

Search of Contemporaneity in New Mosques: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Yeni Camilerde Çağdaşlık Arayışı: Bosna Hersek Örneği

 Edin Jahic

International University of Sarajevo/Bosnia and Herzegovina
ejahic@ius.edu.ba

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Abstract: The architecture of the contemporary mosque is a popular form of self-expression in Muslim communities. Many societies, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, are divided over the mosque-style dilemma. Today's understanding of mosque architecture is quite varied. Some architects, as well as the vast majority of Muslims, believe that new mosques should always be modeled after popular historic styles. A smaller number of architects and others see the mosque as a modern concept devoid of the past. Yet the number of modern designs in newly constructed mosques is significantly lower. Given that the sources of Islam do not contain strict instructions on mosque design, there is no reason to design a mosque today in the styles of the past. The architectural vocabulary of a contemporary mosque should express the present while adhering to universal Islamic principles. In that sense, contemporary architectural language will best express the cultural identity of Muslim communities. A contemporary mosque, on the other hand, will emphasize the fundamental values of Islamic architectural history in this way.

Keywords: Mosque Design, Contemporary Expression, Modernism, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Öz: Çağdaş cami mimarisi, Müslüman topluluklarda popüler bir kendini ifade etme biçimidir. Bosna-Hersek de dahil olmak üzere birçok toplum cami tarzı ikilem konusunda bölünmüş durumda. Günümüz cami mimarisi anlayışı oldukça çeşitlidir. Müslümanların büyük çoğunluğu gibi bazı mimarlar da yeni camilerin her zaman popüler tarihi tarzlara göre modellenmesi gerektiğine inanıyor. Daha az sayıda mimar ve diğerleri camiye geçmişten yoksun modern bir konsept olarak görüyor. Ancak yeni inşa edilen camilerde modern tasarımların sayısı önemli ölçüde düşüktür. İslam kaynaklarının cami tasarımı konusunda katı talimatlar içermediği göz önüne alındığında, geçmişin tarzlarında bugün bir cami tasarlamının hiçbir nedeni yoktur. Çağdaş bir caminin mimari sözlüğü, evrensel İslami ilkelere bağlı kalarak bugünü ifade etmelidir. Bu anlamda çağdaş mimari dil, Müslüman toplulukların kültürel kimliğini en iyi şekilde ifade edecektir. Çağdaş bir cami ise İslam mimarlık tarihinin temel değerlerini bu şekilde vurgulayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cami Tasarımı, Çağdaş Anlatım, Modernizm, Bosna Hersek

1. Introduction

Numerous new mosques have been built in recent decades in Bosnia and Herzegovina, either in locations of old or destroyed ones or in various new places. They are emerging equally in rural and suburban areas, but also congested urban zones. Unlike the old ones, which in the past largely determined the future development of *çarşı* or a city, many recent mosques are often being built on inappropriate sites, sometimes squeezed among tall buildings, or just off the main roads. The construction is usually financed by contributions from private and business incomes and sometimes generous foreign donations in urban areas. It is often the scenario that a client or a key donor authorizes a designer who, according to his ideas or vision of the task, defines functionality and appearance. This creates different solutions that can provoke conflicting opinions, from affectionate approval to energetic disapproval, but often total indifference. If the notion of "a beautiful mosque" can be left to the subjective understanding of the individual, the question of an appropriate architectural approach to the mosque design should concern every educated architect.

In general terms on the topic under consideration, the modern mosque is a characteristic expression of Muslim communities from the mid-20th century to the present day. Although the notion of a contemporary mosque generally implies a building built nowadays, its "contemporaneity" in a narrower sense is reflected in the appropriate formal expression. The architectural values of today's mosques derive from the social, cultural, and material circumstances of the environment in which they are created. In addition, in its essence and character, the mosque of the modern age strives to maintain the spiritual and traditional background and express a pronounced symbolic message. While a mosque of the past was undoubtedly an expression of the ruling elite, the modern mosque comes from different categories of society, from the individual to the state itself. Its current function may also be more complex compared to the large mosques of the past and largely depends on specific conditions and environments.

