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The Third Millennium Mosque:
Redefining Sacred Space for Intercultural Dialogue in Florence

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Glossary

Adhan: the adhān is the Islamic call to prayer, usually made by the muezzin.

Hadith: a hadith is a short account, generally few lines, about the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbsl). However, it has a much greater importance because it is part of the Sunna, which is the second source of teaching after the Qur'an itself.

Hajj: is the traditional pilgrimage to the Sacred Mosque in Mecca.

Jumu'a: Jumu'a (also known as Jamii or Jumuha) is the "Friday prayer", the name given to the communal prayer that Muslims perform every Friday just after midday.

Ka'ba: the Ka'ba is an ancient building located inside the Sacred Mosque in the centre of Mecca. It is considered the most sacred structure in Islam.

Khutba: the khutba is a sermon given by an imam to Muslim worshippers on Friday, when they gather for the communal salāt al-jumū'a.

Masjid: the masjid is the original name for the mosque. It is the place where a Muslim performs the daily salāt.

(pbsl): PBSL stands for "Pace e Benedizione su di Lui" (Peace and Blessings be upon him). This expression is used by Italian-speaking Muslims after mentioning the Prophet Muhammad.English-speaking Muslims use PBUH,
meaning "Peace be upon him".

(psl): PSL stands for "Pace su di Lui" (Peace be upon him), and it is used after mentioning other prophets in Islam.

Qibla: the term qibla refers to the direction of Mecca and the Islamic sanctuary of the Ka'ba, towards which a Muslim must face when performing the salāt.

Salat: is the Islamic prayer.

Sawm: it refers to the obligatory fast that every Muslim who has reached puberty and is in good physical and mental health must perform during the 30 days of the lunar month of Ramadan.

Shahada: it is the declaration of faith through which a Muslim states belief in one single God (Allah) and in the mission of the Prophet Muhammad (pbsl).

Shari'a: it is the set of rules for life and behavior given by God for the moral, religious, and legal conduct of His followers.

Sura: in the Qur'an, a sura is each one of the 114 sections of the Qur'an.

Sujud: is the act of prostration to God in Islam.

Tawhid: is the principle at the foundation of the belief in the oneness and uniqueness of God (Allāh).

Ummah: in Islam, the term ummah primarily refers to the community of believers.

Wudu': is the ritual washing that every Muslim must carry out before performing an act of religious importance. The most common of these is the salāt, for which one must first achieve the state of ritual purity (tahāra).

Zakat: is the religious duty to give a portion of one's wealth in order to purify it. Every Muslim who has the necessary means is required to fulfil this obligation.

Abstract

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Abstract

The thesis explores the architectural project of The Third Millennium Mosque in Florence as an opportunity to redefine the meaning of Islamic sacred space within the city's urban and cultural context. The work analyses the symbolic, social, and spatial value of the mosque as a place of worship and intercultural dialogue, focusing particularly on the relationship between religious identity and its integration into the Florentine architectural fabric. Starting from a historical and typological analysis of Islamic architecture—from the origins of the mosque to its developments worldwide and in Italy—the research investigates the design principles and foundational characteristics of the Islamic sacred space, reinterpreting them in light of the needs of the local Muslim community. The proposed project aims to create an architecture capable of merging tradition and contemporaneity, spirituality and functionality, fostering an open dialogue with the city and its inhabitants. Thus, the mosque becomes not only a place of prayer but also a tool for social cohesion and a symbol of peaceful coexistence among different cultures and religions, reflecting the role of architecture as a bridge between faith, history, and modernity.

La tesi esplora il progetto architettonico della Moschea del Terzo Millennio a Firenze come opportunità per ridefinire il significato dello spazio sacro islamico nel contesto urbano e culturale della città. Il lavoro analizza il valore simbolico, sociale e spaziale della moschea come luogo di culto e dialogo interculturale, ponendo particolare attenzione al rapporto tra identità religiosa e integrazione nel tessuto architettonico fiorentino. Attraverso un percorso che parte dall'analisi storica e tipologica dell'architettura islamica, dalle origini della moschea alle sue evoluzioni nel mondo e in Italia, la ricerca indaga i principi di progettazione e i caratteri fondativi dello spazio sacro islamico, reinterpretandoli alla luce delle esigenze della comunità musulmana locale. Il progetto proposto mira a costruire un'architettura capace di coniugare tradizione e contemporaneità, spiritualità e funzionalità, in un dialogo aperto con la città e i suoi abitanti. La moschea diventa così non solo luogo di preghiera, ma anche strumento di coesione sociale e simbolo di convivenza pacifica tra culture e religioni diverse, riflettendo il ruolo dell'architettura come ponte tra fede, storia e modernità.

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The Islamic Community Worldwide





Introduction and Precepts of the Islamic Faith

Islam is a monotheistic religion of Abrahamic origin, which began in the 7th century on the Arabian Peninsula, specifically in Mecca. Believers hold that this faith was revealed by the Prophet Muhammad (pbsl), considered in Islamic tradition to be the last Prophet and the “Seal of the Prophets”, sent by Allah to reaffirm the revelation first given to Adam, the first prophet.
With a large community of about 2.07 billion followers, equal to around 25% of the world’s population, Islam stands as the second most widespread religion globally, immediately after Christianity. The primary sacred text of Islam is the Qur’an, written in Arabic, which Muslims regard as the final divine revelation, perfectly preserved through time. The hadith (sayings and accounts) form another essential source, containing the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbsl). They represent the main reference for knowing the Prophet, who is viewed as the ideal model for humanity.
Islam, according to its followers, represents the culmination and completion of the divine revelation given to previous prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Similar to Jewish Halakha, Islam includes a system of laws known as Sharī’a, which guides personal, community and social life. It focuses on five key aims: the protection of life, property, health, religion, and human dignity.

TheArkān al-Islām, also known as the “Pillars of Islam”, represent the five fundamental duties required of every practicing Muslim, provided that the person has reached puberty and is in sound physical and mental health. According to a hadith attributed to Bukhari in the 9th century, the Archangel Gabriel communicated these pillars to the Prophet Muhammad (pbsl). They are as follows:

Shahada (Declaration of Faith):

The Shahāda is the fundamental declaration of faith, which states: “Ashhadu an lā ilāha illā Allāh – wa ashhadu anna Muhammadan Rasūl Allāh” (“I bear witness that there is no deity except Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His messenger”). For it to be valid, it must be spoken with full understanding of its meaning and with sincerity of intention. Pronouncing the Shahāda with sincerity is sufficient to express one’s acceptance of Islam.

Salat (Canonical Prayer):

The Salāt is the ritual prayer performed five times a day at specific times, marked by the calls of the muezzin in the mosques. This act of devotion is essential in the daily life of a practicing Muslim.

Zakat (Almsgiving):

The Zakāt is the obligatory payment that Muslims must give, if they are able to afford it, in order to purify their wealth. The amount, calculated as 2.5% of a person’s annual financial assets, is intended for the poor and those in need.

Sawm Ramadan (Fasting during Ramadan):

The sawm Ramadan consists of fasting from dawn until sunset during the lunar month of Ramadan. This act of self-discipline is practiced by those who are able to do so without harming their health.

Hajj (Pilgrimage to Mecca):

The Hajj is the canonical pilgrimage to Mecca, which is obligatory at least once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able to undertake it.

In addition to these five pillars, there are the six Arkān al-Īmān (Pillars of Faith), which require belief in God as the only Creator and the only One worthy of worship; in the angels; in the revealed books such as the Qur’an, the Gospel, and the Torah; in all the Prophets without exception; in the Day of Judgement; and in Destiny as part of life. These elements define the faith of a Muslim.

The understanding and belief in God in Islam are based on several fundamental elements, including:

The awareness of the existence of God, in contrast to atheistic or materialistic views of existence.

The awareness of God's mastery over creation and His active role as the guarantor and sustainer of all things.

The awareness of God's exclusive divinity, without any partner or being to whom any form of divinity can be attributed.

Faith in all the Divine Names and Attributes as affirmed in the Qur'an and in the Sunnah (prophetic tradition).

The Surah CXII of the Qur'an, known as al-Ikhlās or "the chapter of sincere worship", provides the definition of God: "Say: He is God, One. God, the Eternal. He neither begets nor is begotten, and none is equal to Him."[1] This sura is considered the perfect summary of Islamic Oneness, or Tawhīd, which expresses the characteristics of God as Unique and One. God is understood to be completely transcendent and beyond human comprehension and therefore cannot be represented in any form. Everything that exists is seen as a sign, manifestation, or reflection of God, through which He makes Himself known. The Qur'an states that everything created by God comes into existence by His command: "He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth; when He wills something, He says, 'Be', and it is." [2] By placing trust in God, the Muslim receives His guidance. The closeness of God to the human being is expressed in the words: "I am as My servant thinks of Me, and I am with him when he remembers Me..." [3] The attributes of God - such as life, knowledge, power, will, hearing, sight, and speech - belong entirely to Him, without compromising His Oneness. God oversees human life without being visible, yet He is always ready to assist those who call upon Him. God may be invoked through His 99 Names, as Islam rejects the idea that God resembles His human creation in any way, and excludes any anthropomorphic concept of Allah. These 99 Names aim to describe His essence, offering a rich range of attributes from eternity and truth to wisdom and power, providing a profound understanding of the Divine.

The designated place, although not strictly required, for performing Salāt (the Islamic ritual prayer) is the mosque, called masjid in Arabic. The mosque, in addition to being a liturgical space, serves several functions, including a place for gathering, studying, and even resting. Inside it, the five obligatory daily prayers are performed, the breaking of the fast during the month of Ramadan takes place, and the funds of zakāt are collected and redistributed. The mosque represents one of the most significant architectural expressions of Islam, shaped by the principles that govern sacred art in general. In accordance with Islamic theological doctrine, or tawhīd, the mosque does not contain human or animal representations. Instead, geometry plays a key role as a link between human reality and divine transcendence, since both, according to Islamic belief, belong to Allah, who is considered both al-Zāhir ("Manifest") and al-Bātin ("Hidden"). The avoidance of depicting human images derives from the absence, in Sunni Islamic thought, of the concept of sanctity, and from the belief that only the Prophet Muhammad (pbsl) can intercede for human beings before God. This restriction is also intended as a safeguard, to prevent any form of idolatry or deviation in worship.



Principles of Islamic Architecture and Urban Planning

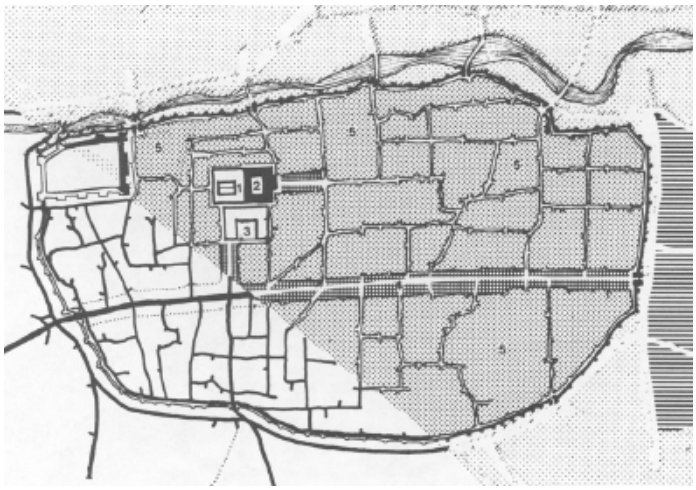

Fig.1 The plan of the Islamic Damascus.

1. Church of St. John 2. Umayyad Mosque.
3. Al-Khadra Palace 4. Market/Colonnade.
5. Residential Quarters 6. Cemetery.

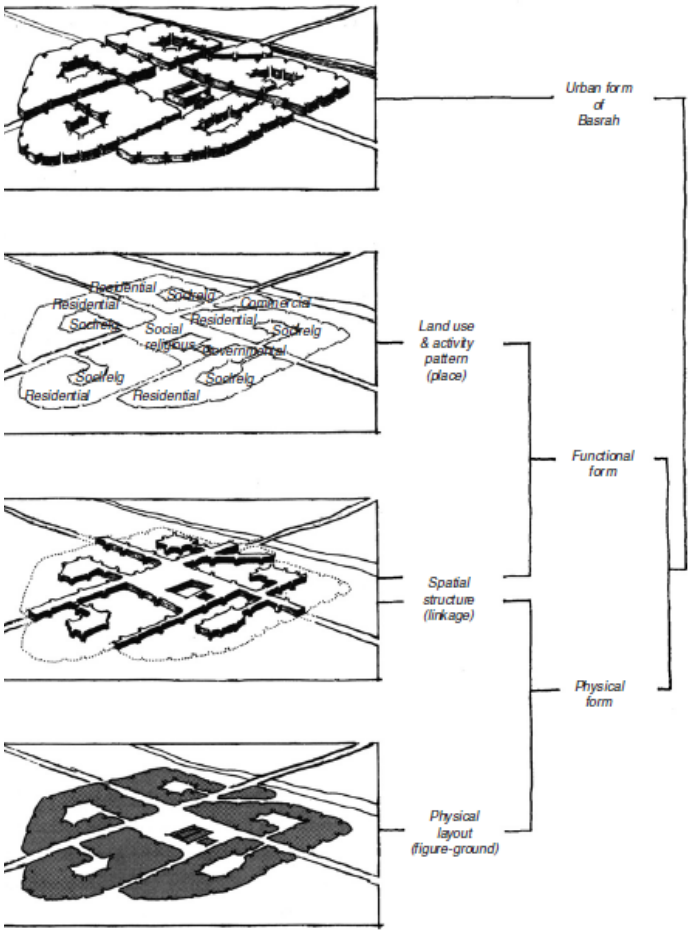

Fig.2 Basrah's urban form analyzed, Iraq.



Fig.3 Enclosed residential quarters (Riyadh).



Fig.4 Example of street system from Riyadh.



Fig.5 Urban fabric in the stereotypical Islamic city (Isfahan).

From the perspective of the Andalusian jurist Ibn Abdūn, architecture is regarded as a refuge for the spirit, the soul, and the body of the human being, naturally embodying spiritual values and beliefs. [4] In Islamic culture, architecture and urban form are closely interconnected with religion, and mosques play a central role in public and social life. Traditional Islamic cities are characterized by the absence of independent monuments and large open squares, favoring instead narrow alleyways and enclosed residential clusters. This layout reflects a unique conception of public and private space, emphasizing the importance of family privacy and security. The congregational mosque, in addition to being a place of worship, functioned as a center for social and political services. Cities were organized around central markets and cul-de-sacs, creating a pedestrian environment with narrow, shaded streets and shopfronts that enriched everyday life. These spaces, adapted to climatic and cultural needs, highlight the importance of respecting local traditions when designing urban environments. In the context of traditional Islamic cities, several distinctive features can be observed. These cities tended to be relatively small, with populations rarely exceeding 100,000 inhabitants. Urban populations represented only a small portion of the country's total population. Cities were walled and divided into separate districts, with minorities - such as Jewish communities - living in distinct quarters. Daily life revolved around compact, defensible neighborhoods, powered mainly by human and animal labor and, in some cases, by water. Solidarity between neighbors was a fundamental value, emphasized by the design of residential neighborhoods known as mahallāt and hurāt. Islamic houses, designed to ensure maximum privacy and security, reflected the importance of extended families living in adjacent homes and forming cohesive social units. The mosque, strategically placed at the intersection of major thoroughfares, served as the spiritual and social heart of the city. Next to mosques, markets (sūq) were arranged into specialized sections to facilitate trade, monitored by market inspectors (muhtasib) responsible for ensuring fairness in transactions. Caravanserais situated along major routes provided lodging and basic services for travelers and merchants. Security was a priority, with strong defensive walls, strategically located gates, and watchtowers. The planning principles of Islamic cities were shaped by climatic conditions, religious and cultural beliefs, Sharīa law, and the social organization of the community. Courtyards, terraces, covered streets, and gardens were designed to adapt to hot climates. In summary, the traditional Muslim city represents a distinctive model of urban development, integrating spirituality, social cohesion, family privacy, and security, all guided by principles deeply rooted in Islamic culture, law, and faith.



Fig.6 Great Mosque of Kairouan, Kairouan, 670.



Fig.8 Shah Mosque, Isfahan, 1629.

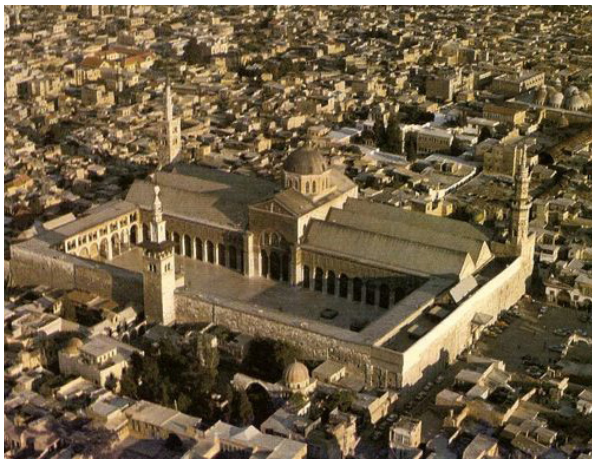

Fig.7 Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, 713.



Fig.9 Ibn Tulun Mosque, Cairo, 884.

The Islamic architecture has played a crucial role in shaping one of the richest and most diverse architectural traditions in the world. Its influence extends across a vast territory, from the northern regions of Africa to Central Asia, from Southern Europe to East Asia. This development was shaped by a variety of factors, including pre-existing architectural traditions, climatic conditions, the availability of building materials, and, above all, the religious and cultural principles of Islam. The expansion of Islamic rule in the 7th century led to the assimilation of various regional architectural traditions. In Syria, a classical architectural tradition with deep historical roots developed, providing the foundation for works such as the Great Mosque of Damascus, a hymn to Byzantine grandeur transformed by the Islamic hand. In North Africa, Berber and ancient influences were incorporated, culminating in the splendid Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia, a masterpiece of geometric harmony and intricate design. In Egypt, architecture was shaped by Pharaonic and Coptic styles, resulting in the distinctive beauty of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo. Meanwhile, Iran witnessed a remarkable fusion of Persian and Sasanian influences, giving rise to buildings such as the Shah Mosque (Mosque of the King) in Isfahan, an outstanding example of architectural majesty featuring pointed arches and highly elaborate decoration. These diverse traditions contributed to the formation of a unique style of Islamic architecture, one that is flexible and adaptable to the needs of different regions. Islamic architecture is characterised by its flexibility and adaptability. Its foundational principles are not confined to a specific physical form but are reflected in concepts that connect religious meaning with architectural expression. One of its distinctive features is the absence of a strict separation between the sacred and the profane. This distinction is based on personal awareness and understanding, rather than on physical characteristics of space. For example, prayer can be performed in any clean place, emphasising that the separation between sacred and profane is conceptual rather than tied to any particular architectural form. Mosques, the principal religious structures of Islam, embody this principle, serving as places of worship while also holding a significant political and communal role in society

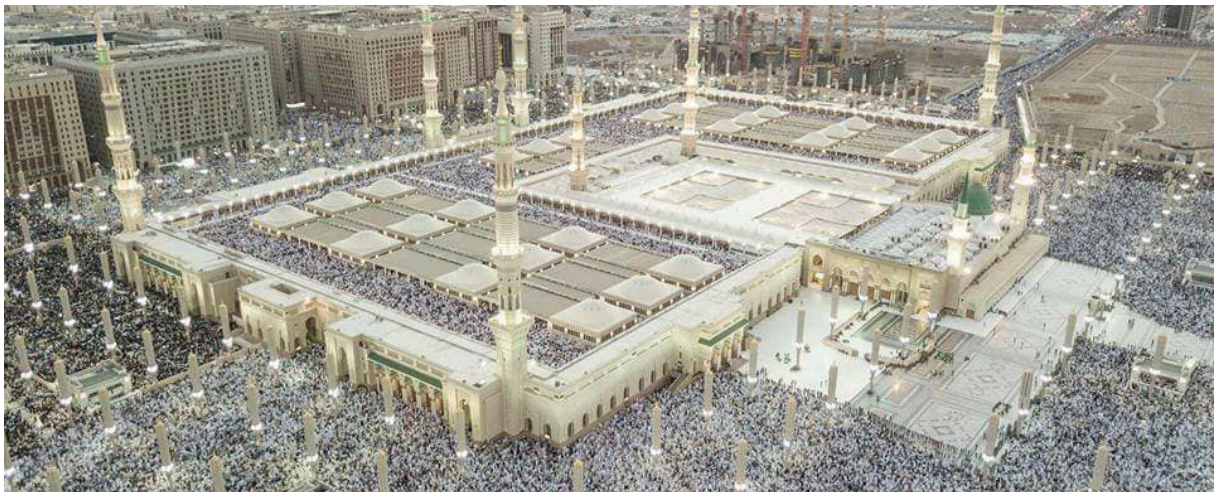

Fig.10 Prophet's Mosque, Medina, 623.



Fig.11 Turkish Caravanserai.



Fig.12 University of al-Qarawiyyin, Fez, 857.

