

Medieval Architecture
February 12-19 2002
Islam

Readings

R. Ettinghausen and O. Grabar, *The Art and Architecture of Islam*, esp 17-25, The Umayyads

O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, 1-18, The Problem

O. Grabar, *The Alhambra*

- Writing Assignment
- You have been to the Alhambra and have returned to New York. You now need to *represent* the building and your experience in writing.
- 6 pages; you may add drawings
- Due March 12

To what extent have *we* invented the Alhambra in our
our image?

The problem of “Orientalism” (Edward Said)

In the nineteenth-century western visitors and
romantic thinkers discovered the Alhambra.

Washington Irving, *Legends of the Alhambra*
(1832). Chateaubriand and Victor Hugo *Les*
Orientales, 1829. Alhambra became a symbol of
sensuous exoticism, “an earthly paradise.”

“Alhambra” is an abbreviation of Qal’at al-Hamra, “the red fort”--because of the red clay of the surrounding terrain. Set on a hill known as the Sabikah--a spur overlooking the river Vega and its tributaries like the Darro. Hills are an extension of the Sierra Nevada. This was an excellent defensive point. But in order to make it inhabitable it needed an artificial water system--aqueducts and cisterns. Site has been described as “an enormous boat anchored between the mountain and the plain.” It owed its life to its dependence on the surrounding land.”

History of Granada. 711 the first substantial body of Moors crossed the Straits of Gibralter and began an advance that ended at Poitiers in 732--this marked the high point of the western lands of Islam.

756 arrived the remaining member of the Umayyad dynasty--recently replaced in the central lands of the Islamic world by the Abbasids. Center of Umayyad power was Andalusia in Seville and Cordova, together with the new royal city of Madinah al-Zahra--one of the world's greatest cultural centers in the 10th century.

Reconquista--Christian reconquest of Spain got under way in the tenth century. Toledo fell in 1085, Cordova in 1246, Seville in 1248. Islamic Spain collapsed into a disunited collection of princelings based on individual cities. Yet these courts were brilliant in literature, philosophy and science. Symbiosis of Muslim and Christian culture. Paradox--the Alhambra stands for “Islamic culture” yet it was built when Spain was no longer controlled by Islam. The last Muslim kingdom was based on Granada--and it existed under theoretical Christian suzerainty.

Early Muslim Granada--the “Old City” Remains of a mosque, palace and extensive stretches of city wall. In the eleventh century the Berber dynasty of the Zirads formed a semi-independent principality. City walls date from this period. Extensive settlement of the *Albaicin* hill. From this period comes the establishment of the fortress-palace on the Alhambra hill. The patron was Yusuf ibn Naghrallah, the Jewish vizier of the Zirids. Legend that the fountain of the lions belongs to this period--bringing Solomonic meaning. The eleventh century marked the high point of the Muslim city of Granada. There followed a period of war between rival dynasties.

1238 a major milestone--the conquest of the city by Muhammad ibn Nasr, a feudal prince claiming descent from the Prophet. He accepted Castilian suzerainty, managing to maintain himself as sole ruler of Muslim Spain. His twenty two descendents formed the Nasrid dynasty until the Christian conquest of 1492. The two most powerful rulers, Yusuf I (1333-4) and Muhammad V (1354-9) were associated with the construction of the new fortress-palace. This moribund dynasty associated with a strikingly rich and original culture based on centuries of economic prosperity and skillful exploitation of the surrounding land. This area became a refuge for displaced Muslims from elsewhere. Granada was at its most Muslim on the eve of the Christian conquest. Retrospective fascination with the past.

The construction of the Alhambra cannot be fixed precisely in time. No systematic recording was attempted. This was a living city of some 740 by 220 meters surrounded by walls and gardens. It also contained the royal residences. A princely city overlooking a bourgeois city below. The outer enclosure and aqueduct were probably completed by the end of the thirteenth century. The most important elements--the Courts of the Myrtles and the Lines belong to the times of Yusuf I (1333-54) and Muhammad V (1354-9 and 1362-91). The summer palace, the Generalife belongs to the reign of Isma'il (1314-25). Tower of the Infantas from the mid fifteenth century.