The mosque is the only type of building in the Muslim past that has retained its place in the modern environment and whose symbolic significance is equally relevant (Wijdan, 1992: 187). For the objective evaluation of the values between the architecture of the historic mosque and the mosque of the modern age, it is of particular importance to understand the different socioeconomic and material conditions. As Fethi (1985: 53) states in his essay, unlike in the past, when architecture was the result of the manual aesthetics of dedicated builders and artisans guided by unique aesthetic principles and traditions, today's production aesthetics are based on a universal system of clients,

architects, and contractors. The mosque architecture developed gradually in the past, creating a rich visual language that encompasses many individual design elements and concepts and ways of organizing them into a coherent whole within the universal Islamic concept of spatial planning (Nasr, 1987).

In the modern urban environment, the architecture and functioning of the mosque are affected by the demographic influx, modern communications and technologies, a modern and secularized education system, etc. Changes in its design are more evident today than in the past, so it is difficult to talk about the existence of a clearly defined style. There are also no coherent rules regarding content, size and relationships between individual spaces. Each new task carries specific requirements in terms of functionality. For example, the traditional gradation of mosques according to importance, which has been strictly adhered to for centuries, does not exist today. Anyone can build a mosque; the only requirement is that they have sufficient funds.

The mosque architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina finds its conceptualization in the domain of the four-century Ottoman–Turkish tradition. After four centuries, at the transition from historical to modern times in the Austro–Hungarian period (1878–1918), a short and less significant episode in the Pseudo Moorish style follows. Then the period of the Kingdom of SCS and Yugoslavia (1918–1945) with little influence on the mosque's development followed. During the 1970s and 1980s in socialist Yugoslavia, new mosques begin to emerge, usually as a need to replace ruinous ones. In almost fifty years, the opinion about the mosque's appearance by the faithful, *ulema*, and experts alike became quite heterogeneous. On one side are many who see the mosque as an imitation of old mosques with domes and slender minarets, while a few embrace a modern look. Accordingly, this essay debates the prevailing trends in Bosnia and Herzegovina and seeks to point out why a modern expression is logical and in which direction contemporaneity should be sought. I argue that the new mosques should be designed based on a contemporary architectural approach and not an imitation of traditional role models, no matter how emotionally close and culturally recognizable they may be. I should also mention that, at the outset of this discussion, sources of Islam (Quran and *Sunna*) do not contain precise guidelines on mosque design.¹

¹ “Those that have tried to derive specific examples from these sources are doing both themselves and the sources a disfavor. Themselves by ignoring the wider context in which we live and which must provide the major “givens” of the problems to be addressed, and the sources by demeaning them to the level of a “handbook” or “textbook” rather than treating the Quran as the eternal message of inspiration and guidance for all times and the *Sunna* of the Prophet as the embodiment of exemplary behaviour.” Ismail Serageldin.

Along with the changing role of the mosque, the changing character of urban areas inhabited by Muslims is also evident. In the context of social and economic changes, present secularization, modern education, and communication, rapid changes in the modern urban image of cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be observed. The urban landscape is gradually changing, new structures and forms are emerging, and infrastructure systems are becoming more demanding. In such circumstances, where new structures emerge elsewhere, mosques can no longer be the central urban benchmark and modulator of urban space. They now need to show a harmonious attitude towards the existing urban structure.

A characteristic issue in many Muslim societies, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, is the standpoint of the tradition. It is especially evident in the appearance of new mosques, and one should look for the reasons for the sentiment viewpoint towards historical forms. Several valuable Ottoman-era monuments still represent the archetypal idea of the mosque. Thus, for many, domes and slender minarets have long been rooted as symbols of traditional Islamic architecture. However, these forms are exposed to the effects of permanent changes in society and urban space. Muslim identity and awareness of tradition face the challenges of new technologies. The relationships of two opposites can stay in different states depending on the social and cultural environment. The state of positively oriented relations should lead to the reinterpretation of traditional qualities following modern challenges and technologies. Since the contemporary mosque is one of the forms of self-expression of the Muslim community, it becomes a mirror of its activities and one of the instruments for defining identity.

