

Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar by I.M.Pei: Tradition and Modern Development in Islamic Architecture

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Abstract

The Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), designed by I. M. Pei and built in Doha, Qatar in 2008, marks the critical point in the continual development of Islamic architecture. The intention of this paper is to improve ways to assess the attempts of continuation of Islamic architecture within its modern context. As the Middle Eastern nations expand and explore modernization, Islamic architecture progresses in tandem with modern trends while continuing to serve its own Islamic cultural context. A paradox arises between the traditional building typologies in Islamic architecture and the museum building typology as part of the changing typologies of the modern urban fabric. In particular, this paper examines the modern museum as a building typology and part of Doha's new feat towards modern urbanism, all in its quest of becoming the cultural capital of the Middle East. By doing so, the paper also investigates the implications of the modern Museum of Islamic Art within a traditional Islamic society. Finally, the paper analyzes the museum's architecture in attempt to create a framework that would be used to critique its ability to propagate the furthering of Islamic architecture; in regard to its ability to embody the virtues of Islam while fulfilling its societal and contextual obligations as a museum.

Keywords :Islamic Architecture, Modernization, Continual Development

1. Introduction

In this paper, five excerpts are referred to from the Aga Khan symposium and Ahmed Hamid's book *Hassan Fathy: Continuity in Islamic Architecture* to aid in the forming of a method for analyzing I.M.Pei's design of the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in its ability to further Islamic architecture continuity. By referring to Haider's "Islam, Cosmology, and Architecture"ⁱ the possibility of Pei's design to approach Islamic architecture from its theological standpoint is investigated. Lewcock refers to the concept of referencing history, in his essays "Working with the past,"ⁱⁱ as a way of re-tracing Islamic architecture back to the essence that formulated the Islamic architectural elements that we know of today, which is also important for my analysis of Pei's design. In regards to the excerpts from Hamid's book *Hassan Fathy: Continuity in Islamic Architecture*, looking at the three excerpts that felt relevant to the research: "Inappropriate Adaptations,"ⁱⁱⁱ which is a critique on cherry picking prevalent architectural elements to re-package a curated cultural experience; "Disjunction and Dislocation"^{iv}, a critique on the lack of site specificity which leads to historical or geographical cohesion; and "Individual Elements devoid of context" refers to the categorization and fragmentation of individual architectural elements taken out of context to convey certain cultural connotations.

1.1 Islam, Cosmology, and Architecture

Analyzing Islamic architecture through a cosmological lens resolves the extraction of the essence of Islam from Islamic architecture through its cosmological references in terms of Godly references. This is illustrated in the thought elaborated by Hamid, “Islamic thought structured itself in the manner of hierarchies that always started and ended with profession of Grand Unicity. It is little wonder then that the architecture of Muslims expressed conceptual, spatial, and architectonic hierarchies without breaking down into staged compositions of forms and spaces.”^v This profession of Grand Unicity is especially important due to the fact that the Museum of Islamic Art, houses artifacts that were spiritually guided in the confession of Grand Unicity. The profession of Grand Unicity was clearly thought about when the spaces were programmed because the prayer rooms and education centers were considered in a hierarchical manner (Fig 1 and Fig 2). Additionally, this thematic Grand Unicity is explored in the grand sheer scale of the atrium in reference to one’s self as you set foot from the main entrance; the main circulation is signified or revealed once visitors enter the first floor, as to add to the Grand Unicity. The visitors are confronted with a dual grand staircase connecting them to the hierarchical organization of programs in the upper floors. The grand staircase takes up 25% of the lobby space and it frames a grand view of the continuously evolving stretch of skyscrapers that make up the Doha skyline.