Naming the parts of the complex

1. The Alcazaba (citadel)
2. The Mexuar--a hodge podge of ruined or restored features. A royal tribunal at the entrance to the palace?
3. The Golden court (Cuarto Dorado). Royal entrance “His throne comprises the heavens and the earth; the preserving of them oppresses him not; he is the all-high, the all-glorious.” (Koran). Two doors, one of them (right) leading to the Court of the Myrtles
4. Court of the Myrtles (36.6 by 23.5m)
5. Hall of the Ambassadors, 11.3m square by 18.2m high. Stunning interior decoration of stucco and wooden roof. Royal reception room
6. Baths downstairs
7. Court of the Lions (28.5 by 15.7m). Hall of the Two Sisters (octagonal, north) Hall of the Abencerrajes (star-shaped south) name derived from a family murdered there (Chateaubriand)
8. The Partal
9. Generalife (*Jinnah al-'Arif*, The Noblest of Gardens)

The inscriptions

1. Those giving information (Gate of the Law)
2. Repetitive Koran texts, “There is no victorious one except God”
3. Poems--specifically composed, by Ibn Zamrak or Ibn Jayyab. Use of poems on buildings rare before the 14th century. Often at eye level.

Themes of the poems: defense; water and the faith of Islam

Water. Hydraulic system--aqueducts and cisterns probably goes back to the thirteenth century. Practical functions, pleasure, patronage, image of paradise

On the 14thC basin of the Fountain

“A sculpted monument, its veil of splendor consists of a pearl which adorns the environ with the diffusion of gems;

Silver melting which flows between jewels one like the other in beauty, white in purity’

A running stream evokes the illusion of being a solid substance and one wonder which one is in truth fluid.

Don’t you see that it is the water which is running over the rim of the fountain, whereas it is the monument which offers long channels for the water

Like the one in love whose lids overflow with tears and who curbs the tears in fear of a slanderer

What else is it in truth but a mist which sheds forth from the fountain drenchings towards the lions?

It [the fountain] resembles in this the hand of the caliph when it happens
that it sheds forth supports towards the lions of the Holy War

O thou who beholdest the lions whilst they are crouching, timidity
preventing them from becoming hostile....

God's blessing upon thee and mayest thou be blessed eternally to
reiterate celebrations and to were down thine enemies

Affirmation of royal power: poem in alcove of Hall of Ambassadors

“You received from me morning and evening salutations of blessing,
prosperity and friendship;

This is the high dome and we [the alcoves] are its daughters; yet I have
distinction and glory in my family,

I am the heart amidst [other parts [of the body] for it is in the heart that
resides the strength of soul and spirit

My companions may be the signs of the zodiac in the heaven [of the
cupola] but to me only and not among them is the Sun of nobility.

For my lord, the favorite [of God] Yusuf, has decorated me with the
clothes of splendour and of glory without vestments,

And he has chosen me as the throne of his rule; may his eminence be
helped by the Lord of light, of the divine throne...”

“Islamic” unlike “Christian” refers to more than a faith--to a series of related cultures. Unlike the slow spread of Christianity as an imperceptible growth from within the spread of Islam was rapid and externalized through conquest.

622 was the year of the Hijra when the Prophet Muhammad left Mecca to found Madina, the first Islamic state, followed by a handful of people who made the Prophet's house the first center. By 750 Islamic armies spread to France and to the Indus. The first Islamic dynasty, the Umayyads. Creation of new cities and the appropriation of old including Alexandria and Jerusalem where the Dome of the Rock was built.

Islamic art was based upon appropriation, adaptation and invention. It is regionally diverse, but with a heartland in the Near (Middle) East and the Fertile Crescent.

The needs of the mosque could be served by a very simple building: the House of the Prophet.

Needs of meeting and prayer were served by an open space or *haram* which was both holy and of restricted access and a *masjid* or place of prostration for prayer. The *mihrab* provided a focus of attention as the most holy point of the site.

