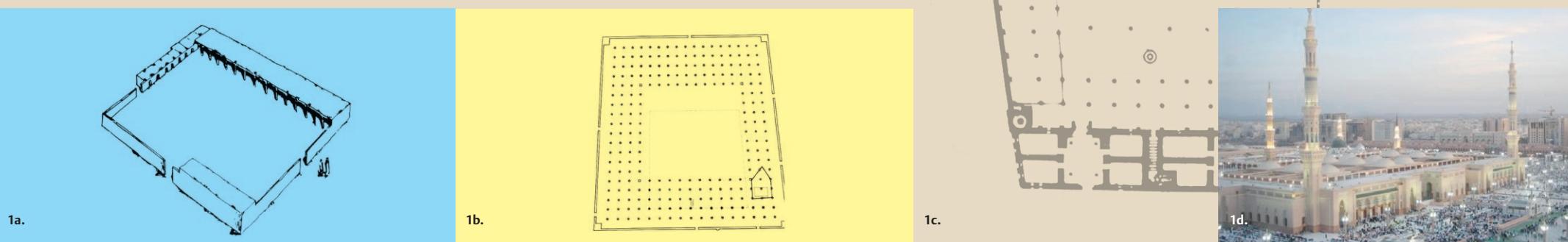


Architectural conservation of the mosque

Architectural historic preservation has been used as a means to express or represent national, Islamic and even ethnic identity, and often this is linked to tourism or used to serve political ends, particularly in nation building. This article investigates agency and utility in the conservation of religious built environments in different societies in the Islamic world and its meaning to these societies today. Conservation should be interpreted more broadly than the physical continuity of historic structures; it should also enable the continuity of non-material aspects of culture.

Hasan-Uddin Khan



Stewardship and the built environment

Islam enjoins its followers to act as stewards of the earth, and whatever act that reinforces this is regarded positively. The notion of stewardship includes the protection of heritage, both natural and constructed. The Quran says: "The servants of [Allah] All Merciful are they who tread gently upon the earth with humility" (Quran XXV: 63). Being prudent with both building and natural capital supports this notion of safeguarding them for future generations. Historic buildings are reflections of cultural values, and contain within them our collective memory; an integral part of our identity is lost when they disappear.

While many of the issues and ideas discussed here may apply to many other building types, I will focus largely on the mosque in this article as it is Islam's most emblematic building. It is worth noting that contemporary architectural conservation is a relatively recent phenomenon in Muslim societies – generally practiced only since the 1960s – except perhaps for the preservation of historic archaeological sites and major historic monuments. Most of the great historic mosques of Islam have experienced change, enlargement, and restoration over the centuries. Restoration entails bringing the structure back to the state of some period of existence or origin: but to what period and state remains a point of debate. This includes even the most historic and architecturally significant buildings, as we will see.

"Value" as a tool for decision-making

There are a number of factors to be considered in restoring religious buildings, which include political, economic, cultural and physical contexts. Broad philosophical and ethical considerations are as important as the parameters of architectural 'best practices', and this is even more so for religious structures, as they express religious and cultural values to both the local communities and the world at large.

Two influential 19th century thinkers, John Ruskin and Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, posited two different approaches to conservation. Ruskin argued that restoration was a "lie" which destroyed the soul of a building in use. In marked contrast, Viollet-le-Duc wrote that restoration was a means to re-establish a building, giving us an understanding of history and place.¹ The first calls for cultural continuity and the notion of maintenance as an ongoing process, and the latter for the restoration and revitalisation of the built environment. Later, the 20th century Austrian art historian Alois Reigl defined heritage values.² He wrote of Memorial Values, which deal with age and history, and Present-day Values, of usefulness, newness, and artistic value. For mosque preservation, one must add to this enumeration, the values of religion and culture. Decision-making about their conservation or restoration is made through an overlay of these different values, which need to be clearly defined and stated.