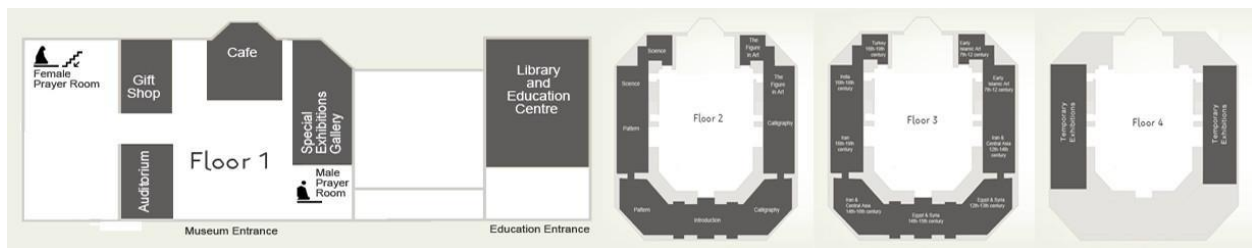


Fig. 1 Floor plans and arrangements of programs with a grand unicity hierarchy in mind, I. M. Pei, Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar, 2008 (Drawings taken from <http://mia.org.qa>)

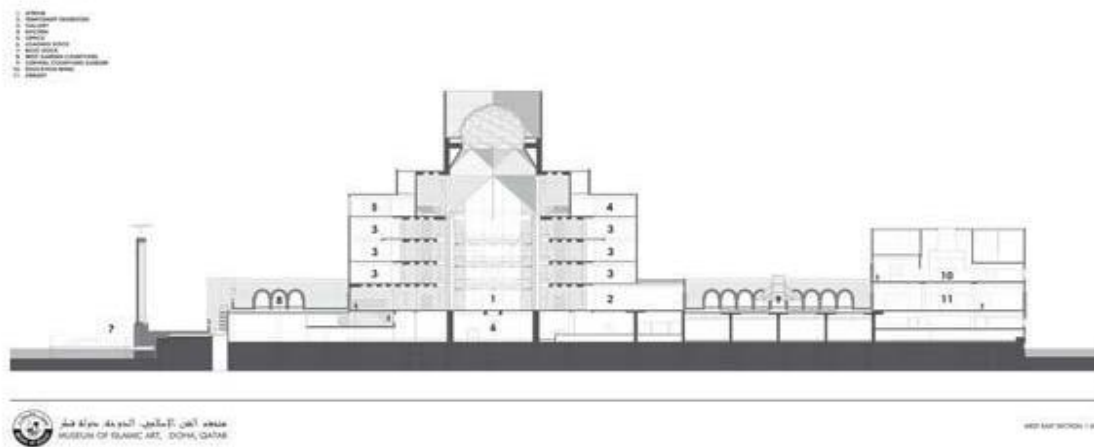


Fig. 2 Sectional quality of arrangements of programs with a grand unicity hierarchy in mind, I. M. Pei, Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar, 2008 (Drawings taken from <http://mia.org.qa>)



Fig. 3 View showing grand window in the atrium
(Image by Rami Mannan)

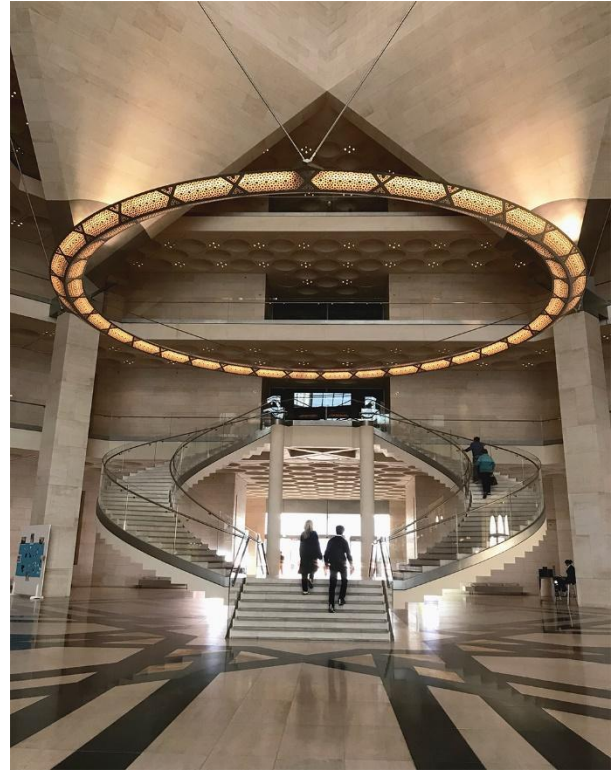


Fig. 4 View showing grand circulation
(Image by Rami Mannan)