At Mecca Muhammad took over the ancient *masjid-al haram* and directed it to the new faith. He introduced a ritual of individual prayer (*salat*) to be performed 5 times a day wherever the worshipper might be. In addition on Fridays at noon prayer should take place in the *masjid Allah* and a sermon would be delivered and prayer lead by an imam

No Eucharist; no sacraments; no incarnation. No Trinity. God is one and without rival.

Mohammad's house served as the first mosque. A 50m square courtyard built of sun-baked bricks with some rooms set on the east for residence. To the south were colonnades of palm trunks supporting palm branches to protect from the heat. The southern side became the *qibla* or place toward which prayer was directed.

The prophet led prayer and gave sermons from a position on the north.

On art and painting, the Koran indicated that “wine, games of chance, statues and arrows for divination are a crime, originating in Satan.

Contrast the Christian idea of human creativity as an image of divine creativity. In Islam God is the only creator. The artist who fashions a representation of a living thing comes into competition with God.

The importance of the Book (Koran) in Islamic thought. Writing served instead of images to focus the purpose of worshippers. The importance of calligraphy.

Focus upon the formal potential of architecture as combination of columns, piers, arches, vaults and the variations of type (domed and basilical) and material (brick, masonry and concrete). Experiments enhanced by immediate contact with vibrant cultures, ancient, Jewish, Persian, Sassanian, Byzantine.

Umayyads and their art 650-750. After the death of the Prophet in 632 four of his immediate followers ruled until they were replaced by a dynasty descended from a wealthy Meccan mercantile family, the head of which (Mu'awiya) was governor of Syria. In 661 he defeated his rival and became the first Caliph or successor of the Prophet. His descendents ruled the Muslim world for the next century as the Umayyads.

Great variation in Umayyad art in response to local traditions and materials. Of the works of architecture associated with this period the most important is the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, founded by Abd al-Malik, finished 691. This was the first surviving Umayyad work and their first major architectural enterprise.

Commemorative function of the building--later thought to enshrine the spot where Muhammad ascended to Heaven. Its original associations were more clearly with the site of the Jewish Temple and events in the life of Abraham. Its decoration with Byzantine crowns and Sassanian jewels projects the triumph of Islam over those older cultures. Mosaic artists were probably Byzantine.

The building is located on an artificial platform in the *Haram al-Sharif* (Noble Sacred Enclosure) that was associated with the Temple. Domination of city skyline intended to project the idea of appropriation.

Central dome is 20m in diameter and 25 m high made up of two wooden shells gilded on the outside and placed on a high drum with 16 windows. Inner arcade of 12 columns (spolia) and 4 piers. Two ambulatories divided by 8 piers and 16 columns. Marble and mosaic covers the interior. Ceilings of carved wood. Tie-beams faced with bronze. Effects of light.

The Dome remains close to the principles of Christian building. It is a *martyrium* like the Anastasis rotunda.

Mosaic decoration intact over 280 square meters does not include a single human being. Vocabulary includes motifs from conquered lands. Long inscription under the dome contains the Christological passages in the Koran emphasizing the Muslim message in the city where Christ was crucified.

Early mosques. Generally simple, made up of a large nearly-square area with a deep portico signifying the *qibla* side toward Mecca. Eventually shallow porticoes sheltered the other sides leading towards complete cover becoming a hypostyle hall. Supports were often *spolia*. Various coverings (wood, vaults, domes). Served as religious, devotional and political centers

Damascus Great Mosque (706)

Outline (157 by 100m) determined by a Roman enclosure. *Qibla* is unusual in that the hypostyle is intersected by a transept-like corridor with dome.

Minarets based on the lower parts of Roman towers.

Cordova Great Mosque built under Umayyads of Spain,
Caliph Abd al-Rahman III and his son al-Hakam.

190 by 140m rectangle of which a third occupied by
courtyard. Covered space made up of 17 naves on 16
arcades running SW-NE--wrongly thought to be in the
direction of Mecca. In the heavily restored outer wall are
11 portals.

Four periods of construction

1. 784-6: 9 or 11 12-bay naves
- 2 and 3 additions made under Abd-al-Rahman 833-52
- 4, al Hakam, 961-76