I consider religious values and significance to be the first consideration for conservation intervention for a mosque. The mosque developed as a building type from the house of the Prophet Muhammad and has undergone many changes in its physical manifestation. Even though this original mosque may no longer exist, the *memory* of it and its associations may

be preserved in the structures that have succeeded it. An important example of this is the Ka'aba and its mosque the Haram al-Sharif (discussed later), which has been altered over the centuries and yet retains its significance. Second is the importance of a mosque in connection with its age and social memory. If a building has survived over the centuries it will have accrued great meaning to the community that uses it. Perhaps it is a reminder of some golden age of Islam. Examples include the 9th century Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo and the Bakiriyah Mosque in Sana'a dating from 1597. A third reason for restoration would be architectural value, where the structure and ornament in a mosque is worth preserving as an exemplar of artistry. This is exemplified in buildings such as the 16th century Ottoman Sokollu Mehmet Paşa Mosque in Istanbul or the 17th century Masjid-i Shah in Isfahan. Fourth is cultural value, which is to be differentiated from the religious and architectural values. Preservation for cultural purposes, to recognise specific ethnic or religious groups, or social significance, provides another reason for intervention. This last motivation is often given shape through political decisions.

Continuity and change in the religious places of Islam

If mosques remain in present use they are often well maintained, as is the case with the earthen mosque of Djenné in Mali, Al Aqsa in Jerusalem, or the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf (important to Shi'ite Muslims), although this is not always the case. Conversely, questions related to the use and maintenance of mosques, or their restoration, are made acute by their function as living institutions and places of worship, particularly in the case of the need for expansion and enlargement to accommodate increased usage. If one were to follow Viollet-le-Duc's principles, this would be acceptable as long as the architecture of the whole is not compromised and is clearly discernible.

In the past the physical form of mosques was not static; even the most important and iconic of them grew and changed. A particularly striking example of this dynamism can be seen in the most holy place in Islam, the Ka'aba in Makkah and its mosque, the Haram al-Sharif, both of which form the focus of the hajj pilgrimage. The Quran says the Ka'aba is "The very first house [of worship] established for humanity ...The place where Abraham stood [to pray]" (Quran III: 96-97). Such an important religious place as the Ka'aba and its mosque has had to withstand the immense pressure of rising use. The hajj to Makkah involved 280,000 pilgrims in the 1950s and now accommodates two million; consequently the Haram al-Sharif has been extended and rebuilt extensively over the centuries. Additions or reconstructions have altered or even obliterated not only the historic features of the monuments but also their setting, and perhaps overwhelmed something of the spirit of the pilgrimage. Such changes may be understood to be the latest phase in the continual alteration of the buildings, which has occurred throughout their existence; but the speed of change since the 20th century has allowed little reflection on what the design means in terms of continuity or preservation.

Consider also the Mosque of the Prophet – the Masjid an-Nabawi. The structure started off as the Prophet's house in Medina, a simple courtyard with rooms on two sides that was designated as a mosque in 622 CE. Eighty years later

1: The Mosque of the Prophet over the centuries.
1a: The house of the Prophet. After Cresswell.
1b: Plan of mosque in the seventh-century. After Cresswell.
1c: Plan of mosque in the seventeenth-century. Courtesy MIT Rotch Library.
1d: The mosque in 2009. Courtesy Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

caliph Al-Walid replaced it with a new building with minarets. There were several alterations and additions, including those made by the Ottomans who controlled Medina from 1517. After the foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 the mosque underwent several major modifications, including the one in 1986 by the architect Abdel Wahid El-Wakil. Although El-Wakil intended to incorporate the old structure into his design for a more commodious building, the old mosque was torn down and replaced with a new one, the second largest mosque in the world (figures 1a-1d). Currently, extensive additions are underway, which will again considerably alter the area.

What do these examples of enlargement mean, and how do they relate to the notion of historic preservation of cultural heritage? The present building has no relationship with the past except that it recognises the magnificence and the presence of Islam and the central role of the Prophet. How far should we go in the preservation of past heritage? How much should we allow for change in restoring a mosque? To what degree does contemporary utility, however discreetly provided, rupture the sense of historical integrity?