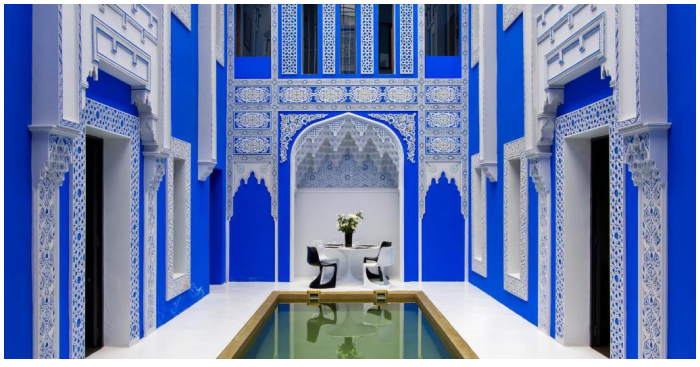

Fig.13 Riad Goloboy, Marrakesh, 19th century.



Fig.14 Mausoleum of Mevlana, Konya, 1274.

The Islamic architecture is a complex and diverse form of art that reflects the vastness and richness of its culture. Over the centuries, various dynasties, regional traditions, and cultural influences have contributed to the development of a wide range of architectural styles, which have adapted to the classical typologies of Islamic architecture.

Listing these types, we find:

1.Mosque: the mosque is the spiritual center of the Muslim community. These buildings reflect the importance of unity and submission to God in Islam. Mosques generally follow a basic layout with an open central courtyard surrounded by porticoes. The most significant element is the mihrab, an arched niche that indicates the direction of Mecca. Larger mosques also include a minaret, a tower from which the call to prayer is made.

2.Madrasa: the Madrasa refers to an Islamic educational institution, similar to a college, where students study theology, jurisprudence, and other Islamic disciplines. These buildings often have a square or rectangular layout with an internal courtyard. The teaching spaces are arranged around the courtyard, and students often reside in adjacent living quarters.

3.Mausoleum: Islamic mausoleums commemorate important individuals in the history of Islam. These buildings vary from simple structures to monumental complexes, often featuring domes and intricate decoration. Many mausoleums have become important centres of pilgrimage.

4.Caravanserais: caravanserais were inns located along trade routes, providing safety and shelter for merchants and travelers. These buildings typically featured a central courtyard for pack animals, surrounded by rooms for merchants and visitors.

5.Residential Architecture: traditional Islamic houses are often organized around internal courtyards. The interiors are richly decorated with mosaic tiles, stucco work, inlaid wood and fine fabrics. These houses reflect the importance of privacy and family in Islamic culture.

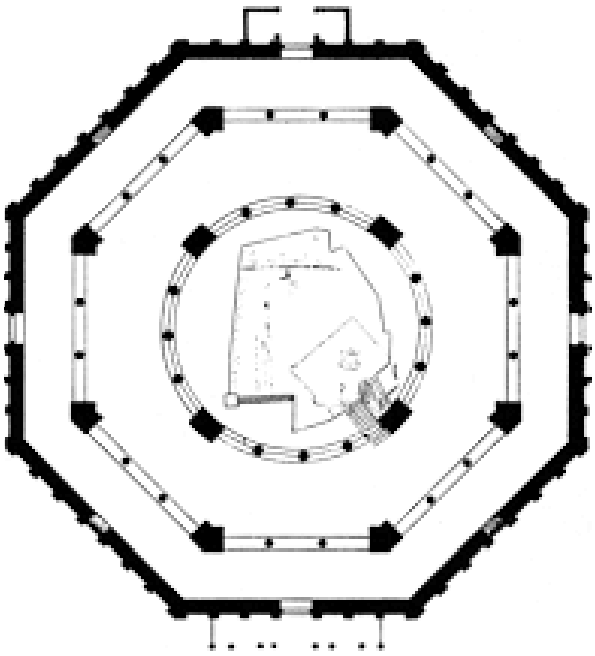

Fig.15 Dome of the Rock plan, Jerusalem, 687.

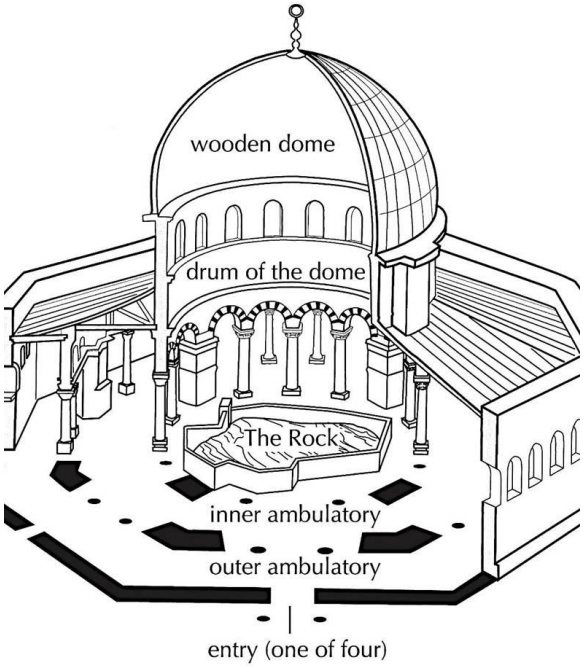

Fig.17 Cutaway drawing of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 687.



Fig.16 Interior of Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 687.

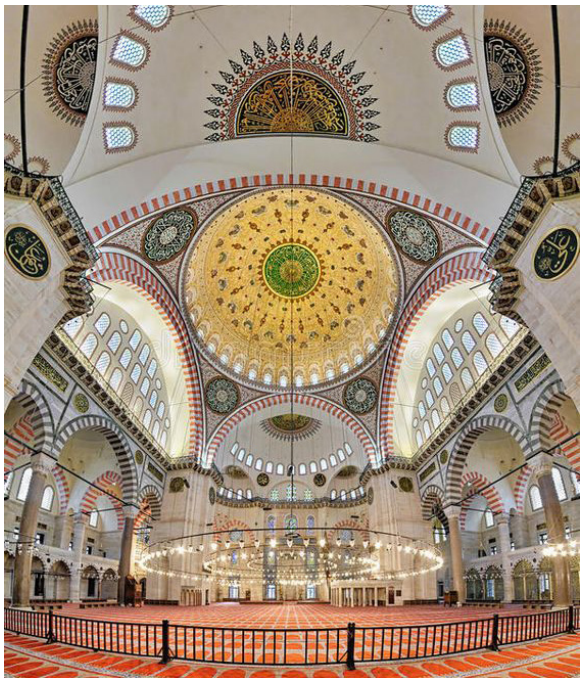

Fig.18 Süleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, 1557.

Within Islamic architecture, achieving unity has been a central aim for Muslim architects throughout history. However, reaching this unity within buildings was a gradual process that required time and technological development. In the 7th century, the Dome of the Rock, for example, was an exception, as it was not constrained by the limitations of the early hypostyle mosques. This octagonal structure featured a circular ambulatory and a concentric octagonal arcade, above which rose a dome. The use of bright colors, repetitive decorative patterns, and abundant light filtering through the windows created a sense of spaciousness and lightness within the building. In more traditional hypostyle mosques, the sense of infinity was evoked through the repetition of structural elements. Multiple colonnades and seemingly endless visual perspectives suggested the infinite, emphasised by the soft light that filled these spaces. However, despite efforts to repeat decorative motifs and to play with the vertical scale of interior spaces, the complete sense of unity found in the Dome of the Rock remained elusive until the 16th and 17th centuries, with the development of Ottoman mosques. The Ottomans achieved this concept of unity in their mosque interiors by using increasingly large domes accompanied by a rhythmic system of smaller semi-domes. This allowed for the minimisation of internal supports. The vertical surfaces were punctuated with numerous windows, creating the illusion that the entire building was floating in light. This effect was so powerful that it was metaphorically compared to “the heavens” as described in the Qur’an. This Ottoman architectural style represented a culmination of spatial continuity, harmonising architecture with light in an unprecedented way, and creating a tangible sense of unity within the buildings.



Fig.19 Humayun's Tomb, Delhi, 1557.

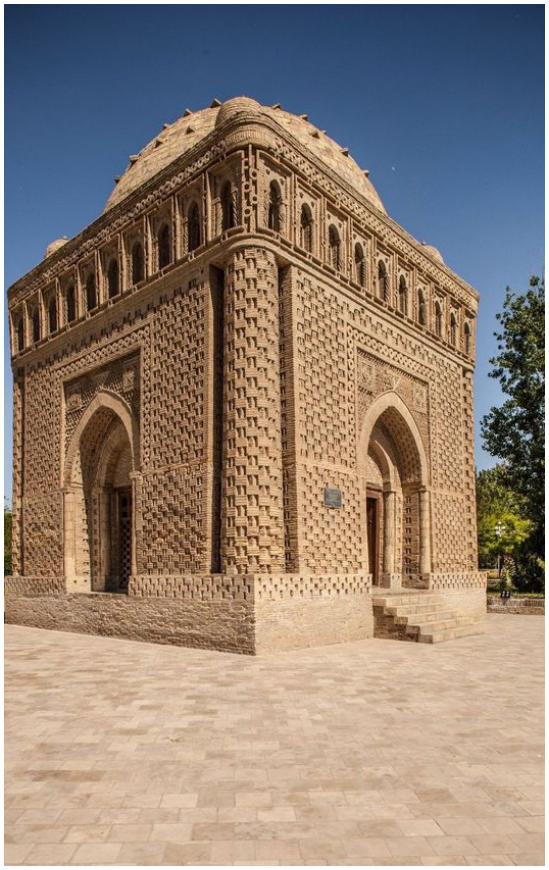

Fig.20 Samanid Mausoleum, Bukhara, 10th century.

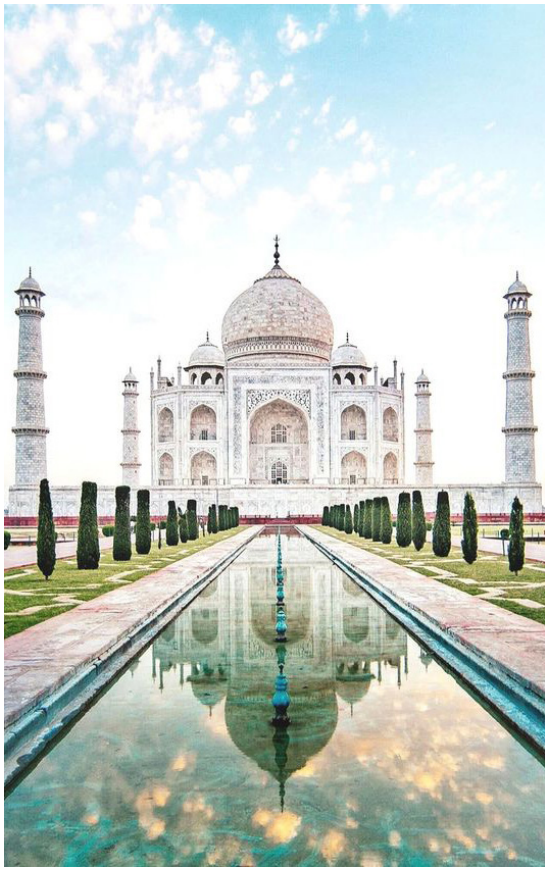

Fig.21 Taj Mahal, Agra, 1632.

In the context of Islamic architecture, the treatment of building exteriors varies greatly across the Muslim world, reflecting distinct cultural and religious values. In Islam, humility and modesty are considered more important than power and display. This philosophy is highlighted in verses of the Qur'an that discourage excessive ostentation of wealth. This perspective has influenced the external appearance of buildings in many traditional Islamic cities, where houses often show little outward architectural expression, and large mosques frequently blend into the urban fabric without striking distinction. However, in some regions of the Muslim world, as seen in the Samanid Mausoleum in Bukhara and the Mughal mausoleums in India, tombs and memorial structures may feature elaborately decorated exteriors. This expression may stem from the desire to honor individuals considered particularly worthy. A significant example of this elaborate exterior expression is the Taj Mahal, built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahān. More than simply commemorating a beloved person, the mausoleum was conceived as the Throne of Allah, placed at the end of the gardens of Paradise on the Day of Judgement. For this reason, the attention given to the exterior was equal to that dedicated to the interior, as both were intended to reflect the grace and sanctity of the person buried within. These variations in external expressiveness reflect the complexity of cultural and religious traditions within the Islamic world, with some structures favoring modesty and outward simplicity, while others celebrate wealth and significance through elaborate architectural detail.



Fig.22 Shah Mosque, Isfahan, 1629.



Fig.23 Sehzade Mosque, Istanbul, 1543.

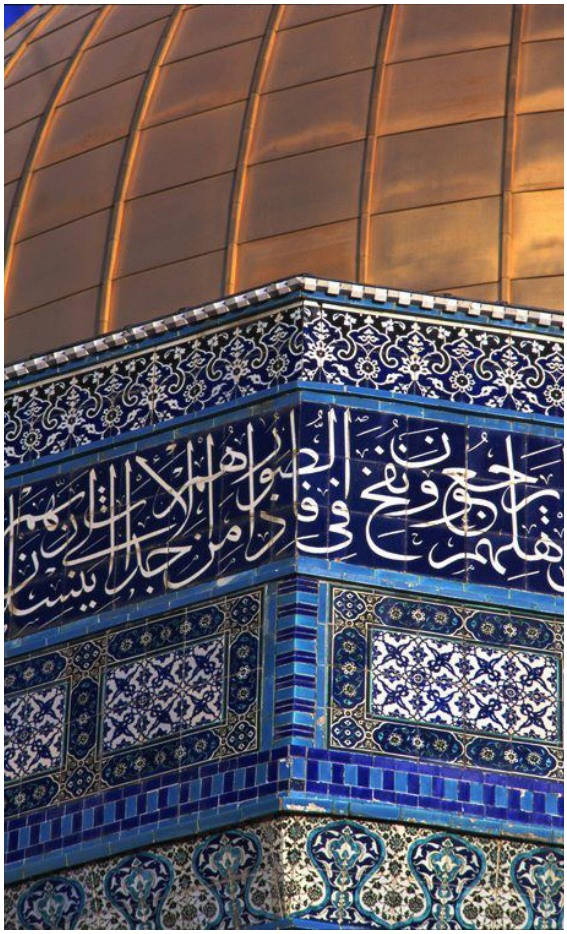

Fig.24 Calligraphy on Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 687.

At the heart of Islamic architecture lies a central principle: tawhīd, the absolute and unconditional oneness of God. This concept is not merely an abstract belief, but a living force that permeates every aspect of Islamic architectural design. Tawhīd, which means “oneness” in Arabic, represents the very essence of the Islamic faith, affirming the unity and indivisibility of God. Islamic architecture, therefore, is not simply a matter of aesthetics or building technique, but a tangible manifestation of this divine unity. Muslim architects conceive spaces with deep humility, recognizing that everything they create is temporary and belongs to God. This awareness translates into an architectural approach characterized by reverence, modesty, and divine service. In the mind of the Islamic architect, the creation of space is not an act of self-affirmation or ego, but rather an act of worship. Every detail, every curve, and every ornament holds spiritual meaning. The complex geometric patterns and elaborate Arabic calligraphy that adorn Islamic buildings are not merely decorative elements, but vehicles through which the essence of tawhīd is expressed. These symbols not only represent the infinity and unity of God, but also the transience and relativity of the material world. A significant example of this philosophy is Sinan, the renowned architect of the Ottoman golden age. For Sinan, his architectural talent was a divine gift, a capacity to be refined in the service of God and humanity. His dedication to architecture was imbued with humility and gratitude towards the Creator, and each building he designed was an act of worship, a tribute to the greatness of God. Islamic architecture cannot be separated from the spiritual dimension of life. Architecture is seen as an opportunity to make God’s presence tangible in the world, a way to celebrate and reflect the divine unity in every aspect of daily living. In conclusion, Islamic architecture goes beyond the simple act of constructing buildings. It is an expression of faith, a form of worship, and a means through which Muslims seek to draw closer to God. Every column, every arch, and every detail is a silent hymn to the greatness of God, a constant reminder of the fundamental unity that binds all things in the universe. Through Islamic architecture, Muslims strive to create spaces that inspire devotion, contemplation, and reflection, offering a tribute to the majesty of God and to the depth of their faith.

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The Islamic Community in Italy





Arrivals of Islam in Italy: Settlements and Architectures

The Islamic community in Italy has its roots in the 9th century, two centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (pbsl). Sicily, the main theatre of the Muslim conquest, remained under Islamic rule from 827 until 1091. Although during that period there were numerous incursions across Italy, Sicily experienced a relatively stable period only between 965 and 1061. Unlike what occurred in the Iberian Peninsula, the Muslim presence on Italian soil was rather precarious. Nevertheless, even after the Norman conquest, a Muslim minority remained in Sicily until 1239, when several uprisings led Frederick II to deport them to Lucera in Apulia. The community settled in Lucera until 1300, when Charles II of Anjou brought them under his control. The settlement of the Islamic community in Italy is closely linked to the broader European expansion carried out by Muslim rulers of the Maghreb beginning in the 7th century. At the beginning of the 8th century, Arab emirs, already victorious in North Africa and in the Iberian Peninsula, turned their attention to the Italian Peninsula. This initiative was driven by the fact that control of the Mediterranean, once Byzantine, had now passed into Arab hands, making the Italian coasts vulnerable targets and offering a pathway for expansion towards Rome and beyond. In Europe, the growing political instability and scarcity of resources that followed the fall of the Western Roman Empire made Moorish incursions increasingly feasible. The Muslim forces, in contrast, held greater stability and more abundant resources. As in other conquered regions, incursions into southern Italy generally began along the coastal areas (by sea) and then moved inland.

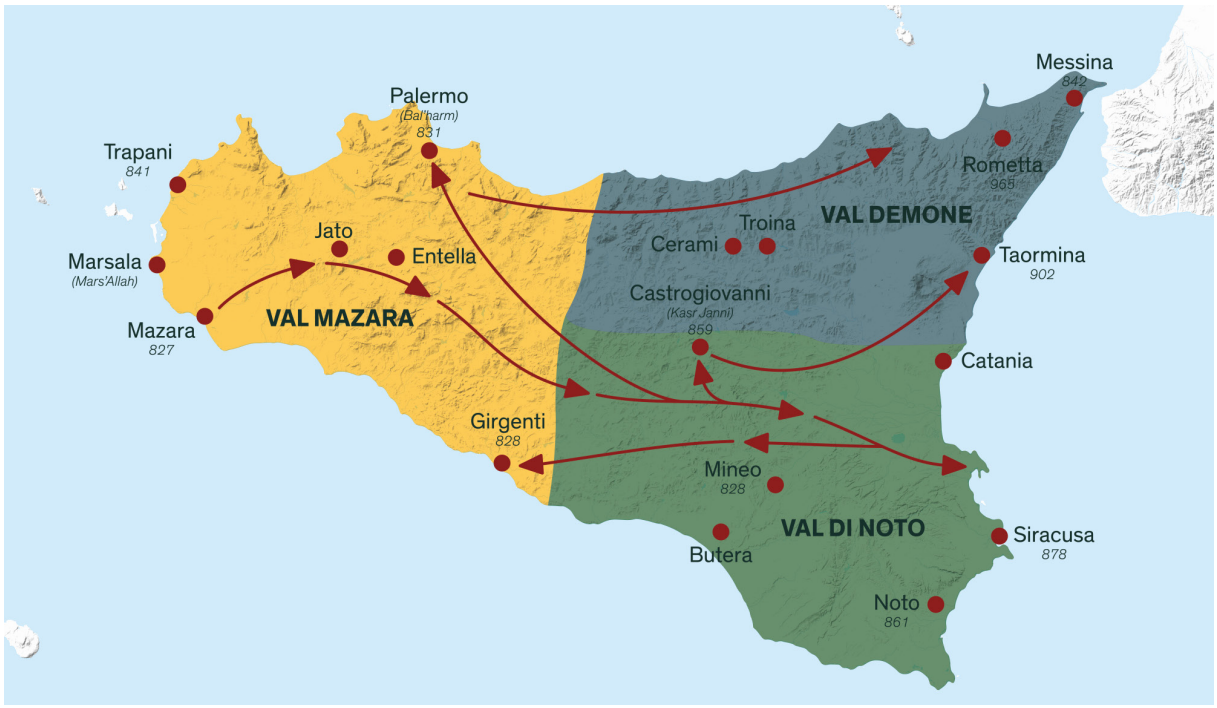

Fig.25 Itinerary of the Arab Conquest in Sicily.

In 825, the Byzantine fleet commander Euphemius of Messina found himself compelled to seek assistance from the Arabs in order to secure his control over the island. The Aghlabid emir, Ziyādat Allāh I, agreed to support the Byzantines, enabling the landing in Sicily at Mazara del Vallo in June 827, and the subsequent attempt to seize control of the island. In 830, after determined resistance from the Byzantine general Theodorus, the Arabs achieved victory, which led to the fall of Palermo on 11 September 831. Further conquests followed: in 835 the island of Pantelleria, in 843 Messina; while in 858 and 859, after prolonged resistance, Cefalù and Enna were also destroyed, concluding with the capture of Malta. Southern Italy thus became a stage for Muslim dominance. Commander Abū l-Abbās Muhammad I and his forces continued expansion across the Mediterranean, seizing Taranto, Bari, and other cities in Apulia. In 878, Syracuse too was destroyed despite strong resistance, followed, in June 901, by the conquest of Reggio Calabria. The Muslim conquest concluded with the destruction of Taormina and the capture of the city of Rometta in 902 and 965, respectively.

