in proving the utility and applicability of their concepts. They still have to pay more attention to the developing of an Islamic architecture under conditions of globalization. Such theory should not emphasize only on the uniqueness of Islamic architecture, but also on its contributions to global architecture. They also need to move beyond the emphasis on the reflection of Islamic values, towards the development of a contemporary theory of Islamic

architecture, one that combines the socio-economic and architectural components of architecture, and address itself to the challenges and contributions of globalization. Further, the movement of the resurgence of Islamic architecture has restricted itself to small-scale and single-function buildings. It has not dealt with more complex types of buildings such as skyscrapers, hospitals, and airports in order to show the relevance of their concepts to these modern institutions. Advocates of the movement have been busy addressing themselves to the issue housing, especially the housing of the poor. This is understandable given the socio-economic challenges in the Muslim world. They still need to widen the scope of their analysis to incorporate modern challenges.

# Islamic Architecture Matrix in 20<sup>th</sup> Century

## Source



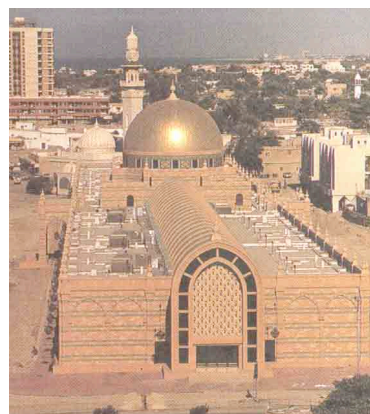
Traditional Islamic Architecture: Internal orientation, environmental treatments, Privacy consideration, long passages markets, with strong and clear elements of style. Left: House in Aleppo, Syria. Source: Aga Khan Visual Archives. Middle-up: courtyard house in Cairo. Middle-down: Market in Aleppo. Right: Qunsouah Alghuri Khan in Cairo. Middle and Right source: Architecture of the Islamic World. Source: Architecture of the Islamic World.

## Continuity & Beginning

Continuity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, respecting spirit, traditions and values of the Islamic architecture (Natural process). Three buildings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sharjah, UAE: Left: Al-Hussn; Middle: Mana'nah mosque; Right: Al-Zarouni House. Source: Graham Anderson.



## Contemporary Production



Contemporary Production (1980<sup>th</sup> ~Now ): trials by muslim architects to gain the community identity and Islamic architecture principles and values in their buildings. One time through adopting traditional concepts, another time by abstracting external features and vernacular architectural elements. These individual trials started to gain limited success, or at least presence in the built environment. Top-Left: Hager El-Dabiah, Social building, Luxor, Egypt. Top (Middle& Right): governmental buildings, Sharjah, UAE. Lower-Left: Majarrah Market, UAE. Lower-Middle: Islamic Market of Sharjah. Lower-Right: Al-Azeeziah commercial building, Cairo.

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