Perhaps what we should look for is not integrity of the past, which now exists in juxtaposition with the contemporary, but the integrity of aesthetic feeling, meaning, and use, revealed in a continuity of forms. In this way the old can inform the new but is differentiated from it. A good example of this strategy is the Khulafa Mosque in Baghdad,³ originally built in the 9th century and replaced in the 13th century. All that remained of the second building was the restored Suq al-Gazi minaret. The memories associated with the site are important to the city and its population. In 1961, the Iraqi architect, Mohamed Makiya was commissioned to build a new mosque on the site that integrated the old minaret. The building was to be modern but was to respect the space and materials of the remaining minaret (figures 2a and 2b). Makiya designed the main octagonal prayer hall to be surrounded by riwaqs (arcades), and he employed yellow brick to match the minaret and yet be distinctive from it – thus following the guidelines of the Venice Charter.⁴ The 1963 project successfully retained the spirit of place and the past.

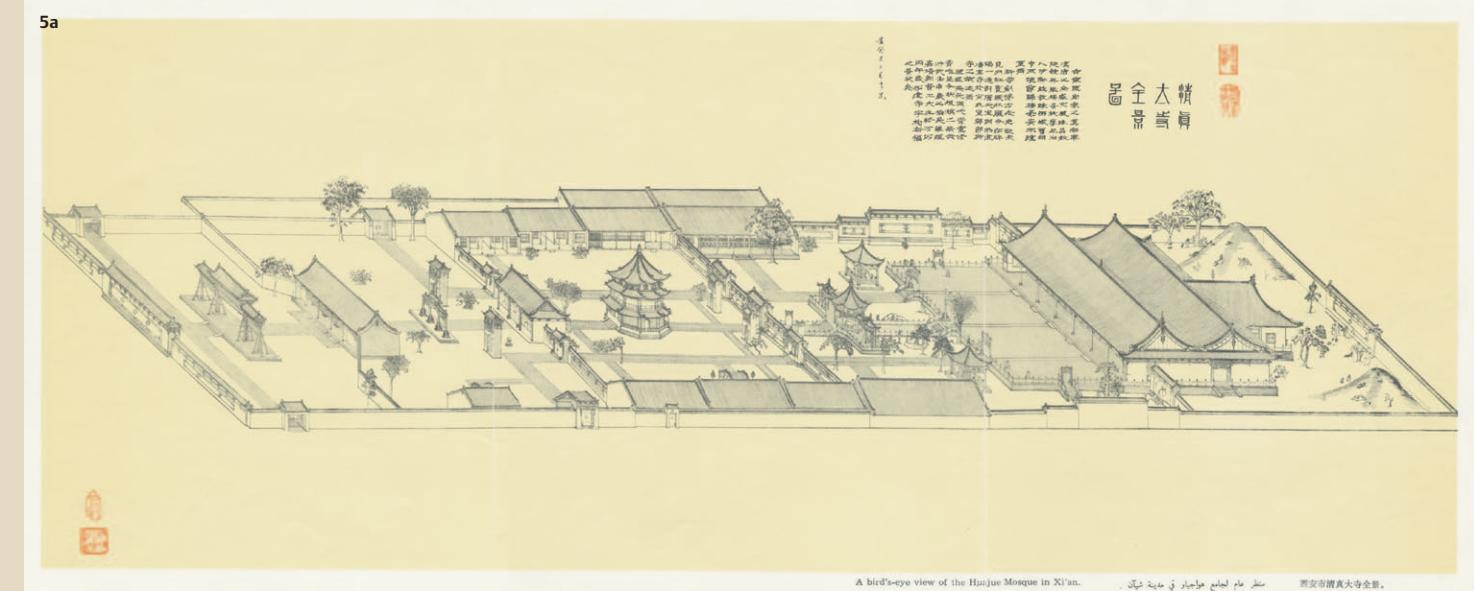
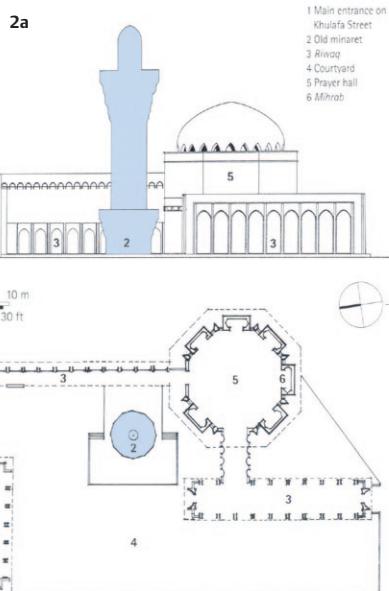
Religious appropriation

Muslims have sometimes taken over and adapted the buildings of other religions, but such appropriation occurs in all religions. For example, the magnificent Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain (8th – 10th centuries), which was built and adapted by the Umayyads from a former Christian church, was converted back into a church in the 14th century, and under King Charles V in 1523 a cathedral was inserted into its centre to re-establish the might and dominance of Catholicism (figure 3).