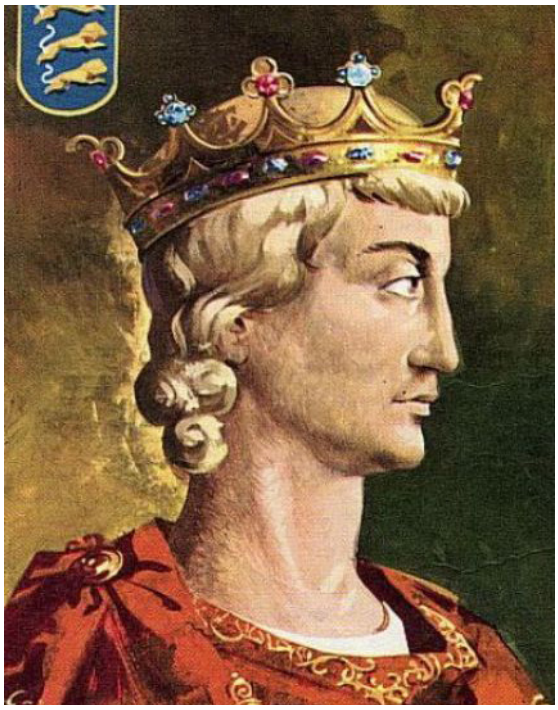

Fig.26 Federico II di Svevia.



Fig.27 Carlo II d'Angiò.

The Muslim presence inevitably affected the social fabric of the time.
The population increased due to large migrations from North Africa, the Middle East, and Al-Andalus, to the point that Palermo became the most populous city in Sicily. However, Muslim rule imposed less favorable socio-economic conditions on those who did not convert to Islam, which included certain restrictions and prohibitions, for example, the inability to hold public, civil, or political offices, or to own houses built higher than those of Muslim neighbors. Christians were assigned the status of dhimmī, which involved the fulfilment of certain obligations (often not strictly enforced), such as marking clothing and homes with specific symbols, and paying higher taxes, along with other disadvantages. From a religious standpoint, the construction of new churches was prohibited, along with the use of bell towers, public processions, the reading of the Bible in the presence of Muslims, and the public consumption of alcohol. Due to these many restrictions, at least half of the Christian subjects eventually chose to convert in order to regain a more acceptable standard of life. Although many prohibitions were often ignored or enforced only in specific circumstances, Christians remained forbidden from marrying Muslim women (while the opposite, Muslim men marrying Christian women, was permitted). Conversion for a non-Arab led to the acquisition of the status of a free person (mawlā).



Fig.28 Palermo Cathedral, Palermo, 1185.



Fig.29 Hypothesis of the Great Mosque in place of Palermo Cathedral.



Fig.30 Church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, Palermo, 1132.

Although many architectural works of Arab origin have not survived to the present day, except for some decorative details or archaeological remains, the numerous urban interventions carried out during the period of Muslim rule in southern Italy are still recognizable. Once Palermo had been established as the capital of the Emirate, Muslim governors expanded the urban structure of the city by improving the water system, increasing agricultural production, and developing new trade routes, which encouraged significant Mediterranean immigration. New settlements were founded and existing ones expanded beyond their original boundaries. Many new public and military buildings were constructed, along with beautiful gardens such as those of the Favara Park, described by the Andalusian-Arab poet Ibn Jubayr Al-Idrisi. [5] He also described the five districts of the city: Halqah (the "Galka"), the ancient Paleapoli, which included the city walls and administrative buildings, where the Jāmi (the Great Friday Mosque) was erected, an immense mosque capable of accommodating up to 7,000 worshippers, built on the site where the Cathedral of Palermo stands today; the district of Kasr, adjacent to Neapolis; the area of Albergheria, where a castle was later built on the site now occupied by the Norman Palace; and the district of al-Halisah (the Kalsa), near the sea, considered the "chosen medina", in contrast to the Galka, which served as the headquarters of the emir and his soldiers. The Islamic occupation practiced such an extensive concept of "urban rebirth" that Palermo came to resemble an Arab metropolis more than a Western city. Recent archaeological investigations have uncovered fragments of Arab Palermo which reveal interesting characteristics of its street layout and residential buildings (such as the harat al-Saqlaba, or "quarter of the slaves"). These studies have shown that two main road axes were bordered by houses with roughly hewn stone walls coated with fine plaster, standing on pavements of crumbling sandstone. These features demonstrate that this was not a medina built with improvised techniques and materials, but rather a carefully conceived urban environment based on precise planning. What remains confirms the extensive construction and expansion carried out mainly under Muslim rule, particularly in the areas near the Papireto river between the late 10th and early 11th centuries, a development that was later halted by the Norman conquest.

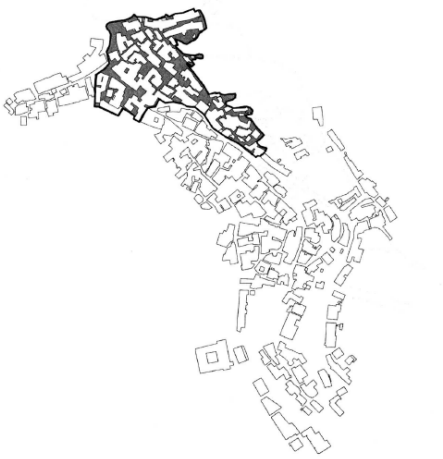

Fig.31 Pietrapertosa, plan of the urban area, highlighting the rabata district.



Fig.32 Pietrapertosa, schematisation of routes in the rabata.

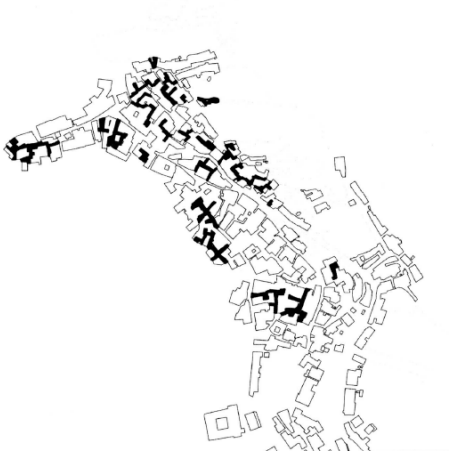

Fig.33 Pietrapertosa, location of the main neighbourhoods within the urban fabric.

The Rabata of Pietrapertosa is a fascinating example of Islamic urban planning in the heart of Basilicata. This ancient district is an engaging interweaving of history and culture, where the Arab legacy is tangibly expressed through its architecture and urban organization. The dominant presence of the surrounding rock has shaped the layout of the built environment, giving rise to narrow winding streets and secluded courtyards. The influence of Arab design is evident in the arrangement of the urban spaces. The irregular alleyways, with their L-shaped, T-shaped or bayonet-like layouts, are characteristic features of Islamic architecture reflected in the Rabata. This spatial organization, typical of Islamic urbanism, reveals a focus on intimacy and privacy, while enclosed courtyards and covered passageways provide additional layers of protection and security. The Arab influence in the Rabata extends beyond the urban structure to its architectural elements. Intricate decorative details, inspired by the geometric and floral motifs of Islamic art, adorn the façades of houses and public buildings. These elements not only enhance the visual beauty of the district but also highlight the importance of aesthetics in the daily life of the community. Another distinctive aspect of Islamic urbanism present in the Rabata is the close attention to the natural environment. The inhabitants created terraces and channels to optimise the use of the mountainous terrain, demonstrating a deep understanding of hydraulic and agricultural engineering. These ancient land management techniques not only allowed cultivation in otherwise inaccessible areas but also contributed to the creation of a sustainable and harmonious environment. Moreover, the Rabata of Pietrapertosa represents an eloquent example of how Islamic urbanism fostered social cohesion. The irregular alleyways and shared courtyards created an intricate network of communal spaces, encouraging social interaction and the strengthening of community bonds. This sense of community is still palpable today, reflecting the enduring influence of Islamic culture in the daily life of the district. In conclusion, the Rabata of Pietrapertosa is much more than a simple neighbourhood. It is an extraordinary example of how Islamic urban planning shaped not only physical spaces, but also the soul and identity of a community. This captivating blend of history, architecture, and culture offers a precious insight into the past, emphasising the importance of preserving and celebrating the cultural influences that have helped shape our world. The Rabata is an architectural and cultural treasure that continues to inspire and enchant all those who have the fortune to explore it.



Fig.34 Aerial view of Tharros, Sardinia.

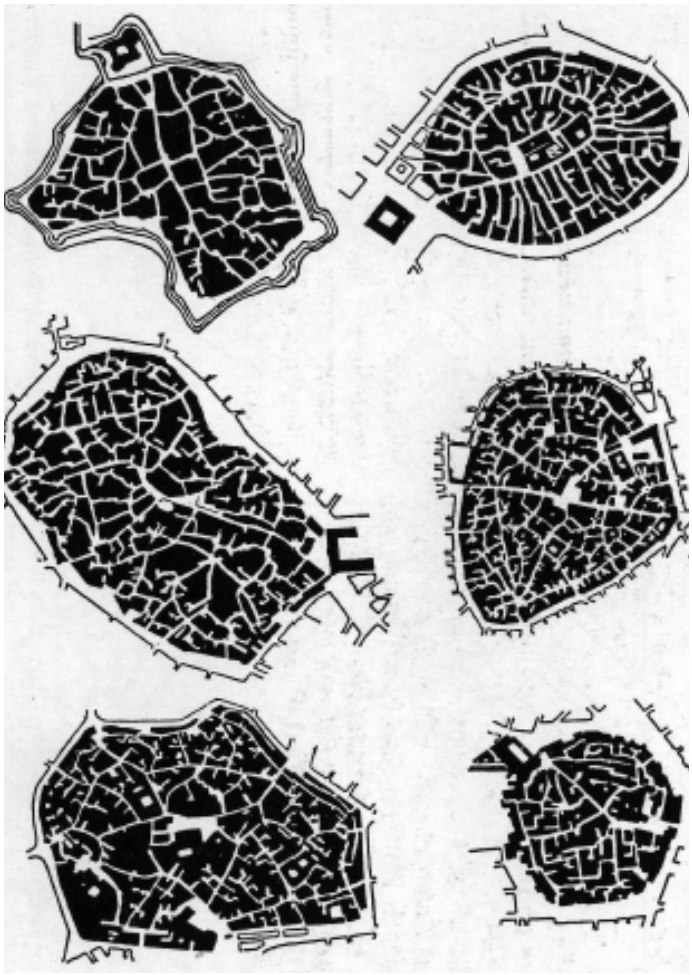

Fig.35 The urban fabric of some centres in southern Italy: Bitonto, Martina Franca, Gallipoli, Bitetto, Altamura, Putignano.



Fig.36 Earthen courtyard houses in the centre of Quartu.

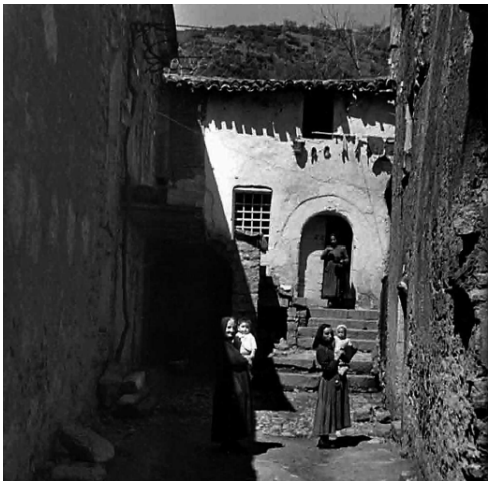

Fig.37 A Sardinian alley.

The influence of Islamic urbanism in medieval Sardinia is a fascinating and complex field of study, revealing a range of features and distinctive traits that testify to the contact and cultural exchange between local communities and Islamic ones. One of the key aspects of Islamic urbanism present in medieval Sardinia is the widespread use of building materials such as earth-based construction. This technique, common in Islamic architecture across many regions, involved mixing earth, water, and fiber to create durable bricks or plaster. The extensive presence of structures built using this technique in medieval Sardinia suggests a significant Islamic influence on local settlement construction. Another notable characteristic is the presence of internal courtyards in Sardinian villages. These open spaces were essential for ensuring family privacy and providing shaded areas—particularly important in the warm Mediterranean climate. The adoption of internal courtyards in Sardinian settlements reflects an urban organization similar to Islamic practices, suggesting possible cultural and architectural exchanges between the communities. The urban layout of some Sardinian villages also features labyrinth-like street patterns, with narrow and winding alleyways. This type of design is common in Islamic cities and not only contributes to a sense of security but also promotes natural cooling of public spaces, creating more comfortable microclimates in hot weather. This characteristic highlights a possible influence of Islamic urban planning in Sardinian settlement design. Beyond architectural features, toponyms such as Tharros near Oristano and the hydronym “Rio Almiddina” in the Olbia area indicate the presence of Islamic communities in medieval Sardinia. Such geographical names provide tangible evidence of Islamic settlements in the region, revealing historical and cultural links with Islamic populations. Another element of Islamic urbanism is the presence of urban gardens within villages. These spaces not only demonstrate an advanced system of land management but also reflect a sustainable use of natural resources, showcasing the practical and ingenious approach of Islamic communities to urban agriculture. Furthermore, cubic architecture, characterized by clean and geometric lines, was a distinctive feature of Islamic architectural style. This style is reflected in some buildings in medieval Sardinia, indicating a possible influence on the design of domestic spaces. In conclusion, Islamic urbanism left a lasting imprint on medieval Sardinia, shaping not only the physical appearance of settlements but also the social and cultural structure of local communities. The analysis of these distinctive traits provides valuable insight into Mediterranean history and cultural interactions, demonstrating how Islamic influences played a meaningful role in shaping the region.



Fig.38 Zisa Castle, Palermo, 1165.

Although the Arab period in Italy lasted for a considerable amount of time, few architectural remains from the Islamic era have survived. Among these are: the Baths of Cefalà Diana, the underground chambers of the Palatine Chapel, the Castle of the Cannita, and certain parts of the complex of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, all located near Palermo, along with other scattered structures in Sicily; as well as modest archaeological remains, including the mosque near the Theatre of Segesta. This scarcity is partly due to the fact that Muslims often repurposed existing buildings and sites, but also because there was a clear intention after their rule to remove the visible traces of Islamic presence in Italy. As a result, much of the artistic and architectural heritage from the period was almost completely erased. However, traces of Islamic architecture in Sicily did endure, particularly because many buildings constructed after the Islamic rule employed Muslim craftsmen. Notable examples include: the Castle of the Zisa (from Azīza – "the Magnificent"), the Castle of the Cuba (from qubba – "the dome"), the Genoardo (from Jannat al-ard – "the earthly paradise garden"), the Palatine Chapel, and the Favara royal park (from Fawwāra – "the spring").



The presence of Muslim artisans active during the Norman period in Sicily contributed significantly to the transmission of distinctive elements of Arab architectural culture. The distinctive features include pointed arches, domes decorated with muqarnas (stalactite-like ornamentation), painted and carved alveolar patterns, Fatimid capitals, and above all, epigraphic friezes made of elaborate crenellations. Much of this architecture was later reinterpreted and integrated into different contexts over the centuries.

An example of this continuity can be seen in the southern portico of the Cathedral of Palermo, where a column bears an Arabic inscription quoting verse 54 of the seventh sūra of the Qur'an, "al-Arāf" ("The Heights" or "The Limbo"), which reads:

"He covers the day with the night, and they follow one another tirelessly. The sun, the moon and the stars are subjected to His command. Is it not to Him that creation and command belong? Praise belongs to Allah, Lord of the worlds!" *[6]*

Traces of inscriptions in the Kufic calligraphic style (from the city of Kufa in Iraq) are also little recognized, though they open the possibility for a new phase of stylistic analysis of this historical period. Among these remains, a testimony of faith (shahāda) has been found near Mount Altesina in the Province of Enna.



Fig.39 Church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, Palermo, 1132.



Fig.40 Detail of the Palatine Chapel Muqarnas, Palermo, 1140.



Fig.41 Detail of a column in Palermo Cathedral.



Fig.42 Interior of Church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, Palermo, 1132.



Fig.43 Cuba Palace, Palermo, 1180.

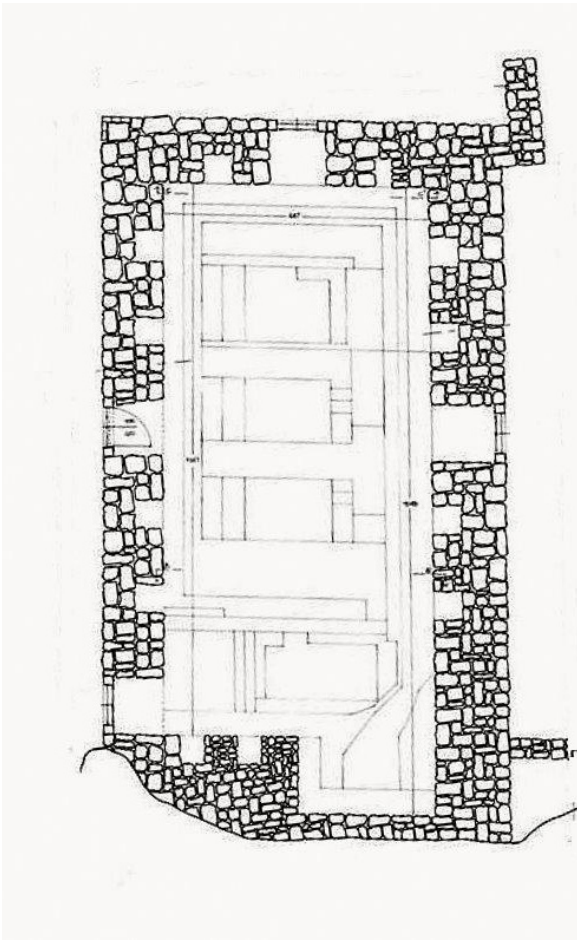

Fig.44 Plan of Baths of Cefalà Diana, Palermo, 10th century.



Fig.45 Baths of Cefalà Diana, Palermo, 10th century.



Fig.46 Interior of Zisa Castle, Palermo, 1165.

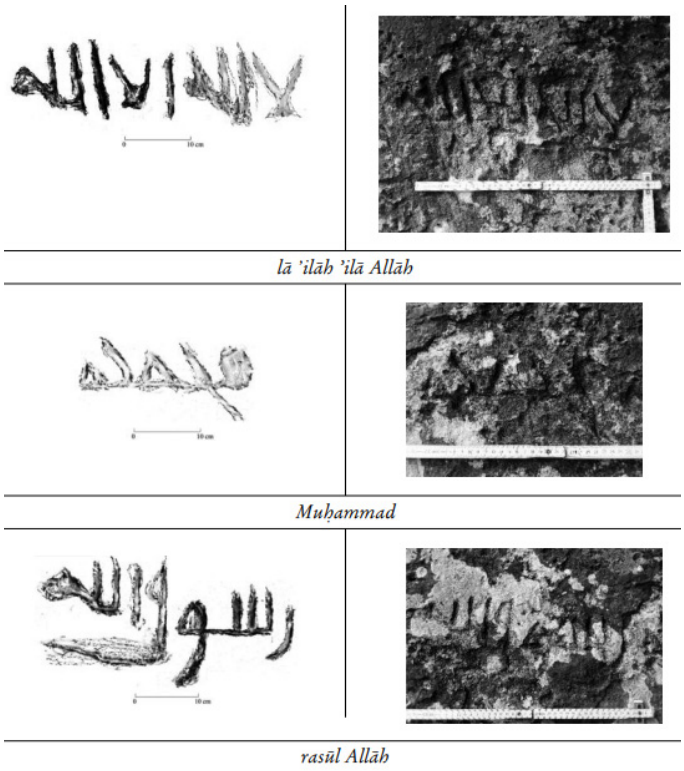

Fig.47 Testimony of faith (shahada) near of Mount Altesina in the province of Enna.



Fig.49 Hammam present in the Rocca d'Entella.



Fig.48 Remains of the Mosque of Segesta, Segesta, 12th century.



Fig.50 Remains of the Mosque of Segesta, Segesta, 12th century.