Cosmology and theology are essential in Islamic architectural design, because it is about mankind’s relationship to the divine embodiment and manifestation in built form: “Man who is in search of the Divine. It is in this pursuit that man makes the dwelling and places himself in it so that he may recognize his own selfhood and through that, perchance, he may achieve the cognizance of his God. This to me is the essence of any cosmology expressing itself through architecture.”^{vi}

2. Working with the Past

Lewcock’s perspective about historical precedents resonated with me in the sense that as architects we have always looked back at our ancestors’ work to somewhat guide us. This is especially relevant as it is attested in I.M.Pei’s method of research about Islamic architecture. By looking at how precedents helped and inspired I.M.Pei with the creation of the Museum of Islamic Art, and in particular, Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo (9th century) with its sprawling design and multiple architectural influences for the formation of early Islamic architecture, Lewcock emphasized this interrelation between contemporary design and historical precedents by saying: “Studying precedent is not limited to building, of course. When they were taking Cubism through its paces. Picasso and Braque were also spending days at the Louvre analyzing the work of earlier artists. Precedent can serve as a source of inspiration and innovation.”^{vii} Lewcock critiques and assesses the importance of researching precedents when studying Islamic architecture and its environment. Lewcock proposes an interesting point in reference to how Islamic communities behave as a collective, which was successfully addressed in I.M.Pei’s rendition of the MIA. This is especially evident with the museum as a cultural building typology. First and foremost, the museum typology will always be seen as a cultural object and for what it advocates in regard to this specific culture through education, while exemplifying and furthering Islamic education and cultural heritage through archival means. On that note, Lewcock devises a methodology of applying precedents within Islamic environments by citing three characteristics in which the application of precedents is permitted. The first is the division of Islamic towns into segmented quarters of separation, each focused on a central

street that allows for dead-end passageways which lead to the houses. The second characteristic is that the inhabitants were encouraged into constant social contact with one another because of narrowness of the pedestrian streets served to reinforce the social cohesion of the neighborhood and the environment. The third characteristic was that the range of visual perception that the inhabitants were experiencing was small, and a balance of scale between public and private buildings was deemed as necessary.

I.M.Pei started his research by experiencing a myriad of Islamic architectures and by determining the essence or common denominator between all the Islamic architectures. Citing Pei, Jodidio and Halbe write in their book on architecture in Qatar, “This was one of the most difficult jobs I ever undertook. It seemed to me that I had to grasp the essence of Islamic architecture. The difficulty of my task was that Islamic culture is so diverse, ranging from Iberia to Mughal India to the gates of China and beyond. I found what I was looking for in the mosque of Ahmad Ibn Tulun in Cairo (876-79).”^{viii} This seems problematic as the journey of I.M.Pei’s research was governed by the urge of finding an essence of Islamic architecture which is a challenging task but rather very broad and could lead to fragmenting the “essence” of Islamic architecture and taking it out of its context.

Pei’s journey ended at a mosque in Cairo which he described as the essence of Islamic architecture (Figs. 5 and 6). According to Pei “I had at last found what I came to consider to be the very essence of Islamic architecture in the middle of the mosque of Ibn Tulun.”^{ix} Pei might be inclined to dub the mosque of Ibn Tulun as the essence of Islamic architecture because it contains a variety of Islamic styles within one choreographed assembly. The architects of the mosque of Ibn Tulun were influenced by and constructed in the Samarran style common with Abbasid constructions, and the Abbasids inherited Persian architectural traditions in Mesopotamia, and were later influenced by Central Asian styles which lead to the composited architectural style of mosque Ibn Tulun. It seems problematic that Pei said that in his perspective, the mosque of Ibn Tulun is the essence of Islamic architecture as the mosque itself exemplifies a myriad of Islamic architectural styles and with the justification that the mosque employed Abbasid skilled workers to build it.