Conversely, Constantine's Basilica in Istanbul was built in 360 CE and used as a church until it was converted into a mosque in 1453, known as the Ayasofia or Hagia Sophia. The conversion of the interior of the basilica into a mosque involved the removal of the altar and relics, the plastering over of the mosaics, the addition of a *maqsura*, a *minbar*, and the mounting of the enormous shields of calligraphy with the names of God and the prophets at the intersection of walls. The slight shift of the interior axis to face Makkah is barely

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Strategies for cultural continuity in the Islamic world



discernable. Meanwhile, on the exterior four minarets were added to proclaim the building as an edifice of Islam (figure 4). From 1935 the building complex has housed a historic museum. It has undergone several restorations, the most recent being at the end of the early 20th century.

In the Cordoba Mosque-Cathedral and Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, the notion of restoring cultural heritage is a politically charged one, raising questions regarding which cultural layer is accorded privilege over another and why this is so. It also highlights the time dimension to old monuments that problematises simple notions of the cultural component of architectural legacies.

State policies on religious heritage

What one restores and why is often a matter of politics. As the historian Renata Holod acknowledged: "Efforts at structuring conservation programmes are therefore faced with several difficulties. The old environments have lost status; at best they have suffered from benevolent neglect on the part of governing elites ...the impetus to [conserve] lies within the realm of political and ideological decisions."⁵ For example, since 1947 in Pakistan conservation preference is given to mosques rather than temples or churches because Pakistan sees itself as an Islamic state, even though other religions had built significant religious edifices within its boundaries. It should be noted that important Buddhist stupas are preserved, but given the meagre resources of the archaeology department, the priority is to conserve Islamic buildings.

A dramatic case of non-conservation is that of the Buddhas of Bamyan in Afghanistan, dating from the 6th century, which were deemed "un-Islamic" and destroyed in 2001 by the Taliban. Several Muslim governments, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the UAE, joined the international protests to save the monuments, but to no avail.

What should have been the attitude of Islam as a religion of tolerance in these cases? Should religious edifices belonging to another religion be preserved? And within Muslim countries themselves, how would this affect the preservation of Shiite mosques in predominantly Sunni countries? This is an ethical question. Suffice it to note, preservation is certainly a political act.

At a time of religious liberalisation in China, at the end of the 20th century, government funds were made available to restore the great timber Xian Mosque, said to have been built in the 8th century but largely rebuilt during the Ming dynasty in the 14th century (figures 5a and 5b). This was a political gesture as much as it was in recognition of the mosque's historical importance.

Mechanisms and agency enabling conservation and restoration

Preservation in the Islamic world has largely been the purview of governments, ministries, departments or local government. Their preservation efforts have been negatively affected by the lack of expertise in archaeological departments, which are by far largely responsible for conservation of historic monuments.

2: The Khulafa mosque rebuilt in 1963.

2a: Plan and elevation of the redesigned mosque with the remaining historic minaret shown in blue.
2b: The new mosque in context. Imagery courtesy Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

3: Roman Catholic cathedral inserted into the Cordoba Mosque in 1523. Courtesy Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

4: The Ayasofia: a church converted into a mosque. Photo: H.U. Khan.

5: The Great Mosque of Xian.
5a: Drawing of mosque.
5b: Entry porch to the prayer hall. Photos: H.U. Khan.

In more recent times preservation work has been augmented by non-state initiatives by NGOs, local community groups, often using *zakat* (charitable) funds, and wealthy individuals. Like the building of a mosque, its preservation is regarded as a pious act.