The Rural settlements from the Islamic period in Sicily did not follow a single settlement model, as significant differences existed between the western and eastern parts of the island, where Byzantine norms continued to dominate until the 14th century. The archaeological discoveries currently available from the western part of Sicily provide us with the few traces of the Islamic era that we possess. Initially, the Arabs sought to make use of the Byzantine structures that had already defined the urban fabric. This strategy was also justified by the fact that the Arab conquerors typically did not establish settlements in the countryside, but concentrated instead in urban centers, since religious teaching generally did not take place outside the cities. Only later, around the 10th century, were more peripheral sites considered and subsequently developed, as in the case of the area around Segesta. A strategy that contributed to the spread of Islam beyond the metropolitan centers was initiated by the Fatimid caliph al-Muizz, who in 965, in response to the Byzantine offensives at Rometta in 962, ordered the Kalbid emir to gather the inhabitants of each district into a fortified structure that included a mosque, so that the population residing there could receive religious instruction. Islamization thus took root, and in western Sicily in particular, the converted population became the majority, something confirmed by recent archaeological findings across the region. Evidence of Islamic funerary practices has been identified in cemetery areas at Monte Maranfusa, Entella, Caltanissetta, Monte Iato, and Caliata di Montevago. Other discoveries include three lead plaques inscribed with a sūra of the Qur'an in Kufic script found in the hamlet of Milocca, as well as the previously mentioned mosque near the theatre of Segesta, the only Islamic place of worship in Sicily that is recognized without any doubt regarding its origin or later alteration. Agrigento is another area rich in archaeological remains. Here, the Muslim fortress of Platano, known since the 9th century and later destroyed by Frederick II, has been identified, along with the fortified palace of Entella, which also included a hammām (bath complex), unique in Sicily except for the one at La Zisa.



Fig.51 Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Lucera, 1302.



Fig.52 Ideal mosque reconstruction superimposed on the church.

The Muslim settlement in Lucera in the 13th century is a crucial episode in the history of Islamic Italy. It demonstrates the cultural interaction between Islam and medieval Italy, offering a unique perspective on interreligious coexistence and cultural dialogue. Examining the reasons for this presence provides valuable insight into the diversity of medieval Italy, which profoundly shaped Italian identity over the centuries. This historical phenomenon reveals the dynamism of intercultural relations and remains a significant element in the complex narrative of European history. The Islamic settlement in the city of Lucera, established on 25 December 1239, was instituted by Frederick II in order to “segregate” and maintain control over approximately 20,000 Muslim subjects dispersed throughout Sicily. The settlement endured for around seventy years, during which it grew and developed considerably, until an ultimatum was issued. In 1304, the new ruler of Naples, Charles II of Anjou, ordered the elimination of all remaining architecture of Islamic origin, including places of prayer, Qur’anic schools, mosques, and madrasas. The greatest loss was the Great Mosque, located in the center of the city, on whose foundations the Cathedral dedicated to Saint Mary of the Assumption was later built. As was customary, the mosque was accompanied by a tall minaret, from which the call to prayer was made at set times throughout the day. However, the voice of the muezzin alone was not always sufficient to reach more distant worshippers; for this reason, white cloths were hung from the top of the minaret, serving as a visual signal. The minaret was later converted into a bell tower, redesigned in the Provençal Gothic style. The presence of this tower influenced the asymmetric alignment of both the rose window and the tympanum of the cathedral.



Fig.53 Pisa Cathedral, Pisa, 1118.



Fig.54 Medieval towers of San Gimignano, San Gimignano, 13th century.



Fig.55 Cathedral of Pistoia, Pistoia, 923.

In the heart of Tuscany, a charming landscape of rolling hills and historic cities holds a fascinating secret: a chapter of cultural interaction between the Islamic world and Christian Europe, expressed in the magnificent architecture of Tuscan towns. This dialogue between distant civilizations shaped the distinctive character of Tuscan cities, creating an urban fabric enriched with stories, ideas, and aesthetic influences from far-off lands. Pisa, with its strategic maritime position, was one of the main mediators between the Islamic world and Europe. The Cathedral of Pisa is an extraordinary example of this cultural fusion: its pointed arches and refined decorative details reflect Islamic artistic influence, while the famous Leaning Tower shows elements of Moorish style, channeling Islamic aesthetics into an iconic European monument. Lucca, surrounded by its well-preserved medieval walls, tells a similar story. The churches of Lucca, such as San Martino, present a kaleidoscope of cultural influences: the black-and-white inlays reveal Islamic textile patterns blended with local tradition. Here, Islamic architecture merges organically with the urban landscape, creating a unique atmosphere of cultural harmony. San Gimignano, with its medieval towers standing like sentinels of the past, also displays architectural features reminiscent of Moorish style. The horseshoe arches and geometric decorations testify to an art that crossed the sea to find a home in this Tuscan town. Pistoia, likewise, a custodian of Islamic-influenced architecture, presents in its Cathedral a layout that does not differ greatly from that of a mosque) and in other churches, elements of Arab origin. The pointed arches and geometric decorations weave a narrative of cultural exchange, showing how Islamic art blended with Romanesque tradition to create a unique synthesis of architectural styles. Islamic architecture in Tuscany is more than a collection of buildings; it is a fluid story of a timeless cultural dialogue. These cities, with their ancient stones and finely carved details, speak to us of an era in which cultural differences served as bridges rather than barriers. They invite us to explore a past marked by deep connections and artistic understanding, demonstrating that beauty can flourish when cultures meet and embrace one another in their diversity. This is the legacy of Islamic architecture in Tuscany—a legacy of cultural interweaving that continues to inspire and captivate the hearts of modern visitors.

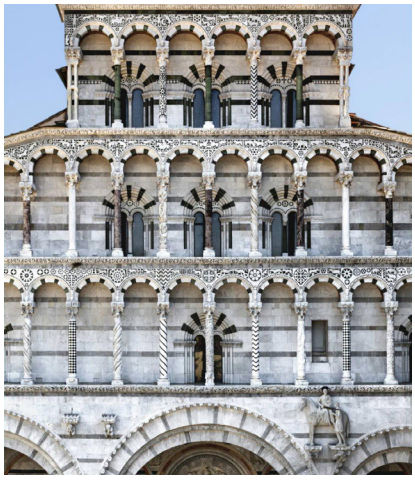

Fig.56 Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca, 1070.

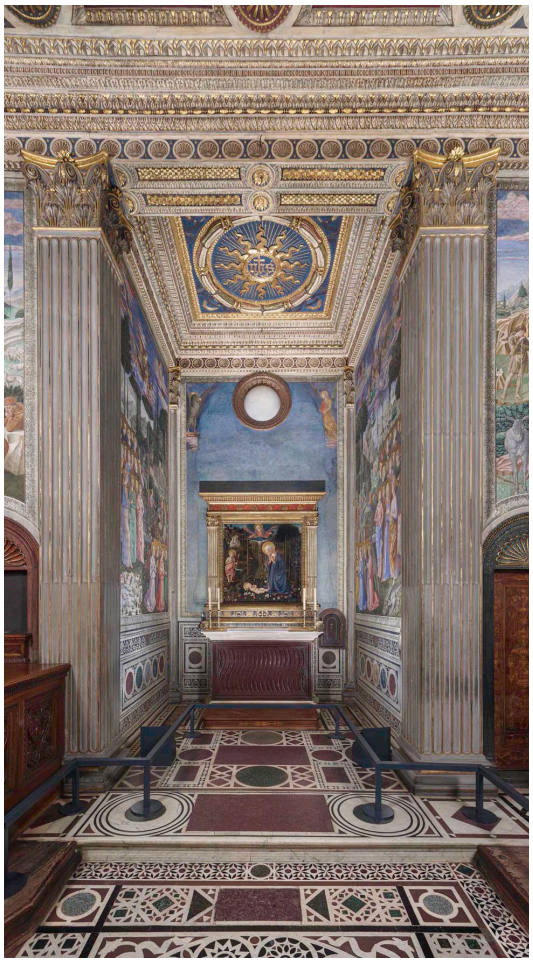

Fig.57 Chapel of the Magi, Firenze, 1459.



Fig.58 Villa Cafaggiolo, Firenze, 16th century.



Fig.59 Trittico di San Giovenale, Masaccio, 1422.

Starting from the 8th century BC, Tuscany was a region deeply connected to the Mediterranean–Eastern world, with strong commercial and cultural ties. In the 12th century, the Florentines began establishing more direct contacts with the Holy Land, especially during the Crusades, and several Florentine merchants settled in places such as Acre and Damietta. In the 14th century, Florence consolidated its economic presence in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, exporting wool, silk, and gold textiles. In 1406, with the conquest of Pisa, Florence began to develop into a Mediterranean maritime power. This period was marked by intense artistic and cultural activity: works such as Masaccio's triptych in San Giovenale in Cascia reveal Arab artistic influence, evident in the "Kufic" script featured in artworks of the time. These cultural and commercial interactions between Florence and the Muslim world highlight the importance of Florence as a center of cultural and commercial exchange in the Mediterranean, contributing to the development of the city's Renaissance art and culture. In the 15th century, Florence became a crossroads of cultures, a place where influences from the East—including Islamic architecture—merged with Italian artistic tradition. This period was characterized by intense cultural and commercial exchanges between the Republic of Florence and the Muslim world, particularly Egypt, which would have a significant impact on the city's architecture and art. The Florentine embassy in Egypt in the 15th century played a crucial role in opening the doors to Islamic architecture in Florence. Florentine ambassadors, such as Felice Brancacci, had direct relationships with the Mamluk sultan of Egypt and were well acquainted with Islamic architecture and traditions. These contacts led to the importation of architectural elements, decorative motifs, and artistic styles from the Islamic world into Florence. A remarkable example of the influence of Islamic architecture in Florence can be seen in the Chapel of the Magi in Palazzo Medici Riccardi. This chapel, commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici, features a hemispherical dome—typical of Islamic architecture—and decorative elements inspired by Eastern mosaics. The frescoes within the chapel display stylistic and thematic Islamic influences, demonstrating the fusion of cultures and religions. Speaking of domes, even the majestic dome of Santa Maria del Fiore, the masterpiece of Filippo Brunelleschi, is not immune to the influence of Islamic architecture; it stands as an eloquent example of how Islamic aesthetics permeated the very foundations of surrounding cities, bearing witness to a seamless artistic integration. Another significant example of Islamic architecture in Florence is the Medici Villa of Cafaggiolo, commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici. This villa features an inner courtyard surrounded by rounded arches, a distinctive element of Islamic architecture. The interiors of the villa are decorated with polychrome ceramic tiles, echoing Islamic artistic traditions.



Fig.60 Dome of santa maria del fiore, Firenze, 1420.



Fig.61 Sammezzano Castle, Firenze, 1605.

Islamic architecture also influenced private residences in Florence. The city's wealthy and influential families began adopting elements such as open loggias and hanging gardens, inspired by the architectural traditions of Eastern palaces. These elements can be seen, for example, in Michelozzo's Courtyard at Palazzo Medici Riccardi, where the rounded arches and Tuscan columns recall Islamic style. Moreover, Islamic architecture in Florence was not limited to buildings alone. Decorative techniques such as inlaid stucco and geometric motifs were adopted by Florentine masters in their works, creating a unique fusion of styles. These intricate and refined details became an integral part of Florentine Renaissance architecture and art. Islamic architecture in 15th-century Florence was not merely an importation of foreign elements, but rather a creative fusion of cultures. This cultural exchange enriched the city's artistic landscape, leading to a diversification of architectural styles and contributing to the creation of unique works of art that still today bear witness to the enduring influence of Islamic architecture in Renaissance Florence.



History and Development of the Islamic Community in Italy

The Islamic presence in Italy returns to consolidate in the 1960s, centuries after the Saracen landings of the Muslims, with the arrival of groups of students from various countries such as Syria, Jordan, and Palestine, and from different currents of thought, as well as entrepreneurs and embassy employees. In 1971, the first independent Islamic Association (from any governmental body), known as USMI (Union of Muslim Students of Italy), was founded. It brought together all the Muslim students who came to Italy to pursue their studies and established its foundation at the University of Perugia, subsequently spreading to other university towns such as Turin, Milan, Ferrara, Genoa, Bologna, Rome, and Catania, with the aim of creating a genuine coordination network. The USMI opened the first Muslim place of worship on Italian soil, a modest prayer room in the historic center of Perugia, called the "Mosque of Via dei Priori," which is still active today. The association's mission is to provide cultural and religious support to young foreign Muslims who have come to Italy for study purposes. Among the customs of these young people were the organization of places of worship, the arrangement of the ritual Friday prayer, the celebration of the two most important holidays and Ramadan, and the organization of bi-annual spiritual retreats. The establishment of the first Muslim community in Italy thus began with young intellectuals. In the same 1970s, the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy (CCII) was established in Rome, supported by the ambassadors of various Sunni countries active in Italy at the Holy See. The CCII is responsible for initiating the Project of the Mosque of Rome, which began in 1974 and was completed in 1995 by the architect Paolo Portoghesi. However, as early as 1980, the first Italian Mosque was opened in Via Castromarino in Catania. It was closed for political reasons a few years later and replaced by improvised locations, until December 15, 2012, when the doors of the Mosque of the Mezzogiorno, known as the "Mosque of Mercy," were opened. The 1970s marked the entry of the first Muslim immigrants from North Africa, predominantly Morocco, and the 1990s saw an increase in North African and Eastern European immigrants. At the turn of the 1990s, coinciding with the arrival of a new generation of Muslim immigrants, many students belonging to the USMI who had completed their studies, instead of returning to their countries of origin as expected, ended up settling on Italian soil, even in different cities, whether for work, to continue their studies, or simply to stay. They began to create families and establish independent "Islamic cultural centers," effectively giving rise to true communities. This birth of diverse communities began to make the USMI a restrictive fit for all these realities.The need for a new representative association led to the birth of the UCOII (Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy), which definitively established a strong stability of the Italian Islamic community in the territory. The particularity of this association is that it is not an extension of some foreign government or a type of representative project; rather, it is the expression of the Italian Islamic communities and their mosques. It is no coincidence that all the presidents the association has had were already presidents of other communities scattered throughout the territory or were personalities belonging to their executive boards; thus, it can be said that the UCOII did not create the mosques, but the reverse. The values that the UCOII set out in its statute can be

summarized in two points: Representation and Representativeness. Describing the first point, the association was born with the aim of giving a face to Muslims in Italy and acting as an interface between the Islamic communities in the territory, the institutions, civil society, and other religious confessions. The other aspect, Representativeness, which is the association's strong point, is expressed by the extent to which the mosques and thus the communities actually feel part of this association, resulting in greater credibility from the institutions that recognize this reality as the main reference subject for the faithful in Italy. [7] The objectives that the UCOII sets for itself are multiple; the primary one is the establishment of an agreement (intesa) with the Italian state. This is a matter of considerable importance because it would allow for a whole series of claims and protection of rights, among the most important of which are the recognition of the Islamic faith in Italy, as well as the recognition of mosques, the recognition of holidays, or the distribution of food compliant with Islamic precepts in canteens. Among the other services that the UCOII performs are the political activity of countering Islamophobia, the management of cemetery issues, and naturally everything that has to do with the opening and management (including technical matters) of mosques in Italy. This is because today there is no legislation or a pre-established procedure in this regard, thus causing a genuine regulatory void, making the possibility of creating new places of worship not of the Christian faith on Italian soil very complicated. During 1998, hoping for a potential agreement with the Italian State, the UCOII attempted to lay the foundations for "the Islam of the States" (l'Islam degli Stati), and the Islamic Council of Italy was founded, directed by about ten Italian citizens, half of whom were nominated by the UCOII and the other half by the two collaborating organizations. The years to come predicted the UCOII's evolution into the Islamic representative association in Italy par excellence; this included new introductions such as new generations entering, the arrival of new personalities who did not necessarily have a political history in their countries of origin, and even the entry of people not necessarily of the Islamic faith. This evolution has certainly benefited the image of the UCOII, which has further facilitated the possibilities of engaging in dialogue with other communities, such as the Christian and Jewish ones, as well as with institutions. Today, the Muslim community in Italy numbers almost three million individuals. These numbers are constantly growing and represent an important issue in the socio-demographic landscape that the Italian state must face, dismantling some foundational social, cultural, and religious precepts and preparing for a broad and shared dialogue.

The end of the 1980s in Italy brings an important novelty that would influence the lives of Muslim citizens residing in Italy; the introduction of the decree-law of 30/12/89, “Urgent rules regarding political asylum, entry and stay of non-EU citizens and regularization.” This event had a strong impact on the development of the Italian Islamic community. The legal provision just established sanctioned real norms regarding civil rights for the many migrants who arrived in Italy during those years and made public the arrival of a new (potentially predominant) faith on Italian soil. It is through the secular and democratic vision of Italy that the UCOII, as a representative body, made its way in the process of legitimizing the rights of the new community of Muslim believers. In particular, it is through Articles 8 and 19 of the Constitution, on which it relies, and through which it is possible to justify its requests. The first states that all religious denominations enjoy the same rights before the law, that they may exercise their functions within established limits, and that their relations with the State must be regulated. The second, instead, states that every citizen may freely profess their own faith, provided that this does not lead to unacceptable acts. Starting from these two articles of the Italian Constitution of 1948, in the 1990s the UCOII achieved recognition of the right to practice the Islamic faith. This process has not yet been completed, since although Islam is the second largest religious community in Italy in numerical terms, to this day it has not yet reached an actual agreement with the Italian State for the recognition of its fundamental rights. Today, the result that the association is close to achieving is that of the recognition of legal personality, which would allow it to be recognized as a “religious community” and therefore to actually begin a concrete dialogue aimed at establishing the formal agreement.The estimates reported by the ISMU Foundation on 10 July 2023 project data counting about 1 million and 500 thousand citizens of Muslim faith, just under one third of immigrants in Italy. This number, however, does not consider Italian converts (around 100 thousand more or less) nor foreigners who have become Italian citizens of Moroccan, Egyptian, Tunisian, or Bangladeshi origin. On a European scale, it is estimated that there are 15 million (about 3% of the entire population). Many observers, after noting that Islam is the religion with the highest growth rate in terms of faith, foresee that by 2050 about 10% of the European population could be considered Muslim and that in 2030 in Italy a peak of 5% could be reached.

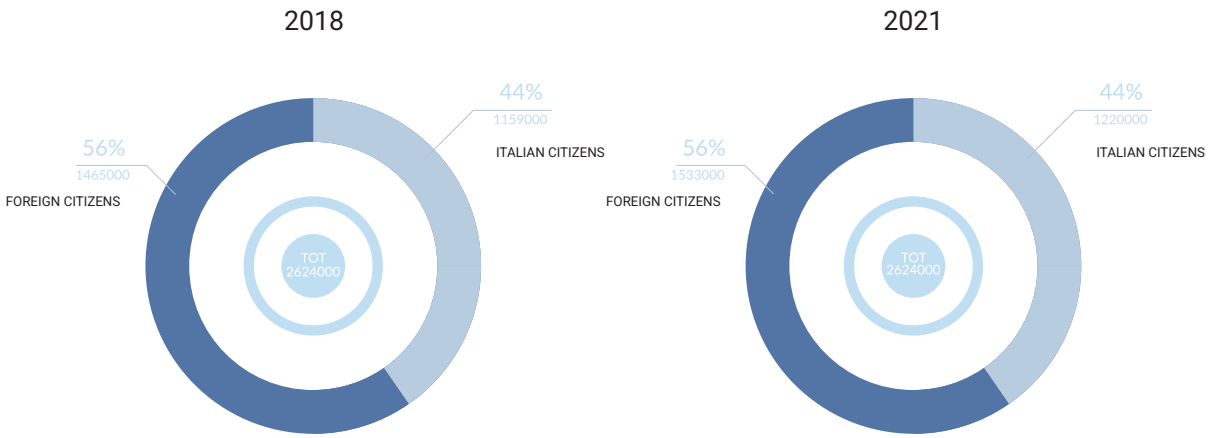

Fig.62 Estimated Muslim population living in Italy.

Fonte: elaborazione dell'autore su dati Pew Research Center, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2015-2060", Washington DC, 2017.

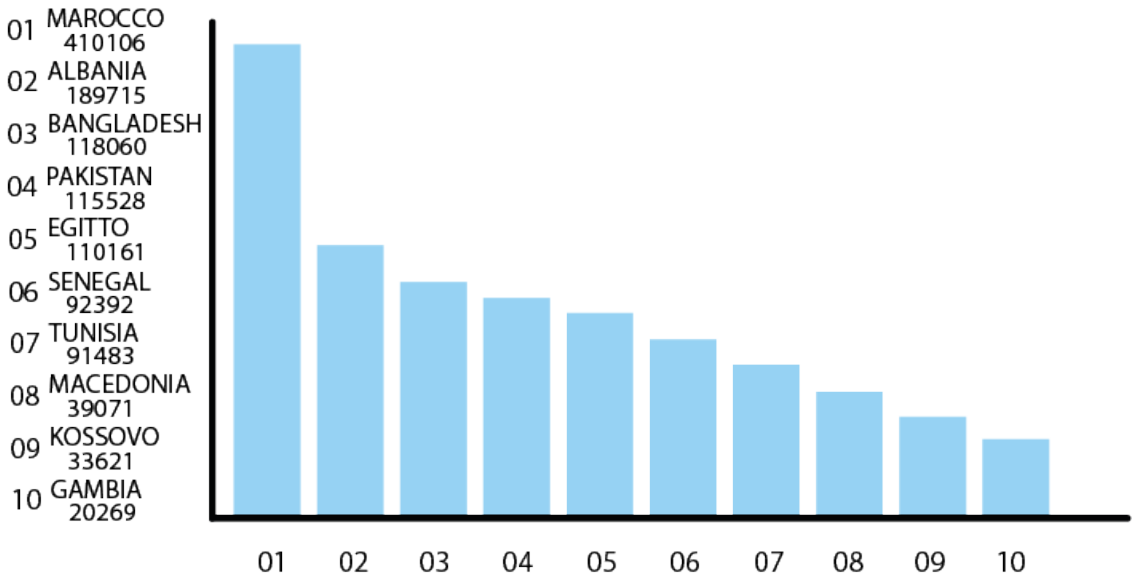

Fig.63 Muslims in Italy, the 10 largest communities.