Fig.5 The Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt, 879
(Photo taken by islamic-arts.org Team from: Ibn Tulun Mosque , Fig.10)

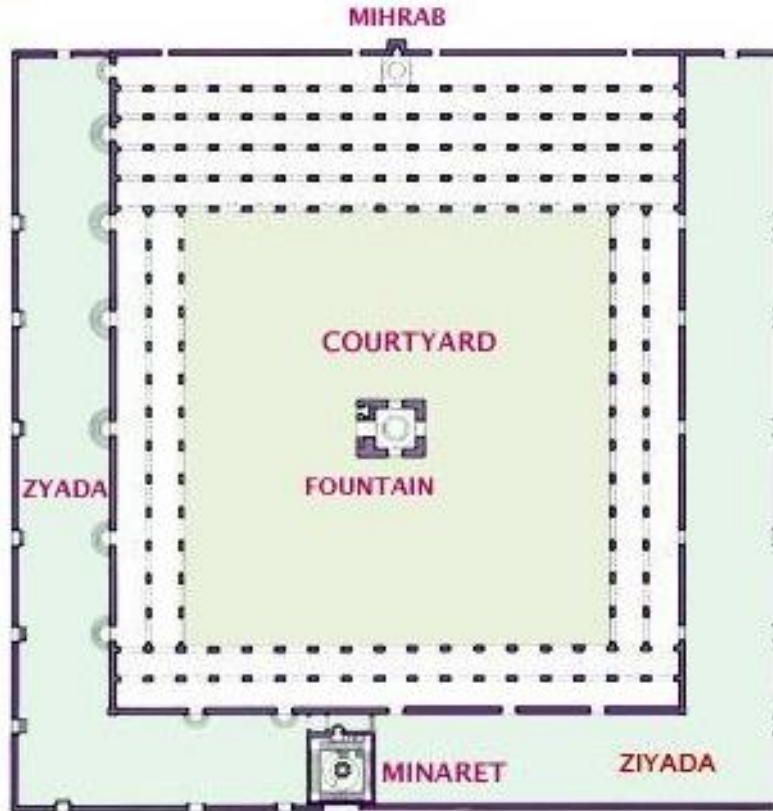


Fig.6 Plan of Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt, 879.
 (Plan from Henri Stierlin: Architecture de l'Islam, 1979, Fig.10)

I.M.Pei later explained, “I was offered a number of sites along the corniche including the location planned for the earlier project. But I did not accept these options.”^x His main concern was about the nature of the modernization of Qatar and its tendency for rapid urban development. “There were not yet too many buildings nearby, but I feared that in the future, large structures that might rise that would overshadow it. I asked if it might not be possible to create my own site ... and thus the MIA is located on the south side of Doha’s corniche on a man-made island 197 feet from the shore.”^{xi} The resemblance of the commanding position of both the MIA and mosque of Ibn Tulun within their environment seems uncanny. As the grand congregational mosque of Ibn Tulun was intended to be the focal point of Ibn Tulun’s capital, al-Qata’i, which served as the Center of Administration for the Tulunid dynasty,^{xii} the same logic was applied to the MIA’s location, in a reclaimed portion of the corniche that positioned the museum as a standalone architecture that symbolizes and furthers Qatar’s initiative of being the cultural capital of the Middle East (fig 7).