2. Stylistic Features in New Mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina

There are several opposing views on the appropriate style of new mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond. Based on several analyzed examples in a few cities, we can say that the diversity of expressions confirms all the complexity and topicality of the issue. In this sense, the question arises: What architectural approach to the mosque design, or which style most consistently depicts the environment and time we live?

First of all, we can point out that the understanding of new mosques by architects but also others interested is heterogeneous. Many argue that mosque architecture should follow traditional patterns from the past, while others see the mosque as a modern building consistently "cleansed" of the past. Between these two extreme positions, we

(1989). Faith and the Environment. In I. Serageldin (Ed.), *Space for Freedom*. London: Butterworth Architecture. p. 213.

find attempts to reconcile them (Serageldin & Steele, 1996: 12). In designing a mosque, almost everyone meets the formal requirements, such as prayer space, *qibla*, *mihrab*, *minbar*, ablution, etc. However, the question of the shaping and meaning of the Islamic prayer space remains: What does it stimulate in users and then in ordinary observers? To respond conveniently, architects should have a broad education that includes basic knowledge of ritual, spiritual, and historical determinants that affect the Islamic prayer space (Fig. 1). Without this, it is challenging to provide a quality answer. In this sense, the Algerian philosopher Muhammad Arkoun believes that “It is a well-documented fact that many leading architects who endeavour to build mosques in ‘the spirit of Islam’ have neither a critical historical understanding of this difficult concept...” (1995: 18).



Figure 1. Mosque at Ciglane, Sarajevo (2008), photo: Bakir Jahić
International style with an odd circular shape

At the beginning of this century, many mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina showed diversity in styles, from imitating Ottoman patterns to seeking modern solutions. These

two essentially opposing views do not necessarily have to be confronted. They can be scrutinized in the relations of the universal and the local. In the context of the topic, the universal refers to contemporary stylistic trends in general, and the local relates to perceptions of a specific environment, or even more narrowly, certain categories or communities.

In architecture, modernism can sometimes be associated with an international style. However, modernity is not exclusively related to the universal formative principles of Internationalism. Modern in architectural expression is everything innovative in a given moment and space. In the Islamic architecture of the past, 'modernization' occurs in new principles, models, and forms to address new demands of society, time, and cultural region. The very notion of modernization is not foreign to the culture of Islam. Thus, there is no religious provision that would prevent the innovation of life flows or favor the preservation of the past. The resistance that exists in some areas towards the modern appearance of the mosque may be opposed to internationalism explicitly, but not directly to modernism. Inventive solutions and ideas should not be interpreted as a priori embrace of Western ideals and values. There is no need to shun contemporary technologies and modern expression in mosque architecture if they are widely accepted in most Muslim communities and used in airports, commercial, residential, and many more buildings. With Khan's dilemma posed "...should buildings be understood as traditional or modern in the way they look or the way they are manufactured?" (1990: 57), we should keep in mind that in the design of today's mosques, technology is not crucial, but the architectural expression.

The number of modernly designed mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina is relatively low compared to the whole number built in a few past decades. They are primarily the result of architects' interpretation and, less occasionally, explicit investor requests. Attempts to design with a modern expression, on the other hand, may not constantly deliver successful outcomes. While some architects manage to sublimate modern design and technical solutions with Islamic principles and understandings of spatial planning (Fig. 2, 3), others lack the necessary skills and sensibility and instead prefer to experiment with their modernist creations (Fig. 4). Those that successfully integrate local or regional values into a modern approach wherever possible generate the best results (Özkan, 1996: 12–13). When it comes to international donors, unique solutions may develop. They can have an impact on stylistic expression by leaving a cultural imprint in a different, albeit friendly, context (Fig. 5, 6).