Source: author's analysis of data from ISTAT and the Ministry of the Interior, "Non-EU citizens in Italy", Annual Report, 2022.

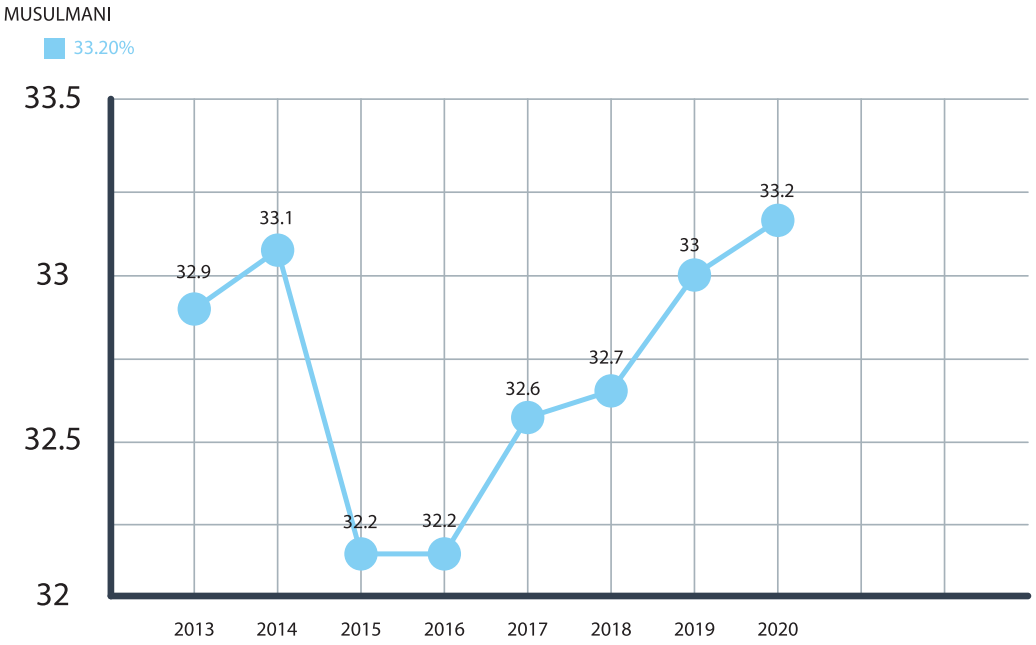

Fig.64 The percentage of Muslims among foreign residents in Italy between 2013 and 2020.

Source: author's analysis of ISTAT data, "Resident Foreign Population by Citizenship and Religion", 2013–2020.

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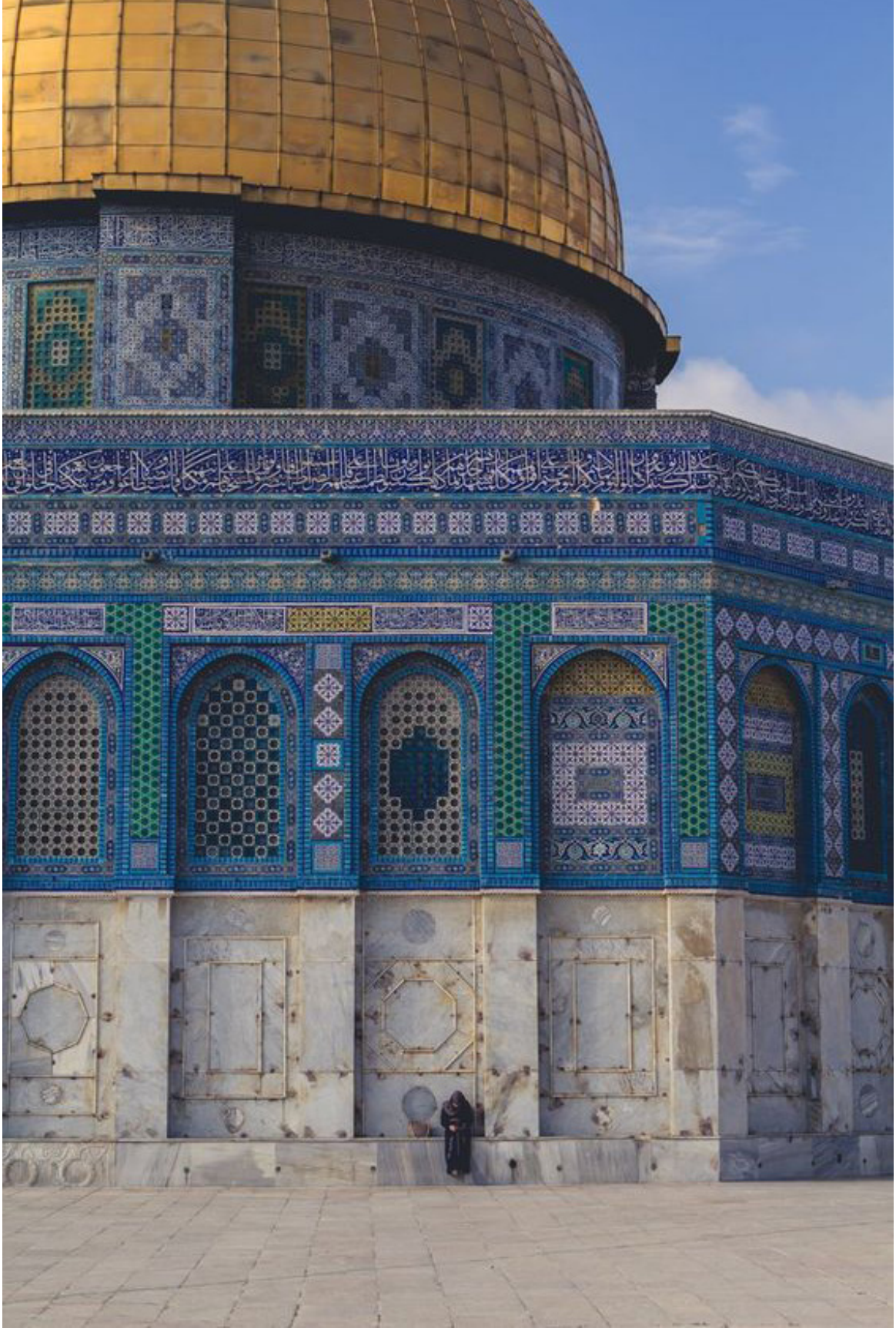
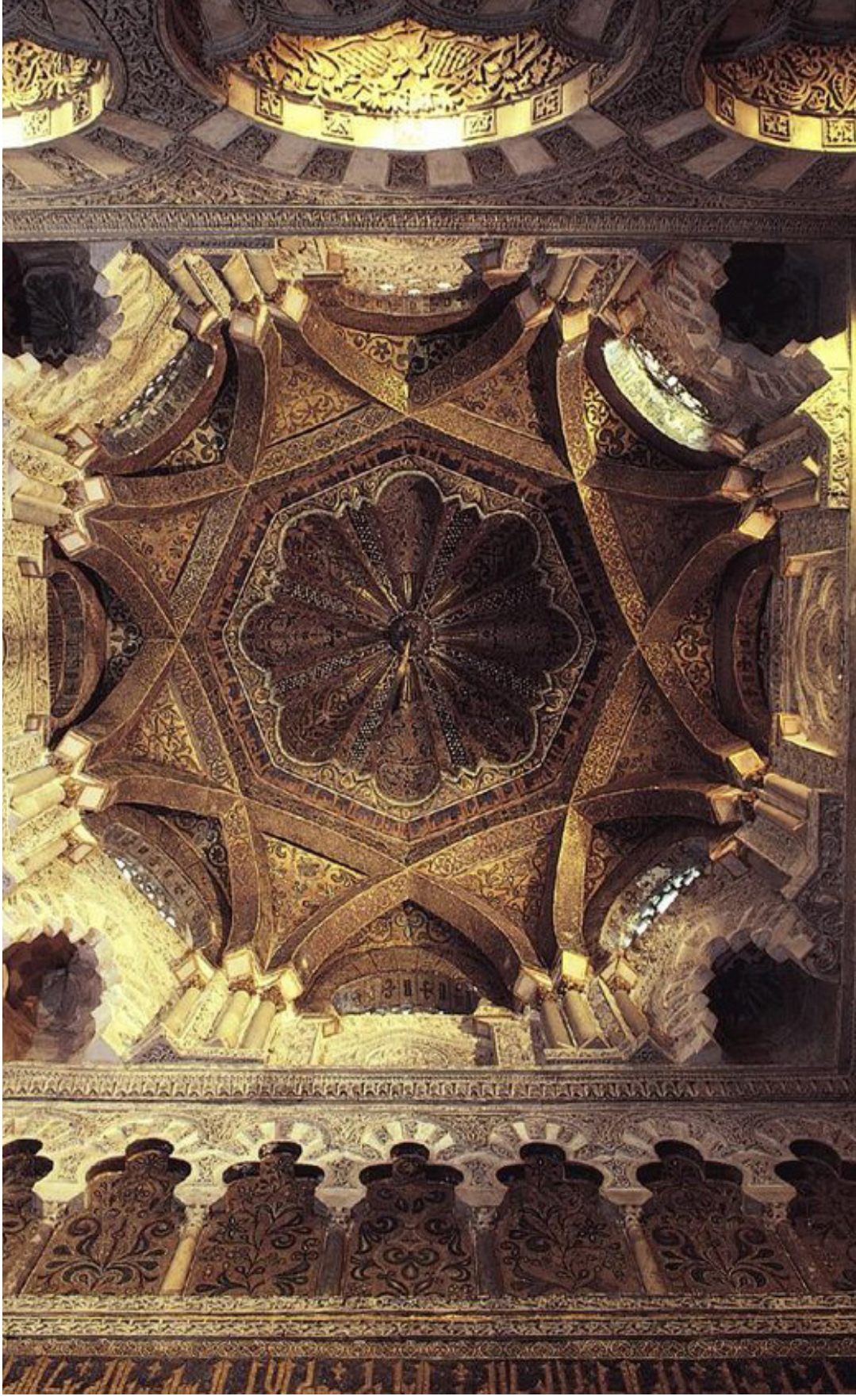
General Framework for Mosque Architecture





Foundational Characteristics of Mosque Architecture

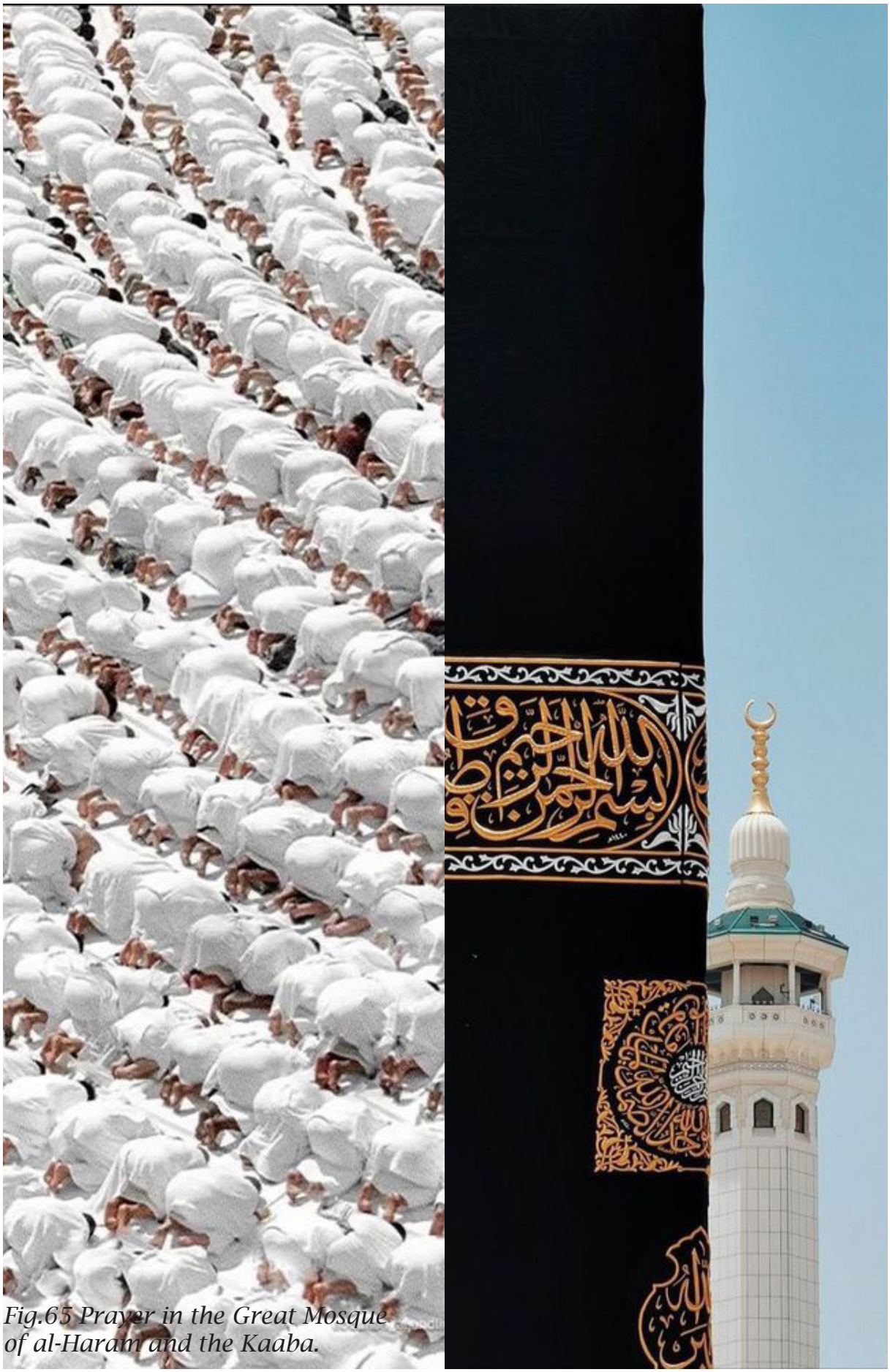


Fig.65 Prayer in the Great Mosque of al-Haram and the Kaaba.

The mosque is the sacred building where the Muslim bears witness to faith in God and performs the ritual prayer. In addition to the daily prayers, the congregational Friday prayer is performed there, attesting one's belonging to the Islamic ummah. The mosque, therefore, functions as a place that acts as a link between the Muslim communities of the world and Allah. The Arabic term masjid, with which the word mosque is translated, indicates the act of prostration (sujūd). The Masjid is the prayer space where the salat is practiced, in its five daily appointments, and it can be performed individually, in groups, or with the entire community. Mosques can be of two types: those used simply as prayer halls, or those intended to host the Friday salat; in the latter case it is called Jāmi (assembly), which can be understood as a congregational Mosque, comparable to the Cathedral in the Christian world in terms of size and importance. Although the mosque is the religious building par excellence, where the community of believers gathers to profess its faith; the Qur'an does not lay out precise indications on how its spaces should be conceived. The lack of specific prescriptions has always left the space of the temple undefined, making it difficult to establish clear rules; for this reason, apart from those few norms agreed upon throughout the Islamic world, the remaining design considerations are based on the customs and traditions of the place that hosts each individual mosque around the world.



Fig.66 Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 1023.

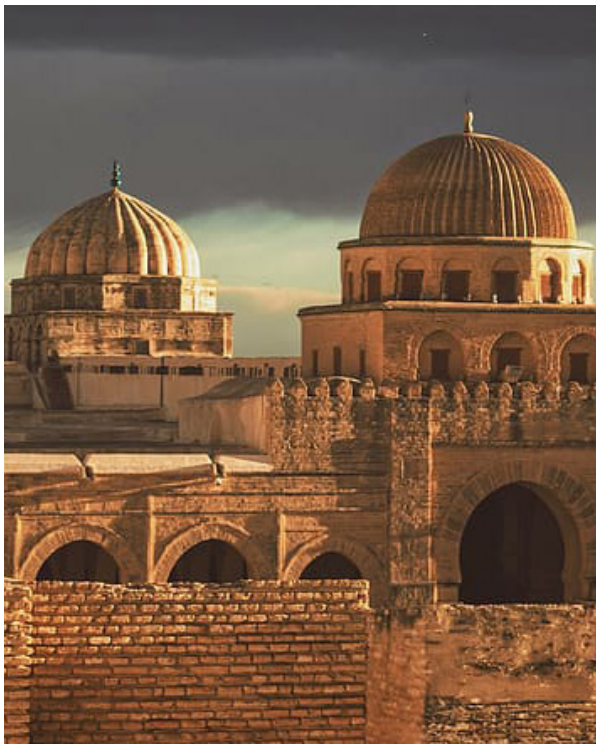


Fig.68 Great Mosque of Kairouan, Kairouan, 670.



Fig.67 Al-Hakim Mosque, Cairo, 1013.

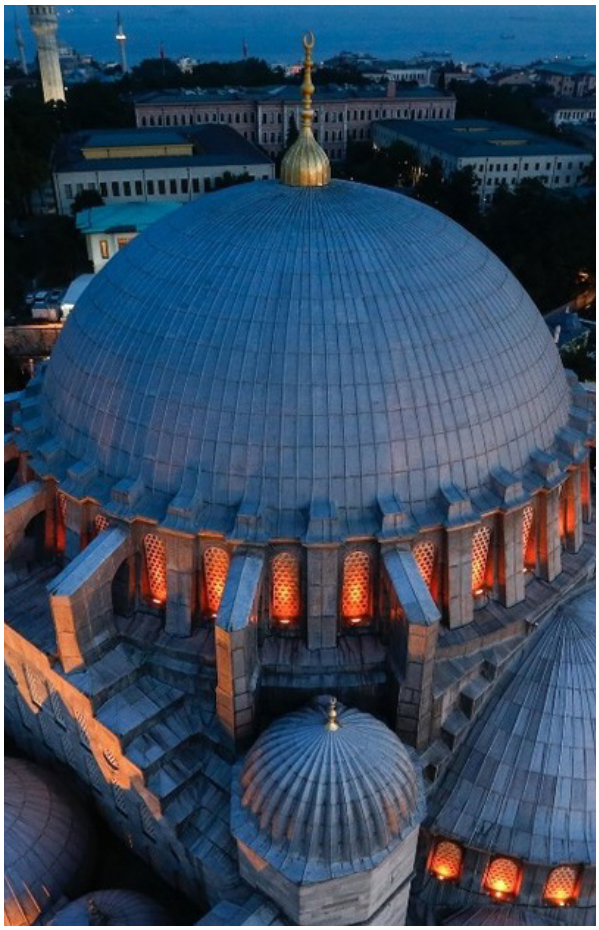


Fig.69 Süleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, 1557.

The Dome

The definition that can be given to the dome is that of a hemispherical covering, built in stone, wood, metal or glass. Initially, domes were placed above the mihrab and the qibla wall, facing towards Mecca, or above the adjoining bay; afterwards, the dome was moved to a central position above the prayer hall. It is an element of classical origin, just like the Maqsura, which was incorporated as an element meant to emphasize the sacredness of the mihrab. Born as an accessory element, the dome itself is not a necessary requirement like the mihrab, although it carries a significant symbolic meaning within the mosque, namely that "symbolically, in Islam the dome represents the celestial vault, just as the garden prefigures Paradise." In fact, the interior decoration reinforces this symbolism through complex geometries recalling celestial bodies, as well as vegetal forms or calligraphic inscriptions. The number of domes can vary from just one, as is most common, to multiple ones. Some mosques incorporate many domes, such as the Ottoman Süleymaniye Mosque, while others feature only a modest number, such as the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia, which has three domes: one atop the minaret, one above the entrance of the prayer hall, and one above the qibla wall. In the Middle East and in neighboring Asian territories, the dome was considered a customary roofing technique in areas where wood was scarce; moreover, it was relatively easy to construct using slanted mud bricks or layers of bricks arranged in progressively smaller circles. In terms of architectural achievements, the first domed building erected by Muslims was the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (691). The distinctive feature of this structure lies in the use of wood for the dome, which had already proven to be highly suitable in church architecture. The wooden structure was lighter and more flexible, although it had to be covered with copper or lead to protect it against the elements. Over time, the dome became the symbolic feature of mosques, although it was also common in palatial architecture, such as in courts, schools, and hammams. The fact that the dome did not become an obligatory element in mosques, unlike the mihrab, indicates that its purpose was not liturgical; therefore, it differed from the function of identifying a significant area during prayer. More likely, the purpose of the dome was decorative or to signal the distinction between more luxurious mosques and simpler ones. By analyzing the Mosque of Cordoba, we can observe that the domes are connected to the protective complex of the Maqsura. In the Al-Hakim Mosque in Cairo, a ceremony in honor of the prince used to take place precisely in the area near the dome and mihrab. These observations support the theory that the monumental domes placed near the mihrab, especially in Persian mosques of the 11th century, were originally intended as royal spaces before being incorporated as the core elements of mosque composition.