Fig.7 Bird eye perspective of MIA in the corniche, Doha, Qatar
 (Photo taken by Wahyu family from MIA park)

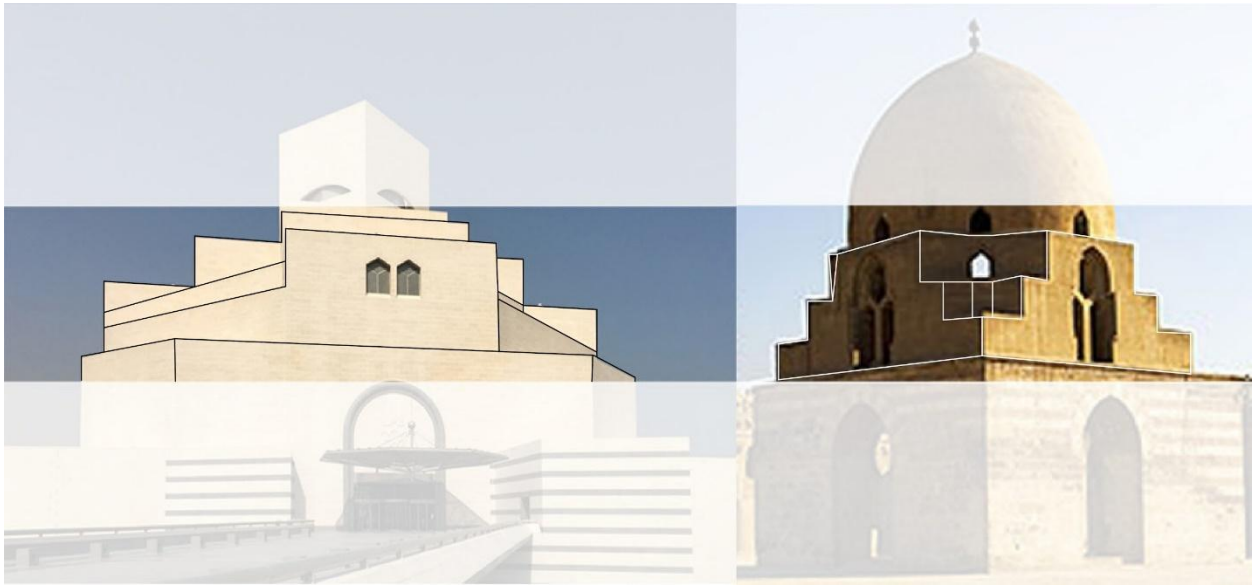


Fig.8 Comparison of forms between MIA, Doha , Qatar and the sabil in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo
(Drawing by Rami Mannan illustrating the uncanny resemblance between the final result and the inspiration)

3. Inappropriate Adaptations

Hamid mentions different approaches at attempting to address cherry picking Islamic architectural elements, “Some architectural approaches attempt to solve the problems of today by taking a tour in history and patching together isolated individual elements in a pretentious construction.”^{xiii} Hamid emphasizes the severity of denying context as it causes projects to swim in a virtual world of signs and symbols belonging visually to the past without substantial relations to the present or the past.

I.M.Pei’s attempt to convey the essence of Islamic architecture remained intact in the final form of the MIA with its towering central core having similarities and references to the high-domed *sabil* (the ablution fountain) erected in the central courtyard of the Ibn Tulun mosque in the thirteenth century. The formal resemblance is blatant (fig 8). As Pei explained, “I remained faithful to the inspiration I had found in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, derived from its austerity and simplicity. It was this essence that I attempted to bring forth in the desert sun of Doha.”^{xiv} As illustrated in Pei’s faithfulness in keeping his inspirations from his journey intact, the project resulted in what may be recognized as mirroring and adapting his inspirations within the MIA by contrasting the resemblance of MIA’s form and the *sabil* from the Ibn Tulun mosque. In my opinion, this is simply unacceptable as this denies MIA from its surroundings and the potential of it being deeply related to its own context and its society. This then brings to question the choice of precedent as what Pei deems as the essence of Islamic Architecture, a mosque that is considered a sacred building typology while adapting the extracted elements to a museum, a building typology that would be considered a secular typology.