Figure 2. Jordanian Mosque in Sarajevo (2002), photo: author
Modern design with clean lines and decent decoration



Figure 3. Mosque of Behram Bey Madrasa in Tuzla (2005), photo: Mustafa Terzić
An innovative design harmonized with the environment

Contrary to modern understanding, there is a widespread opinion that the mosque should be easily identifiable by its traditional elements, shapes, and symbolism. Proponents of this point of view argue that the mosque can only be discernible if the popular language of the past is applied. Traditional motifs are interpreted in various ways, ranging from expressive to fragmented, pseudo-stylistic, or free. Some architects strive to achieve a blend of old and new. Because those approaches are inevitably related to the past, such attempts rarely produce rewarding solutions (Kuban, 1983: 55) (Fig. 7).



Figure 4. Kuwaiti Mosque in Sarajevo (2006), photo: author

Imitating or interpreting historical models is a fairly widespread trend in many Muslim communities, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mosques of this view usually have a concrete hemispherical dome and a slender cylindrical minaret, often with three galleries. There is often a porch in front of the entrance with three smaller cupolas. This kind of design is an illogical way of expressing the present day. Today's construction will become yesterday's construction tomorrow. In this sense, a mosque built on historical models, whether it is a consistent imitation, free interpretation, or eclectic synthesis of the old and new, can not reflect the time in which it was created. This architectural approach stands in contrast to the logic of Islamic architecture and may lead to future misunderstandings about the style and time of its creation. This is a widespread tradition in several Muslim countries, where old mosques' forms and decorations are meticulously replicated (Serageldin, 1990: 19–20).

3. The Significance and Meaning of Contemporaneity in the Mosque Architecture

How can we understand the term 'contemporary' when it comes to mosque architecture? What exactly does the term "contemporary" imply? Merriam Webster defines contemporary as "happening, existing, living, or coming into being during the same period." Concerning the language of the mosque architecture, "contemporary" can be sought in the universal Islamic principles that influence the shaping of the built environment (Ardalan, 1983: 56). The freedom of architectural expression and materialization of the mosque comes from the fact that neither Quran nor *Sunna* includes predefined form instructions, nor does communal prayer necessitate precise spatial conditions. "If God had desired to give people specific instructions on how to build structures in the twentieth century, He would certainly have done so explicitly." (Serageldin, 1989: 213). The sole requirement is the orientation towards the Kaaba and clean space. Although revered as a model in early Islamic architecture, the primordial mosque in Medina, a plain edifice without a minaret, *mihrab*, or dome, enabled generations of builders unfettered development direction and variation in typology and forms. As a result, there's no reason for new mosques to "freeze" in their historical patterns.



Figure 5. Istiklal Mosque in Sarajevo (2001), photo: author

In another sense, the term refers to something styled or designed in a modern manner. As a result, the term 'contemporary' can be used interchangeably with the term 'modern.' However, there should be a distinction between the two terms, at least when it comes to architecture. The second meaning (modern) is useless if we correctly explain the link of simultaneity between two terms: "Churchill was a contemporary of Stalin." However, the concept of contemporaneity frequently connotes something that is contemporaneous with its time, therefore it incorporates positive value judgments, implying that something has been confirmed. Such definitions invariably pose questions: what has been confirmed and in what way, in other words, what do we mean when we say that anything "corresponds to its time"? To be confirmed in terms of architectural contemporaneity means that an architectural work should adhere to universal artistic standards rather than passing trends and haphazard aesthetic values. The oscillations and laws of everyday life and the environment must be part of an architectural work that attempts to fit its time, or, as Fathy says "...it must be related harmoniously to the rhythm of the universe" (1992: 54). Architecture should go forward and should not be frozen in the past, albeit successful periods. Changes and innovations in architecture are necessary, but more important is whether the architect makes them positive or negative, good or bad. In this sense, the architecture of the new mosques should be free from the accidental and transient, and free from indulging in certain clichés.



Figure 6. Interior of Istiklal Mosque, photo: author

An important issue within the consideration of the modernity of the mosque architecture is the architectural symbolism (Ardalan, 1980: 21–22). The minaret, dome, portal, and similar elements have acquired symbolic values over a very long period. Architectural forms have evolved into symbols through spontaneous cultural and psycho–sociological processes. An ordinary man can formulate his idea of these forms according to models from his immediate environment, which are in his consciousness. Replicating known historic forms, on the other hand, is not a viable means of representing the present time. In many modern mosques, on the other hand, the presence of forms that are foreign in expression and, yet modern, difficult to understand in their context, is apparent. The minaret is a functional part of the mosque, but also the most expressive part of its overall symbolic appearance. Ultimately, it should symbolize the presence of Islam and Muslims in a particular environment.