Fig.70 Sancaklar Mosque, Istanbul, 2012.



Fig.71 Mosque of Córdoba, Córdoba, 785.

The Mihrab

According to the ancient scholar Raghib al-Isfahani, the term Mihrab derives from the Arabic expression “Mihrab al-Bayt”, which literally corresponds to “the best place in the house”, and in this case refers to the House of Allah. Introduced around 707–709 A.D., mihrabs can historically be found in two main variations: concave or flat. The concave mihrab, which is the most common, defines a niche similar to an alcove, usually semicircular in shape, “carved” into the wall of the mosque facing the qibla. It allows for the identification and amplification of the recitation of the imam who leads the prayer, causing the sound to “rebound,” thus creating an acoustic apparatus as well as a directional focal point for the prayer. The two-dimensional mihrabs, which are the oldest, began as simple signs or objects such as stones that indicated the direction of the qibla, and later became carved surfaces. Unlike the former, these have the purpose of a more intimate devotional form and instead tend to disperse the sound of the recited invocations. As for the mihrab, both flat and concave types seem to establish directionality within mosques, and they have a complex history regarding their function and how they became fundamental elements in communal prayer, as they are meant to represent, through their aesthetic form, the gateway to the divine.Like other elements of the “modern” mosque, which have entered religious symbolism and become fundamental within the mosque, the niche also appears to be linked to political architecture. In fact, in this regard, a group of scholars believes that it indicated the position of the ruling party within palace-style architectural structures. The Mihrab is located adjacent to the Maqsura, positioned at the central area of the qibla wall. It does not possess only the function of indicating the direction of prayer, but it is also the focal point from which the architectural development of the prayer area originates, the place toward which the worshipper directs their gaze. The Mihrab is much more than a niche; it represents a place of projection, becoming a protected area with an aura of sacredness that is recognizable from any point within the mosque. It is probably an element originating from classical architecture; in fact, geometrically speaking, it recalls a “contraction” of the apse found in Syrian Byzantine churches, where the cathedra was placed. Similarly, it could also be linked to the niche present in Coptic churches, with the difference that that niche was devotional, whereas this one is orientational. It should also not be confused with the altar of churches, as it is in fact its opposite. In the altar we find a convex or protruding form, while the mihrab is concave, and this concavity expresses a symbolism that conveys essentiality, in contrast to the aesthetic of the filled or projecting surface typical of the altar.It is not the niche itself that is sacred, but the direction it expresses. Over the centuries, the mihrab has been given the role of the focal point of the mosque, a connotation further emphasized by the lavish decoration and the materials used in it. With regard to the decoration of flat mihrabs, they often show the same motif representing a lamp surrounded by candlesticks. This type of representation recalls the lamps present in mosques, which are associated with the presence of divine light in the mosque. These motifs linked to the theme of light, representing the candle and the lamp placed beneath the arch, are also generally found on funerary steles. The difference, however, lies in the fact that mihrabs carry Qur’anic verses, whereas the tombstones show funerary details. Generally hollow, the concave mihrab displays decorations that describe it on the wall, which may either focus on simplicity or express themselves through a multitude of complex dynamic designs, geometries, and calligraphic inscriptions containing verses from the Qur’an or hadith, adorned with tiles or stucco that emphasize their forms and religious significance. Calligraphic art, often recurring, presents Qur’anic verses of devotional nature towards the Creator, making it one of the vehicles through which the word of God may reach the believers.



Fig.72 Reproduction of the prophet (pbuh) minbar.



Fig.73 Minbar of Kutubiyya Mosque, Marrakesh, 1147.

The Minbar

The Minbar, which derives from the Arabic meaning “to raise” or “to elevate”, is a pulpit consisting of a straight staircase on the same axis as the seat, upon which the imam sits when delivering the Friday sermon (khutbah). It is often enclosed by an arch, generally fitted with doors, placed at the lower part. The pulpit is typically located to the right of the mihrab and is usually made of carved wood or stone. Although the minbar may show a certain similarity to church pulpits, it has a function and positioning that refer more closely to a lectern, since it is used by the imam primarily for readings and supplications. Developed from the raised seat used by judges in pre-Islamic times, the first minbar in Islamic architecture was that of the Prophet Muhammad (pbsl) in Medina, dating to around 628-631 CE. It consisted only of two steps and a seat, more similar to a throne than to the minbar we know today. After the death of the Prophet, his minbar continued to be used as a symbol of authority by the caliphs who succeeded him. It was the Umayyad caliph Muāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān (in power from 661 to 680 CE) who ordered the increase of the Prophet’s original minbar from two steps to six, thereby enhancing its importance. In the final phase of the Umayyad caliphate, before its fall in 750 CE, the construction of minbars in all congregational mosques in Egypt was mandated, and this requirement was later extended to other Muslim territories. By the beginning of the Abbasid period (after 750 CE), the minbar had become a standard feature of Friday mosques throughout the Muslim world. Thus, minbars rapidly became a symbol of political as well as religious legitimacy for Muslim authorities, earning their status as one of the only formal and necessary furnishings of a mosque, and consequently a key architectural feature. Initially, wooden furniture intended for seating was uncommon in traditional Islamic communities. In North Africa, India, Central Asia and the Middle East, it was customary to sit or kneel on the floor, which was covered with carpets to avoid dirt. The scarcity and high cost of wood in these regions meant that timber was usually reserved for essential uses, such as boat building, roof supports, and the making of doors and shutters. As a result, craftsmen treated wood as a precious resource, using small fragments with great artistic skill. Due to its prestige, the tradition developed of employing wood for the construction of the minbar, since it was the only required furnishing in congregational mosques; this led it to become the main focus of carpenters’ efforts, decorated with the finest materials and the most sophisticated techniques. The use of wood was the primary method of constructing minbars in much of the Middle East and North Africa until the Ottoman period, when minbars also began to be built in stone or brick and covered with glazed tiles. Wooden minbars were generally highly ornate, featuring carved geometric and arabesque motifs, as well as calligraphic inscriptions, and in some cases inlays of ivory or mother-of-pearl.



Fig.74 Abrahamic Family House mosque, Abu Dhabi, 2023.



Fig.75 The Prophet's Mosque, Medina, 623.

The Musalla

The musalla is the main space within the mosque that is used for ritual prayer. The term derives from the verb “to pray,” and therefore refers to the place where the salat is performed. It is in fact the prayer hall of the Islamic temple, where the faithful perform the five canonical prayers, listen to sermons, or take part in community activities. It is the area that receives the greatest focus of liturgical actions, as well as containing the main components of the mosque’s architecture: the mihrab, the minbar, the maqsura, and, when present, also the main dome of the sanctuary. From the earliest mosques, the musalla was typically given a rectangular or otherwise regular form (probably deriving from the Prophet’s house-mosque), although such a form is not in itself mandatory, unlike other elements mentioned. The only requirements imposed on this space are the ability to allow the faithful to perform all prescribed movements correctly, and the possibility for them to arrange themselves in parallel rows, enabling the greatest number of people to face towards the qibla. The spatial configuration of the musalla in the mosque is thus shaped according to the rite of prayer; this means that the composition of the space is conditioned by its users rather than the opposite in all its aspects, taking into account: circulation, the accommodation of religious practices and learning, the presence and arrangement of pillars, as well as decoration, which significantly influences the quality of the experience. The central point is generally marked by a dome which also acts as a skylight, while, in the case of other types of roofing, the main source of light is usually a large chandelier, always present in the prayer halls of sacred mosques. The volume of the hall, given by the relationship between height and floor area, also affects ventilation, lighting, acoustics, and the sense of reverence experienced by the faithful during prayer. An important aspect of the musalla is also the inclusion of a prayer area for both men and women, strictly separated in accordance with Islamic norms, both in terms of spatial arrangement and, often, the entrances. These may be located on the same level (with the men’s area at the front), or on different levels. Generally, the women’s prayer area occupies around 20-30% of the men’s hall, a practice deriving from the fact that, unlike men, women are not obligated to pray in the mosque, resulting in lower attendance.

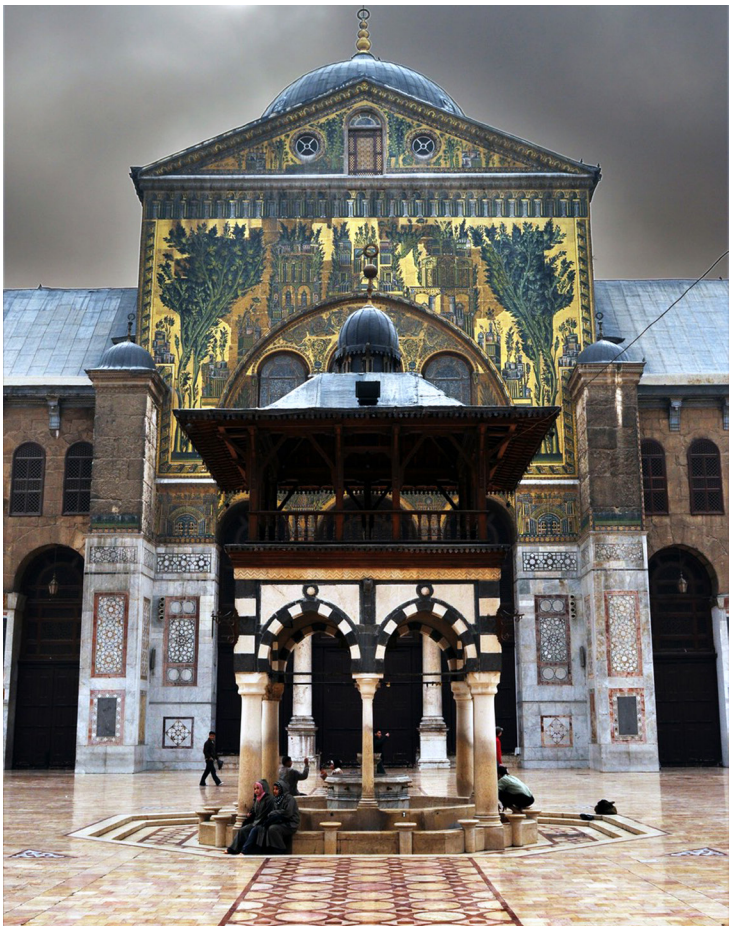


Fig.76 Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, 713.



Fig.77 Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca, 1993.

Wudu area

Ablution better known as wudu, is a fundamental prerequisite for Muslims before performing ritual prayers. During the ablution process, Muslims wash specific parts of the body that may have encountered impurities during the day. To address this obligatory need for the faithful, dedicated spaces are customarily provided in mosque architecture to accommodate this requirement. These spaces help the worshipper purify themselves from the worldliness of daily life, as well as prepare hygienically for the state of worship, which involves purification of the body as well as of the mind and the heart.
If the mosque has a courtyard, water points must be provided in its vicinity for the performance of wudu, and they must meet the purification needs of worshippers of both sexes, in strictly separated areas. This may take the form of a fountain, as for example in the sahn of the Great Mosque of Damascus, or alternatively a basin of still water. The wudu area can also be located outside the courtyard if one is not present and may also be combined with the restroom facilities (in most cases), as in the case of the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca. In this instance, the purification space is connected to the restrooms and may appear as lowered washing basins or as individual stations from which water flows.

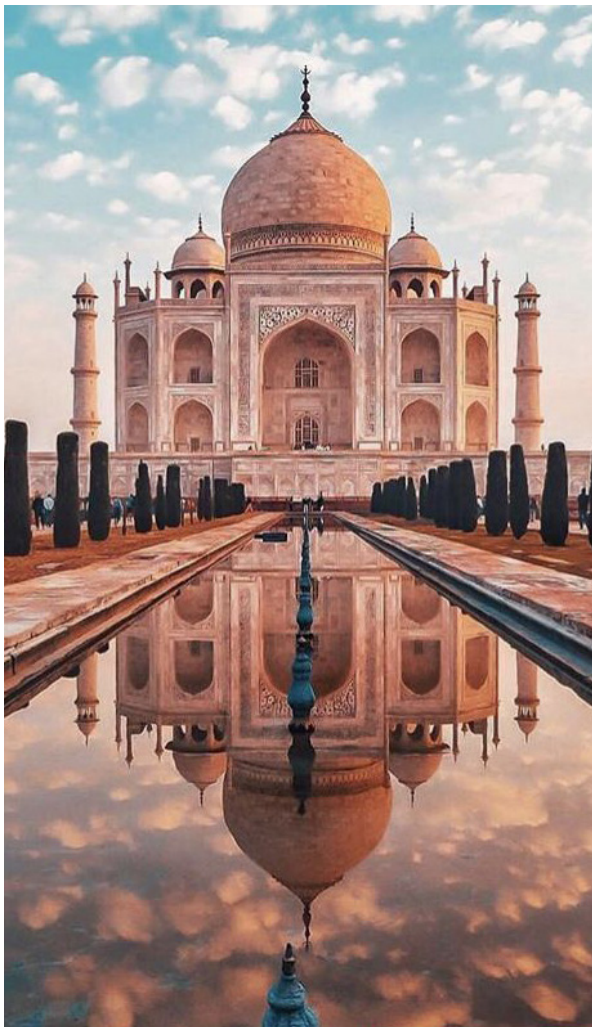


Fig.78 Taj Mahal, Agra, 1632.



Fig.80 Shah Mosque, Isfahan, 1629.



Fig.79 Si-o-se Pol bridge, Isfahan, 1599.

The Iwan

The iwan is a rectangular atrium or area, closed on three sides, completely open on the front, and generally vaulted; that is, with an arched ceiling made of stone, cement, or bricks. The entrance leading into the iwan is called a pishtaq, a term of Persian origin indicating a doorway that opens onto the façade of a building, often decorated with calligraphy, vividly colored tiles, and geometric patterns. Many scholars suggest that the origin of the iwan can be traced back to Mesopotamia, around the 3rd century AD, where modern-day Iraq is located. [8] In fact, iwans were a distinguishing feature of the Parthian Empire as well as Sasanian architecture in ancient Persia, until their final arrival in Arab and Islamic architecture in the 7th century AD. The development of these structures reached its peak during the Seljuk period, when iwans became a fundamental component in architecture. Despite its uncertain development, there is unanimity that the iwan is local in nature and does not originate from a structural evolution influenced by traditions from different areas. The only similar structures, known by the name “pesgam” and attributable to the iwan, have been found in various Zoroastrian dwellings in Yazd, where two or four halls opened onto a central courtyard; despite this, it is not certain that these halls were vaulted. Another characteristic of these structures is that, compared to others, they are not limited to any specific function, so much so that they can be found in religious buildings, as well as public and residential architectures. Iwans were often employed in non-religious Islamic architecture before the 12th century, particularly in houses, communal spaces, and civil structures like the Si-o-Se Pol bridge in Isfahan. Islamic architecture later revised the Sasanian arrangement of the iwan, transforming it into an imposing entrance towards the prayer hall or leading to a tomb inside the mosque, often preceded by a domed space; as it was highly adaptable to various contexts and structural configurations. The iwan, in fact, could be erected along the internal courtyards of palaces, as in madrasas (schools), or externally, as in the Taj Mahal.



Fig.81 Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Abu Dhabi, 2007.

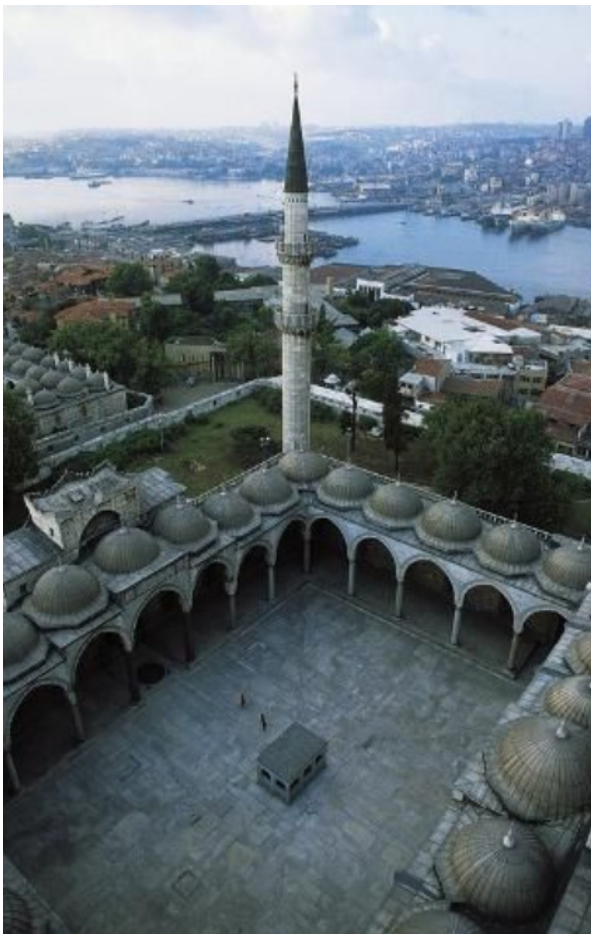


Fig.82 Süleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, 1557.

The Sahn

The sahn (from the Arabic for courtyard) is a type of courtyard belonging to Islamic architecture, and more specifically refers to the formal courtyard of a mosque. Traditional mosques generally include a large central sahn, surrounded by a riwaq, which is a portico enclosed on all sides. Originally used in houses as a safe and private space within the walls of residences, the sahn eventually became a standard feature both in domestic architecture and in religious buildings across the Islamic world, appearing in both urban and rural contexts. It may in some ways be compared to the cloister in European architecture.

The principal requirement that the architecture of a congregational mosque must meet is the ability to accommodate the entire population (at least the male portion, as women are not obliged to attend) of a city or town. For this purpose, congregational mosques must possess a large prayer hall. In many mosques, this hall is connected to the open courtyard, which also functions as a transitional space. The courtyard is generally equipped with a fountain, whose water serves both as a welcome relief in hot climates and as a resource for performing wudu (ritual purification) before prayer. Although not an essential feature of mosque architecture, the courtyard plays an important role. Particularly in an urban setting, these courtyards not only facilitate movement between the entrance and the interior of the mosque but also provide a space in which one may pause, clearing the mind of the noise and concerns of the city before approaching the prayer and better connecting with the transcendent state of the sacred place being entered.



Fig.83 Great Mosque of Kairouan, Kairouan, 670.

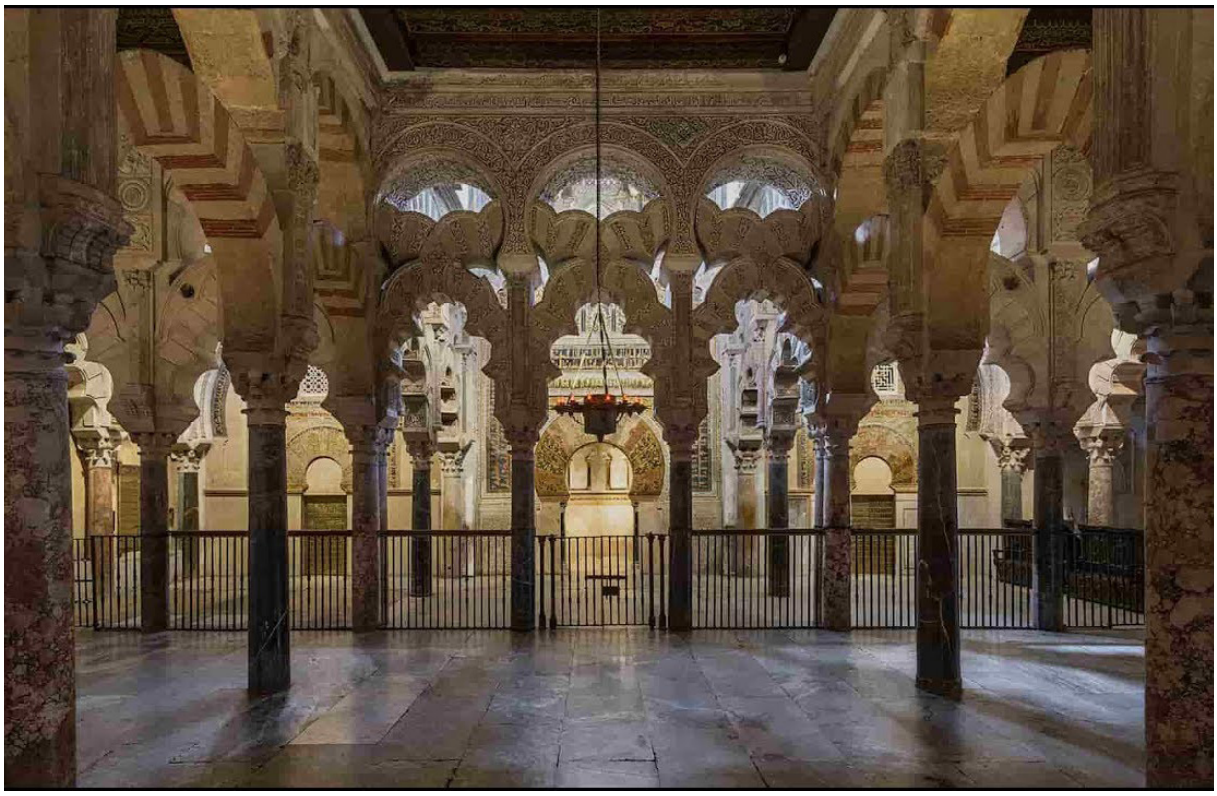


Fig.84 Mosque of Córdoba, Córdoba, 785.