4. Disjunctions and Dislocations

Hamid critiques how certain awarded projects ignore their surroundings, meaning that they are not site-specific and instead they turn to historically or geographically disjointed projects for inspiration.^{xv} They overlook local resources and the potential of the local society. Other projects substitute history for geography. They look for built solutions in history, dislocating the *genius loci* of former communities instead of working with both geography and history in a symbiotic manner. What seems very apparent in Pei’s design of the MIA as it disregards the potentials of its local resources and potential relations to its society as the interpretation and inspirations of the Islamic architectural

elements in the mosque of Ibn Tulun are very apparent in the formal solutions for the domes of exterior and interiors of the central core in MIA and of the sabil at Ibn Tulun Mosque (Fig 9).

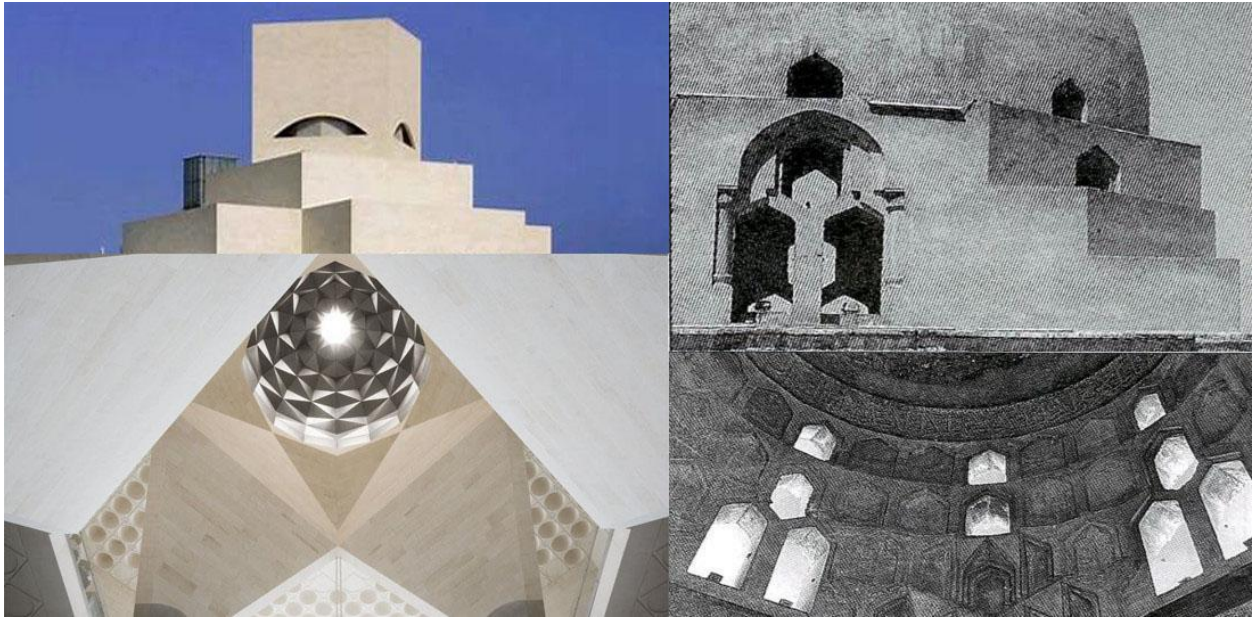


Fig.9 Comparison of exterior and interior forms of the muqarnas dome in MIA, Doha, Qatar and the sabil in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo (Drawing by Rami Mannan illustrating the far more decorative attempt of eliciting light through the dome apertures between the final result and the inspiration)

However, an impulsive reactivity based on rejecting other perceptions can lead to dangerous disjunction. According to Hamid, Islam has always accepted and built upon the successes and failures of previous experiences in a continuous process – a rather iterative process, with continuous improvements.^{xvi} Rejection of previous experiences and other outlooks is considered a waste in Islam, as Islam values continuous transformation and metamorphoses of modes of understanding, while not appreciating and perhaps condemning cycles of destruction. In that regards, the MIA’s formal interpretation of Islamic architecture and its continuity can be deemed as a good start in the attempt of furthering Islamic architecture.