Figure 7. Mosque of Prince Abdullah in Tuzla (2000), photo: Mustafa Terzić
Poor interpretation of the historical pattern in modern language

No form in traditional Islamic architecture contains a universal symbolic message that everyone can understand. The shape of the minaret is determined by the cultural context in which it was built (Holod, 1987). The Moroccan square minaret is a long cry from the Indian Muslims' minaret design. When it comes to domes or entrance gates, the situation is similar. The contemporary minaret should be equally noticeable within a particular cultural context while also striving for universality. New forms are gradually imposed,

and as they are understood and accepted, symbolic values are gradually acquired. This process can only be understood by analyzing and comprehending historical architecture. When studying at the peculiarities of the built environment in Islam, one can see how it is intertwined with nature and the environment. The interpenetration of these two entities shows a sense of surprise as well as the progressive discovery of the created surroundings. The meaning of the space provided by such architecture is a challenge for both visitors and casual observers. As a result, special consideration has been given to entrances and portals, particularly in mosques. The entrance draws people's attention as it sits on the dividing line between the bustle of the street and the calmness and tranquility of the interior. To enter each subsequent zone, whether an inner courtyard or a prayer space, seems like a challenge to discover something new. The success of such architectural creations can be seen in the numerous mosques of the past. This method should be kept in mind, but it does not imply that prior solutions should be replicated in the design of new mosques. The work of old masters should be studied in order to fully understand the contemporary sense of invention and modeling in relation to previous societal and regional environmental situations.

The architectural vocabulary of today's mosques must evolve in response to changing times and environments while keeping true to Islam's universal values. Along from being functional, the new mosques should adhere to the essential aesthetic and symbolic ideas and standards that have been established in Muslim contexts for generations. Although the concept of spiritual and cultural continuity is vital, it is not formally supported (i.e., imitation, reinterpretation, or replication of forms from the past). It is false to question if a mosque with a dome is traditional or not (Kuban, 1983: 58). What's more relevant is how it's presented. The minaret's aspiration to the sky is not its only quality. Its expression and symbolism are the most important aspects of it. To be able to express cultural identity, architectural forms must be carefully selected.

4. Concluding Notes

Respecting the origin and essential role of the mosque, modern architectural understandings, and values, I argue that the contemporary architectural language is the most appropriate way to express the cultural identity of the Muslim community and the continuity of Islamic architecture. The style, function, and structures of today's mosque should reflect the time in which we live. The modern approach should strive for current functional, formal, and expressive principles and solutions. It is feasible to create an architectural expression that reflects the time in which the mosque was built using such an approach, while still following universal Islamic ideals. In this way, with its contrast

to historical monuments, it will further emphasize the exceptional values of the Islamic architectural past.

Building on historical models in a way that reflects adherence to Islamic tradition and culture through imitation and uncritical interpretation of past forms is the opposing approach. It is undeniable that historicist approaches are present in many environments, regardless of the cultural, social, or material environment. This way reflects the retrograde approach in the architecture of the modern mosque and very often results in pseudo values. It is necessary to point out that the forms and decorations of the past, whether faithfully copied or partially and freely applied, can never achieve the significance and meaning they have in historical monuments. The architectural values of the mosques of the past can be respected and preserved if we apply a modern design approach in the design of new ones, with the inevitable respect for the enduring values of the Islamic understanding of the built environment.

The design of a modern mosque includes functional formulations of space according to the given conditions and requirements of the environment, establishing harmonious relations with the surroundings, modern design of characteristic elements of the mosque, and appropriate technical and technological solutions. Accordingly, when creating a new expression, architects should keep in mind an adequate symbolic message that will be clear in their environment, present, and future generations.

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