The Maqsura

The Maqsura (from the Arabic “enclosed space”) is an enclosure or screen, generally made of wood, placed near the mihrab or sometimes in a central position along the qibla wall. It was typically reserved for a Muslim ruler and his advisors and was designed to protect him from possible assassins during prayer. From a spiritual perspective, the function of the maqsura may be compared to that of the chancel screen in Christian churches. These were usually wooden screens decorated with carvings or interlocking wooden pieces (similar to a mashrabiya), which in this case served not only as protection for the ruler, but also acted as a structure that “isolated” the prayer area. Historically, the first maqsura appears to have been created by the caliph Uthmān (644–656 CE) in the mosque of Medina, to safeguard himself from potential attacks, since his predecessor Umar had been assassinated inside the mosque. In this early Islamic period, the caliph also acted as the Imam and led the prayers in the main mosque. Uthmān’s first maqsura was a simple mud-brick wall with small window-like openings, so that he could not be approached but could still be seen by the faithful during prayer. Initially, its structure was as fragile as a mere partition, but it was later replaced by a more solid stone construction.
The maqsura would eventually become an almost standard feature of congregational mosques, since at a time when hostility toward Islam was widespread, separating the caliph from the congregation was considered a fundamental safety precaution.

The Minaret

The minaret, from the Arabic manār (corresponding to "a place of light"), is a type of tower integrated with or adjacent to the mosque. It does not have a fixed height, but it is usually single, with the exception of the most prestigious mosques. Its function is to broadcast the call to prayer (adhan). It can have a variety of shapes, from massive towers to slender spires. The minaret therefore provides a space for the muezzin to issue the adhan, calling the faithful to worship five times a day: at dawn, towards midday, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening. Another characteristic that minarets possessed was a symbolic purpose (like the bell towers of cathedrals), serving as a signal for citizens or to direct traveling caravans, as well as notifying the presence of the Islamic faith in that place, in addition to distinguishing the mosque from other architectures. Originally, mosques did not feature minarets, and the adhan (which only became a custom in the second year of the Hijra, 623-24 AD) was performed from smaller tower structures. In fact, the first Muslim community in Medina chanted the adhan from the door or the roof of the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) house, which also served as a place of prayer. Many scholars, particularly between the 19th and 20th centuries, report that the birth of minarets dates back to the Umayyad Caliphate period (661-750), promoting the theory that they imitated the bell towers of Syrian churches of the time. Other theories suggest that these towers were inspired by the Babylonian and Assyrian ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia or the shape of the Lighthouse of Alexandria. *[9]* In 1989, Prof. Jonathan Bloom published a study that defined the era of these towers' birth, arguing that the first minarets did not appear until the 9th century, under Abbasid rule; and that their initial purpose was not actually related to the announcement of prayer, but rather to be a symbol of Islam that accompanied the most important congregational mosques. *[10]* The first large-scale constructions of minarets employed for the adhan only took hold around the 10th century, and it was not until the 11th century that these towers became a fundamental feature of mosques worldwide. Most studies on Islamic architecture dating back to the late 20th century almost entirely agree with Dr. Bloom's opinion that the mosques of the Umayyad Caliphate did not feature minarets in the form of towers. In place of towers, some mosques of the period were erected with platforms or screens above the roof accessed via a staircase, from which the muezzin could invoke the adhan. These structures were known as mi'dhana ("place of the adhān") or sauma'a ("monk's cell," due to their reduced size). Another alternative and equally valid theory regarding the "Origins of the Minaret" is that of Prof. K.A.C. Creswell, who states that the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus (the former Church of St. John the Baptist), built while retaining the four massive tower-bell towers placed at each corner, could actually be considered the first of the Islamic temples to have introduced the call to prayer from such tower structures. *[11]* His insight also suggests that, in addition to the already mentioned references, the minaret could potentially have been inspired by a prototype studied in Damascus known as "Sawma'a" presenting a squat appearance reminiscent of the Ka'ba at times. The general characteristics constituting the minaret consist of: a regular square base, connected to the mosque from which it is accessed; a shaft belonging to the tower that can have a cylindrical, cuboid (square), or octagonal shape, from which a series of circular, hexagonal, or octagonal sections develop, each delimited by a projecting balcony; stairs or ramps inside the tower, often spiral and thick, such as in Samarra, Iraq, that run to the top, intermittently crossing windows on the walls that allow for light and ventilation inside. At the top of the stairs, a balcony (Al-Shorfa) encircles the upper part of the tower, allowing the muezzin to invite the faithful to prayer from this point on all sides. The summit culminates with a structure (Al-Jusaq) resembling a small dome, or possibly a conical roof similar to a soaring spire, or a curved cap that is in turn surmounted by an ornamental metal signal; and which generally represents a crescent moon, the symbol par excellence of the Islamic faith, which in some cases contrasts with rich decorations represented by carvings.

Regarding form and dimensions, the context hosting Islamic temples, and consequently the minarets, has undoubtedly influenced their features, so much so that the various Islamic regions across the world, as well as the periods that characterized them, have given birth to different minaret styles. The oldest of these minaret styles, known as the Umayyad style, was found in the historical region of the Levant (Sham), where it appeared as a square-shaped tower. This model started as a reference and subsequently spread mainly throughout North Africa and some other Islamic countries.
Historical minarets, considered from the point of view of architectural styles, can be classified as:
The Umayyad style: Known as the oldest, being the first prototype ever. Among its most relevant connotations is the base which assumes a regular quadrilateral shape, featuring a substantial structure delimited by thick walls and several balconies.

The Abbasid style: The most inspired by the architecture of the Mesopotamian Civilization, particularly influenced by the ziggurat, which features circular protrusions, narrow balconies, and smooth external surfaces adorned with decorations and miniatures.

The Persian style: Its most noted characteristics are the presence of pointed (ogival) arches for decorative-structural purposes, in addition to various types of decoration and sculptures.

The Egyptian style: It emerged during the Fatimid era and developed during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. The most noteworthy characteristic of these minarets are the “ribs” (costoloni), which evolve into a hexagonal or octagonal shape, as well as the columns that appear intermittently throughout the tower.

The Indian style: Consisting of a polygonal body, which features close-set ribs, various balconies, and carved ornaments such as muqarnas.

The Ottoman style: Characterized by a very significant height, often exceeding 50 meters, a pointed shape at the summit generally clad in lead, a terminal balcony near the top, and finally a tapering of the final body almost transforming it into an arrow directed towards the stars.

The North-African style: The minarets of the Maghreb feature a square shaft and are arranged on two levels: the main shaft, which constitutes almost its entire height, and a smaller secondary tower surmounting the former, which is then topped by a finial of copper or brass spheres. Internally, a main staircase ascends to the top of the minaret.

Beyond the monumental features of the minaret and its architectural peculiarities, the clear expression that the minaret is meant to represent is that of being a point of transit from the earthly reality towards the sky. In this regard, Dr. Sharif Shah Abdul Rahman, head of the Organization for Islamic Culture in Spain, through his lectio magistralis “The Minaret, Symbol of Civilization,” prompts reflection on the importance of the minaret in the sacred complex of the mosque and how much it is a symbol of the Muslim community, firmly notifying the reference to the sky toward Allah. [12]

In addition to this, the minaret has become a symbol in popular culture of the expansion and presence of Islam in the world. Its powerful imagery allows it a leading role in a city’s urban landscape that almost seems to elevate it to the sky, while simultaneously providing the immediate understanding of being in an Islamic context. We experience the same effect when it is present in a painting; it is so striking that it immediately identifies the origin of the work of art.



Fig.85 Great Mosque of Kairouan, Kairouan, 670.



Fig.86 Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, 713.



Fig.87 Great Mosque of Samarra, Samarra, 851.



Fig.88 Kutubiyya Mosque, Marrakesh, 1147.



Fig.89 Qutb Minar, Delhi, 1230.

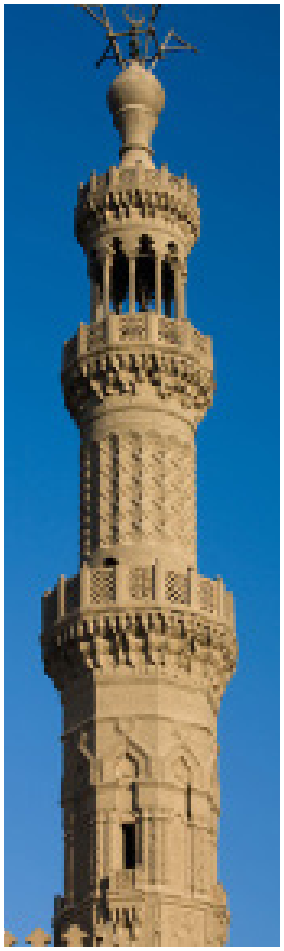


Fig.90 Mosque Amir Qurqumas, Cairo, 1507.



Fig.91 Shah Mosque, Isfahan, 1629.

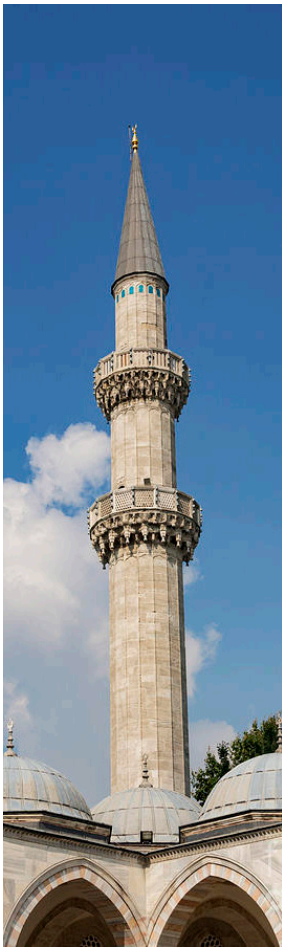


Fig.92 Süleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, 1557.

Decorative Apparatus

The Islamic doctrine in the artistic-architectural field provides for the emphasis of the essence and uniqueness of God the Almighty, the only one to whom the faculty of creating is granted. Unlike the Christian vision, in which the human figure represented in biblical episodes is the norm in religious decoration; in the mosque there is a deliberate rejection of this practice since any kind of human or animate representation is strictly forbidden. The decoration inside the Islamic temple, contrary to what one might believe, does not stop at a mere ornamental or decorative function, but goes much deeper, seeking to fulfill a purpose of a more spiritual nature. One of the tasks it possesses is that of trying to emphasize the feeling of "Tawhid" (unicity of God), thus allowing the believer to strengthen the remembrance of Allah. In order to fulfill its purpose, the building that the Muslim designer erects must be represented as a clear "symbol" of Allah's goodness and His uniqueness. A purpose in fact comparable to any potential Islamic artwork, which is to amplify the feeling of "Tawhid"; since every Islamic artistic-architectural practice has as a common denominator the reference to religiosity as the foundation on which the life of the believer should develop. Focusing on the evolution of mosque decoration, we note how in the house-mosque built by the Prophet (pbuh) in Medina, as previously seen, there was an extreme essentiality. In it there was no trace of any kind of ornament either inside or outside. Only later, during the Umayyad dynasty, did the caliph Walid bin Abdul Malik bin Marwan begin to give space to decoration inside the Islamic temple. In the repertoire of Islamic art, the use of geometry became very prominent during the 7th and 8th centuries, while from the 9th century onwards it became an inseparable feature of Islamic ornamentation. The variety of this discipline made possible an innumerable expressive capacity, representable through simple polygons and rectangles used as framing systems, to the complex patterns of stars and irregular shapes which contrasted with the sinuousness of inscriptions and vegetal motifs. Geometric patterns are the clear demonstration of the attachment of Islamic artists to the visual principles of repetition and symmetry. In the Islamic sphere, these inexhaustible compositions were defined as visual demonstrations of the unity of God and His omnipresence. Another common element of Islamic art is calligraphic decoration, which takes place in various artistic traditions of the Muslim world, and is unequivocally the most recognizable feature in Islamic religious architecture. This practice consists of the repeated citation of Qur'anic verses or Hadith (sayings of the Prophet). In the temple we find it multiple times: in the emphasis on circulation nodes such as the entrance, around the mihrab, or it is able to act as a "connector" between two elements such as the mihrab and the wall surfaces, which through this ornament become a homogeneous body generated from two elements previously distinct, then made indissoluble.

Analyzing its architectural incidence, decoration in traditional Islamic buildings is typically employed either to emphasize the form of a structure, such as: a cornice, an architrave, or a keystone, and so on; or conversely, and in almost all cases, almost to eliminate, by concealing the structural elements of a construction. Setting aside the spiritual aspect, this seems to be the task that large, intricate surfaces take on, allowing them to "dematerialize" the volumes of the sacred space through illusory effects garnished with colors and lights, making it difficult to trace their geometric root.
Generally, the two possible functions—"covering" or "emphasizing" the structure—find their place in contexts where, in the first case (covering), the link with the classical world loses value, while in the second case (accentuating the structure), it generally occurs in a context where the classical heritage still holds value. The decoration that comes to life in Islamic architecture does not have the sole purpose of covering surfaces, but carries with it the faculty to transform an entire space. The lines that define it and transform into arabesques or geometries change the decorative element into the outline of a living form that clarifies a new aspect capable of somehow interacting on a transcendental plane. The Islamic ornament is undoubtedly the component that is able to "stitch" architecture and religion together, demonstrating their indissolubility. Through these analyses, we note how decoration in Islamic religious architecture is a fundamental element and not a secondary component added to the structure. Therefore, during the design of these sacred spaces, it cannot be considered as mere final embellishment, but needs to be regarded on par with all the other elements that characterize the place.

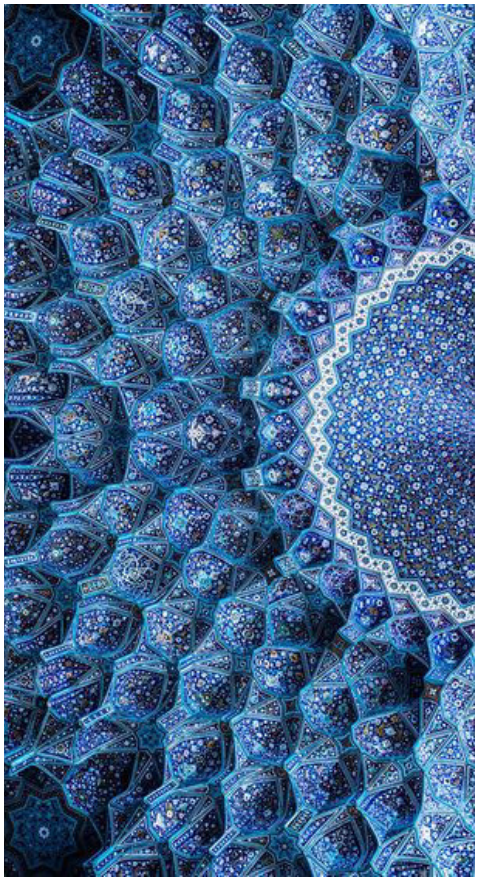
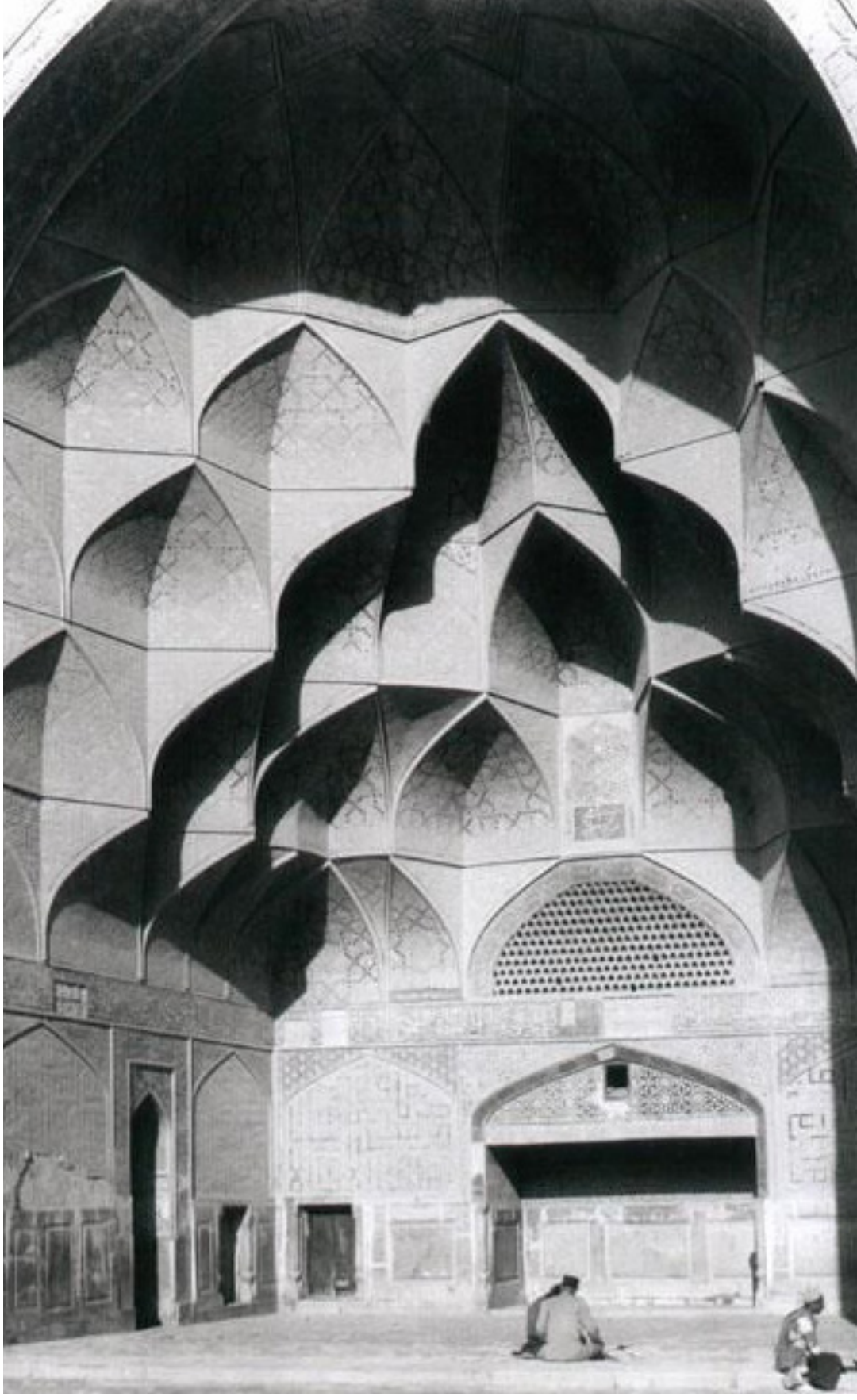


Fig.93 Shah Mosque, Isfahan, 1629.



Fig.94 Madrasa Bou Inania, Fès, 1355.



Historical-Typological Evolution of the Mosque

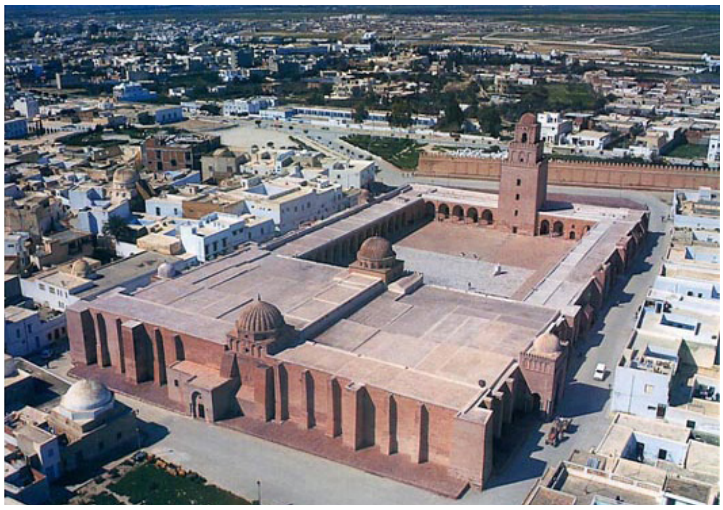


Fig.95 Arab Hypostyle mosque. Great Mosque of Kairouan, Kairouan, 670.



Fig.96 Persian four iwan mosque. Shah Mosque, Isfahan, 1629.



Fig.97 Turkish central dome mosque. Süleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, 1557.