Further, the institution of the *waqf*, or charitable trust, plays an important role in mosque custodianship. Originally, edifices such as mosques were run, maintained and restored through the endowed trust income, administered by an independent group of trustees. Within the urban areas much of the social and religious building came under *waqfs*. As an institution it still has a great potential for enabling the restoration of buildings and the conservation of areas. For example, even in a self-declared secular state, the Turkish Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü, a *waqf*, has been reasonably successful in this endeavour, especially for the restoration of mosques and the reuse of madrasas, such as the Selimiye complex in Edirne.

Ultimately, however, international bodies continue to play major, decisive roles for conservation around the globe, UNESCO among them. In 1960 UNESCO established a World Heritage List which identified places and buildings of importance to all humankind, and with the aid of international campaigns raises funds and provides expertise to save them. Only one mosque is identified by name—the Great Mosque and Hospital of Divriği in Turkey, which remains in its original form. A number of designated sites include mosques within them; for example Historic Cairo, Registan Square of Samarkand with its mosques, the Historic Mosque City of Bagerhat in Bangladesh, and the town of Timbuktu in Mali, which has three major mosques. The exclusion of so much of the Islamic world's built heritage from this list is telling. It is partially due to the fact that Islamic governments are sometimes reluctant to nominate such individual buildings due to the long and arduous process this entails even though, once on the List, the chances of international support and finance increase. If and when governments go through the tedious process of writing up the nominations, they tend to include whole areas rather than individual structures. Another reason is that inclusion of buildings from outside the West has only gained momentum since the 1980s.

Tourism and restoration

Revenues obtained through tourism significantly fund the conservation of religious edifices, and the judicious provision of facilities and utilisation of sites can yield direct economic benefits. Yet mass tourism, including religious pilgrimage, can also damage the urban fabric of old cities and the historic buildings themselves. Tour groups in search of the "authentic" often stimulate an artificial life separate from the environments and lives of the people that inhabit them. Souvenir shops and traffic congestion affect the environment, and tourism can alter the religious experience. One way to protect ancient buildings is to restrict access to them. Yet how can one limit access to mosques and religious buildings that in theory belong to the *ummah* (community of believers)?

Many historic mosques come under the aegis of departments of archaeology, usually housed within the Ministries of Culture and Tourism. Herein lies a conflict of interest: most of the countries of the Islamic world need the income that tourism brings, so their decision-making as to what should be restored is over-burdened with governmental concern for the need to generate funds—even though the restoration could lead to cultural conflict and degradation. The balance between tourism and conservation is a delicate one and, since mosques are part of the religious built environment, results in a highly charged, often emotive, overlay of interests.

Some conclusions

We have to remember that the importance of conservation is not limited to maintaining the forms of historic buildings for posterity; conservation is also the mechanism for the continuation of traditions, indeed for the growth of culture. In order to facilitate the transmittal of Islamic heritage, preservation needs to be a forward-looking enterprise.

As a principle, I propose that religious buildings should remain inviolate and be preserved as long as their forms possess religious meaning for the local communities concerned, and as long as their survival can be prolonged by technical means. However, I recommend that we should recognise the need for change and the adaptive reuse of some structures. In these instances the philosophical values, outlined earlier, may act as guiding principles, but these may be compromised by ideological or fiscal concerns. Historic preservation is a professional activity, but one that is tempered by a number of motives external to the field itself, necessitating a balancing act and negotiation.

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Notes

1 See Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* ([1849] 1992) and Viollet-le-Duc in *The foundations of architecture* ([1854] 1990).

2 Reigl's 1903 work, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung* was translated as an article "The modern cult of monuments: its character and origin" by K. W. Forster and D. Ghirardo, in *Oppositions* 25 (1982), pp. 21-50.

3 See Hasan-Uddin Khan and Renata Holod, *The Mosque and the Modern World* (1997) for a discussion of the mosque, pp. 142-144.

4 The 1964 *International Charter for the Conservation and restoration of Monuments and Sites*, widely known as the *Venice Charter*, whose principles still largely guide the principles of historic preservation states, in Article 12: Replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.

5 See Renata Holod's introduction in *Conservation as Cultural Survival* (1980) p.x.