5. Individual Elements Devoid of Context

Hamid addresses the rise of Islamic architectural publications and the wide availability of images, plans, and drawings of Muslim architecture, by critiquing people’s adaptation by saying “coupled with a false openness to a historicist approach of recreating the past, can be devastating.”^{xvii} This statement resonates with the tendency of architects navigating towards fragmenting architectural elements and compositing them together to create their perceived understanding of a particular “style”. Although Pei surveyed many Islamic architectural sites, it seems Pei was yearning to latch onto something that prescribed the essence of Islamic architectural elements; architectural elements that are deemed monumental and yet almost recognizable by anyone as “Islamic architecture”. An example of this would be illustrated in my analysis (see Fig. 9) that shows an attempt to create a modernized muqarnas dome in the atrium of the MIA that seemingly inspired Pei when he visited the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Egypt. Muqarnas in domes are an integral part of Islamic architecture and serve as distinguishing decorative zones that differentiates the atrium from the rest of the building. They also exemplify a formal representation of the diverse creations of God.

Hamid states in a disappointing manner: “Architects today often raid the past for individual architectural elements that serve their current purposes. An avalanche of singular architectural elements inevitably resulted as by-products of the seminars, workshops, and new curricula associated with this architectural approach, which emphasizes analysis, fragmentation, and Categorization above all else.”^{xviii} Hamid critiques the categorizing tendencies of architects, by illustrating points made in Tay Kheng Soon’s 1983 article referring to a phenomenon called featurism^{xix} It is whereby someone approaching architectural elements rich in history in a shallow manner by traditionalizing the modern or

modernizing the traditional through the use of some symbolic architectural elements in a building – domes, arches, minarets and other elements indicative of certain civilizations, in this case, Islamic.

To further his point, Hamid analyses the concept of featurism by saying “any categorization of Islamic architecture that lacks an in-depth understanding of the forces behind its production distances it from the present.”^{xx} The binding environmental forces that resulted in the individual architectural elements lose their composite power when the pieces are removed from the whole context. This emphasizes the need to appreciate the context and forces that gave rise to those architectural elements. Although it is rather uncanny, preceding the MIA, was the Al Fanar Mosque’s, whose minaret was constructed with high resemblance Abbasid architecture which seemingly coincides with the mosque of Ibn Tulun’s assembly in regard to the minaret in Ibn Tulun’s mosque (fig 10). The nature of this resemblance furthers the danger of categorization and fragmentation when discussing the continuity of Islamic architecture.



Fig.10 Comparison of the minarets near MIA, Doha Qatar and the minaret in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo (Drawing by Rami Mannan illustrating the similarities in composition and placement between the final result and the inspiration)

In conclusion, it is imperative that we need to attempt to move past approaching architectural elements rich in history in a shallow manner by traditionalizing the modern or modernizing the traditional through the use of some symbolic architectural elements in a building – domes, arches, minarets and other elements indicative of a certain civilization. This decision then questions our choices of precedents when it comes to exemplifying the essence of Islamic architecture. A mosque is considered a sacred building typology that traditionally embodies the Islamic architectural elements that are perhaps deemed as iconic. On the other hand, building typologies that would be considered secular typology can still embody Islamic virtues and the frameworks that guided the masters to create the initial forms that are recognized as iconic Islamic architectural elements. This fact perhaps urges us to attempt to adopt the frameworks that resulted in the forms we know today rather than simply adapting architectural elements while excluding them from their context for the sake of the continuity of Islamic architecture. Then again, Islam has always accepted and built upon the successes and failures of previous experiences in a continuous process – a rather iterative process, with continuous improvements. Rejection of previous experiences and other outlooks is considered a waste in Islam, as Islam values continuous transformation and metamorphosis of modes of understanding, while not appreciating and perhaps condemning cycles of destruction. In that regards, MIA’s formal interpretation of Islamic architecture and its continuity would be deemed as a good start in the attempt of furthering Islamic architectures continuity.

6. References

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