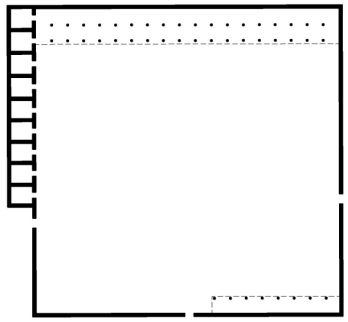
Contemporary illustrations highlight how individual buildings, even those of high quality, are often the result of the personal choices of designers, who are frequently self-referential and detached from historical tradition. From this arises both a discomfort and a notable difficulty in creating an objective guide for the design of contemporary mosques. For those who instead believe in historical continuity, an understanding of the evolutionary processes of architectural structures, through the various specializations and adaptations influenced by local cultures, known as the typological process, can form the foundation for principles and rules for the creation of contemporary designs.

The architecture of mosques is a profound reflection of the rich history and cultural diversity of Islam. While mosques share a common purpose as places of worship and prayer, their architecture varies widely across the Islamic world. Three particularly significant mosque typologies, the Hypostyle Mosque, the Four-Iwan Mosque, and the Ottoman Mosque, testify to the diversity and complexity of Islamic architecture.

The Hypostyle Mosque, rooted in the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), represents one of the earliest styles used in Islamic architecture. This abstract and neutral space, without axes or symmetries, was conceived for a uniform group in ordered formation. Characterized by a large hypostyle hall with columns arranged in an orthogonal grid and an adjacent courtyard surrounded by a colonnade, this architectural form was integrated into the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) own house. The Hypostyle Mosque maintains its relevance thanks to its intrinsic simplicity and cultural and religious significance, influencing both traditional and modern designs. The introduction of the mihrab creates a tension between an axis and a neutral spatial field. Depending on the orientation of the walls relative to the qibla wall, two main variants can be distinguished: the Middle Eastern and the Western type. An example of the former group is the Mosque of Córdoba, with its load-bearing walls and straight arches, while the latter group is represented by the Great Mosque of Kairouan, with its domes.

The Four-Iwan Mosque, developed as a revolution in Islamic architecture, became the predominant typology during the medieval period, especially in Iran. This mosque is characterized by an iwan, an open vaulted space with a rectangular portal, which transforms hypostyle mosques into complexes arranged on two intersecting axes, allowing for spatial dynamism, facilitating processional paths, and establishing hierarchy and serial structure. The introduction of this form represents a significant fusion of Persian influences within Islamic culture and religion, featuring ornate domes and particular emphasis on the courtyard.

The Ottoman Mosque, with its roots in the 15th century when Mehmed II conquered Constantinople, presents a typology with a central plan. Characterized by buildings with sides of equal length and a symmetrical central space, Ottoman mosques often feature a square or circular plan with an open central volume developed around a vertical axis. This typology reveals a strong influence from Seljuk Anatolian traditions and from the Byzantine Church of Hagia Sophia, resulting in imperial mosques with a unique blend of cultures.



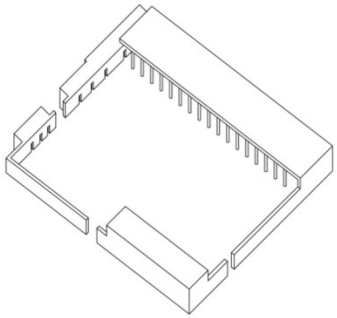
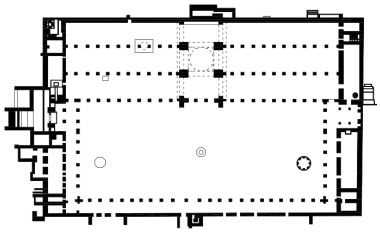


Fig.98 Prophet's Mosque (PBUH), Medina, 622.



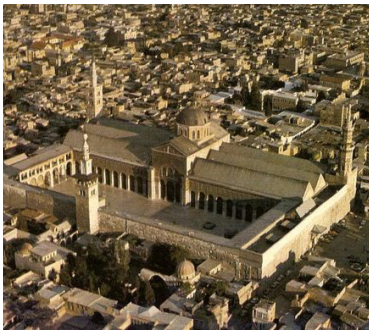


Fig.99 Great Mosque of the Umayyads, Damascus, 715.

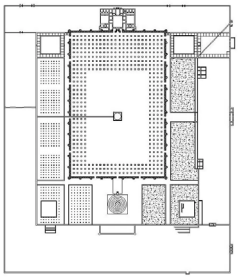
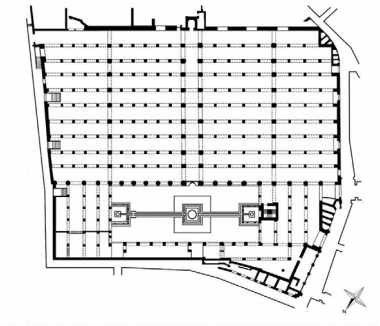




Fig.100 Great Mosque of Samarra, Samarra, 851.



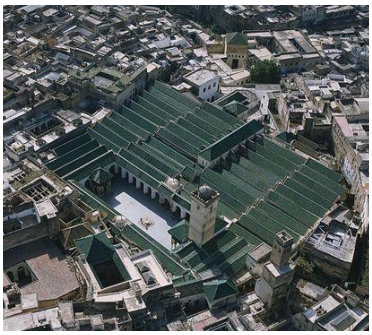


Fig.101 Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque, Fez, 857.

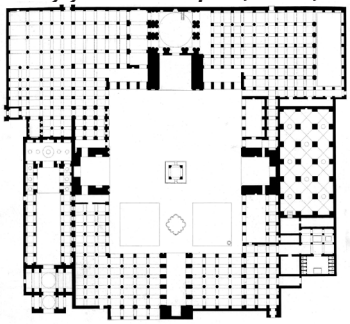




Fig.102 Four-Iwan Congregational Mosque, Isfahan, 11th century.

Hypostyle Mosque (622)

The Prophet's Mosque (pbsl), Medina, 622.

The hypostyle mosque, characterized by a large prayer hall supported by columns, finds its roots in the Mosque of the Prophet (pbuh) in Medina. Built in 622, this mosque established a distinctive style, characterized by a spacious courtyard and imposing columns.

Umayyad-Type Mosque (661-750)

Great Mosque of the Umayyads, Damasco, 715.

Rectangular hypostyle plan with a large courtyard surrounded by colonnaded arcades and a large prayer hall.

Abbasid-Type Mosque (750-945)
Great Mosque of Samarra, Samarra, 851.
Rectangular arcaded courtyard with a large prayer hall covered by numerous colonnades.

Andalusian-Type Mosque (711-1492) Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque, Fez, 857.
The Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque, founded in 859, is not only one of the largest mosques in Africa, but also one of the oldest centers of higher learning in the world. With a rectangular floor plan and an emphasis on the longitudinal axis of the prayer hall, this mosque reflects the refinement and elegance of Andalusian architectural tradition.

Persian Type Mosque (850-1736)

Great Congregational Mosque (Masjid-e Jame), Isfahan, 11th century.

After the arrival of Islam in Persia, Persian mosques developed a distinctive architectural identity. The four-Iwan plan, introduced in the 11th century, modified the traditional hypostyle layout, maintaining an open central courtyard but adding monumental Iwans on each of its sides.

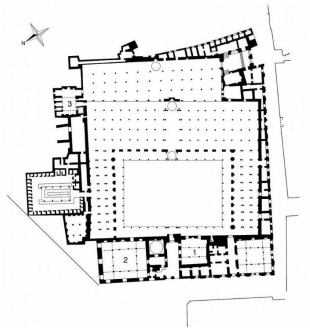




Fig.103 Al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo, 970.

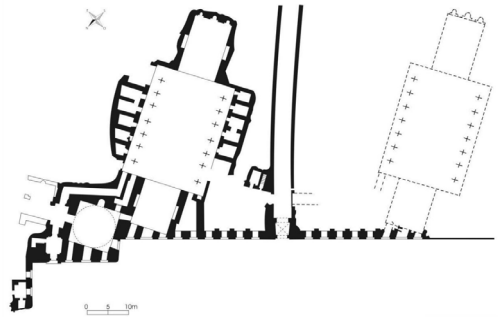




Fig.104 Mosque of Sultan al-Din Ayyub, Cairo, 1242.

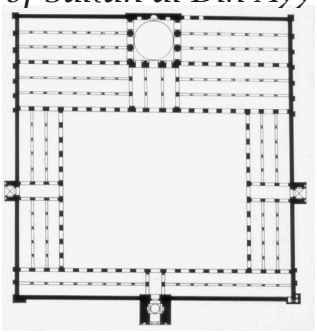
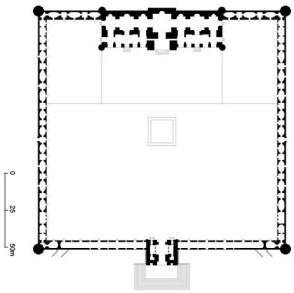




Fig.105 Mosque of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars, Cairo, 1268.



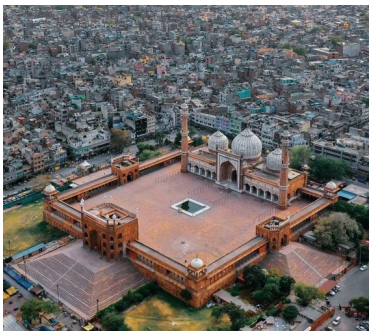


Fig.106 Badshahi Mosque, Lahore, 1673.

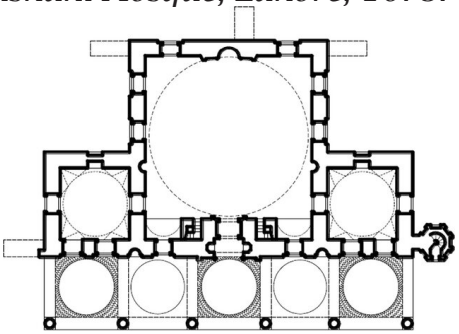




Fig.107 Hatuniye Mosque, Tokat, 15th century.

Fatimid Type Mosque (909-1171)
Al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo, 970.
Founded in 970 in Cairo, with similarities to North African mosques; it was an important intellectual center with a significant history. It features a T-shaped plan, which emphasizes the importance of the mihrab with a wider central nave.

Ayyubid Type Mosque (1171-1250)

Mosque and Madrasa of Sultan al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub, Cairo, 1242.

The Ayyubid era introduced madrasas, institutions of learning, within mosques. The complex of Sultan al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub in Cairo is an example, with two independent buildings connected by a passageway, each dedicated to two of the four Sunni legal schools.

Mamluk Type Mosque (1250-1517)
Mosque of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars, Cairo, 1268.
The Mosque of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars in Cairo, built between 1267 and 1269, represents a synthesis of local and Seljuk influences. With a hypostyle plan, the configuration of the central nave and the maqsura recalls the tradition of classical hypostyle mosques.

Indian Type Mosque (1200)
Badshahi Mosque, Lahore, 1673.
Islamic architecture in India began in the 13th century, importing Arab and Persian styles. However, the Indian typology developed uniquely, rejecting the concept of the enclosed courtyard. Mughal mosques, such as the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, feature wider courtyards and a more sculptural structure, with monumental domes and a central Iwan, representing a departure from the Arab and Persian tradition.

Ottoman Type Mosque (1299-1923)

Hatuniye Mosque, Tokat, 15th century.

Centralized plan with influences from the Basilica of Hagia Sophia, introducing the centralized layout. The Hatuniye Mosque, built during the early years of the Ottoman Empire, adopts an “earring” layout derived from the Byzantine Basilica.



1. Mosque of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 537.

2. Prophet's Mosque, Medina, 623.

3. Great Mosque of Kairouan, Kairouan, 670.

4. Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem, 680.

5. Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, 713.

6. Mosque of Córdoba, Córdoba, 785.

7. Great Mosque of Samarra, Samarra, 851.

8. University of al-Qarawiyyin, Fez, 857.

9. Ibn Tulun Mosque, Cairo, 884.

10. Al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo, 970.

11. Al-Hakim Mosque, Cairo, 1013.

12. Kutubiyya Mosque, Marrakesh, 1147.

13. Quwwat al-Islam Mosque, Delhi, 1230.

14. Sultan al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub's Mosque and Madrasa, Cairo, 1242.

15. Sultan al-Zahir

16. Al-Nasir Mosqu

17. Hatuniye Mosq

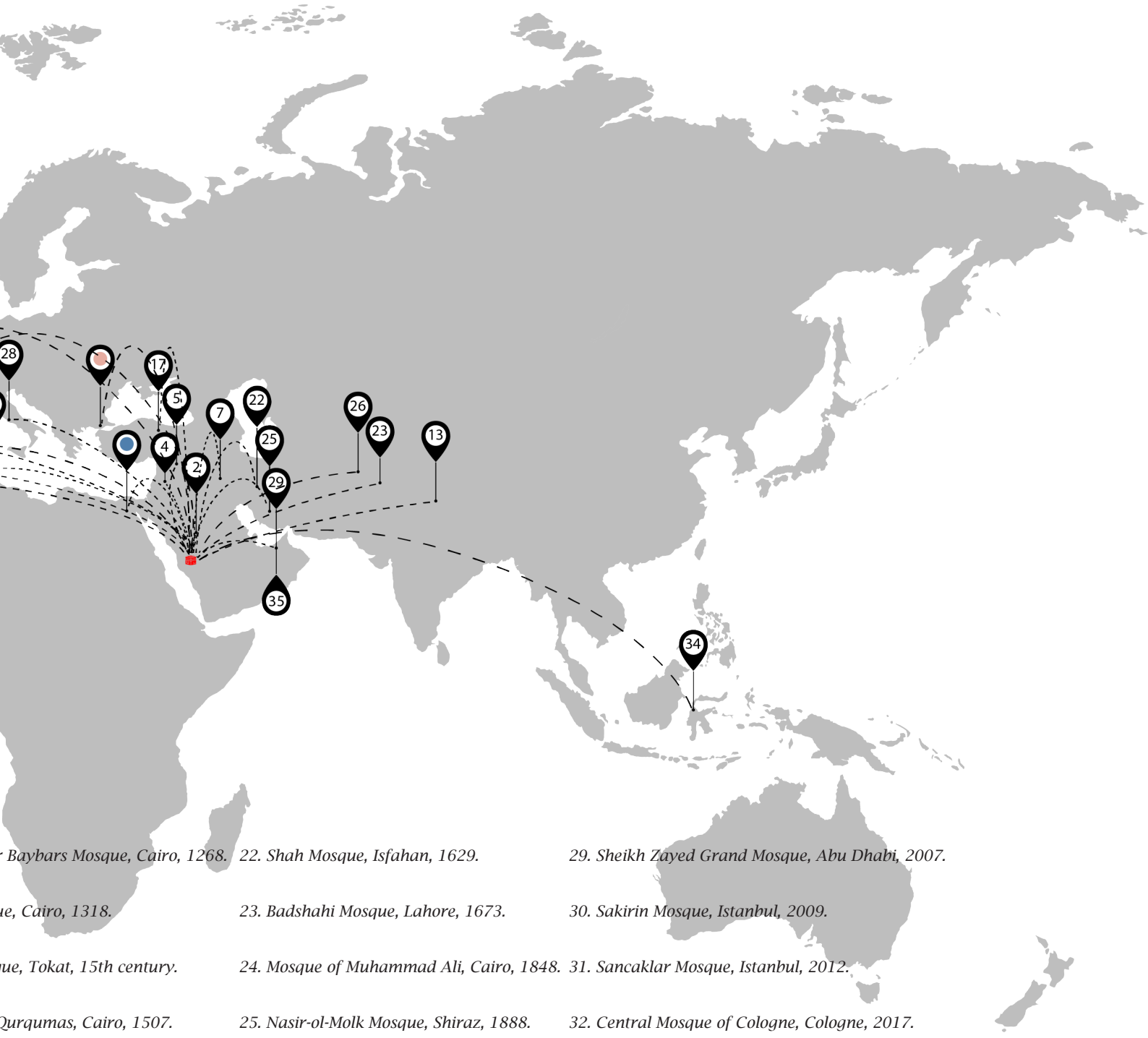
18. Mosque Amir C

19. Sehzade Mosqu

20. Süleymaniye M

21. Blue Mosque, Is

Fig.108 Global map of analyzed mosques facing Mecca.



r Baybars Mosque, Cairo, 1268.
ue, Cairo, 1318.
ue, Tokat, 15th century.
Qurqumas, Cairo, 1507.
ue, Istanbul, 1543.
Mosque, Istanbul, 1557.
stanbul,1597.

22. Shah Mosque, Isfahan, 1629.
23. Badshahi Mosque, Lahore, 1673.
24. Mosque of Muhammad Ali, Cairo, 1848.
25. Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque, Shiraz, 1888.
26. Faisal Mosque, Islamabad, 1986.
27. Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca, 1993.
28. Mosque of Rome, Rome, 1995.

29. Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Abu Dhabi, 2007.
30. Sakirin Mosque, Istanbul, 2009.
31. Sancaklar Mosque, Istanbul, 2012.
32. Central Mosque of Cologne, Cologne, 2017.
33. Central Mosque of Cambridge, Cambridge, 2019.
34. Nurul Yaqin Mosque, Palu, 2022.
35. Abrahamic Family House Mosque, Abu Dhabi, 2023.



Case Studies of Mosques Worldwide

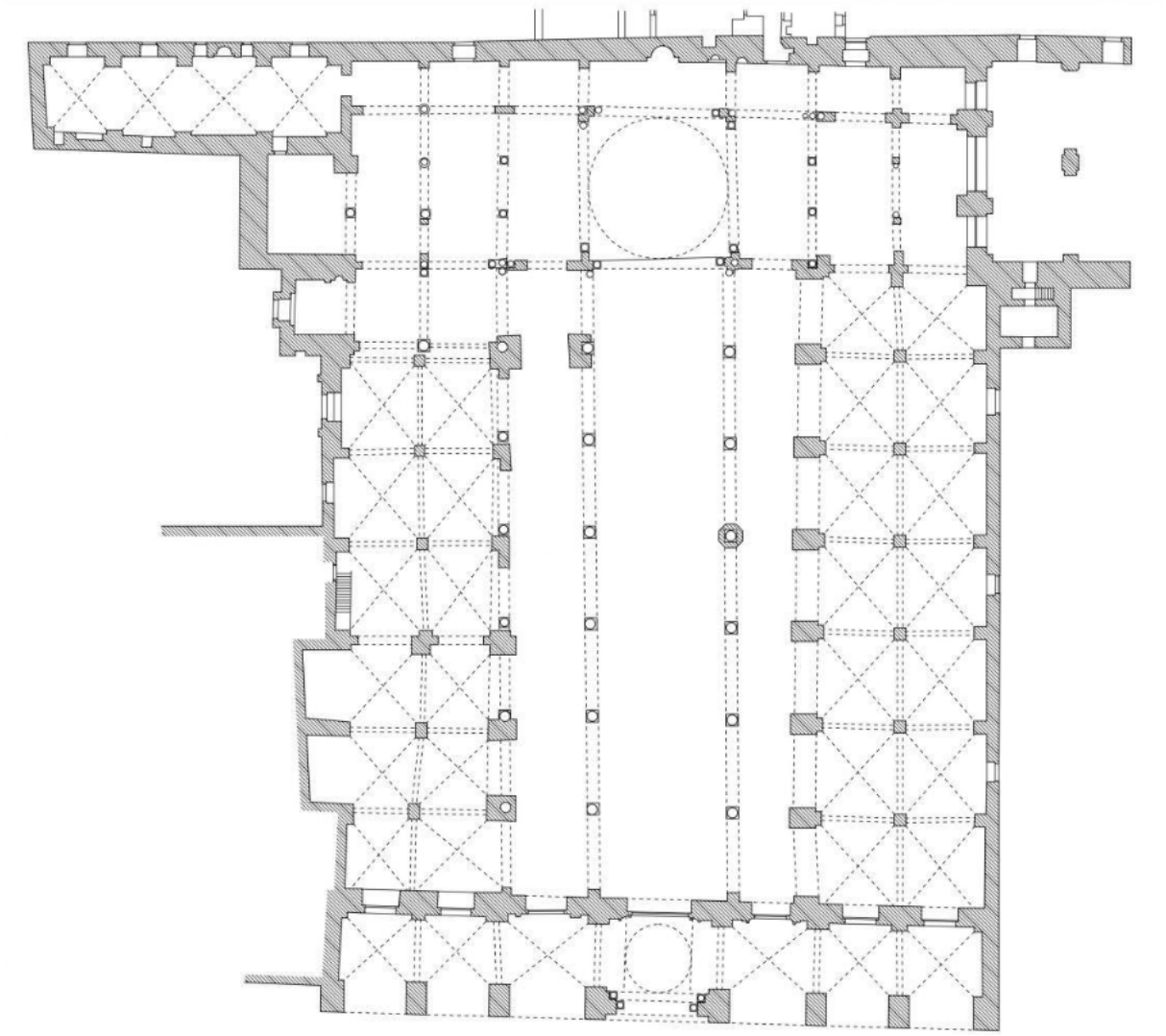


Fig.109 Mosque floor plan.

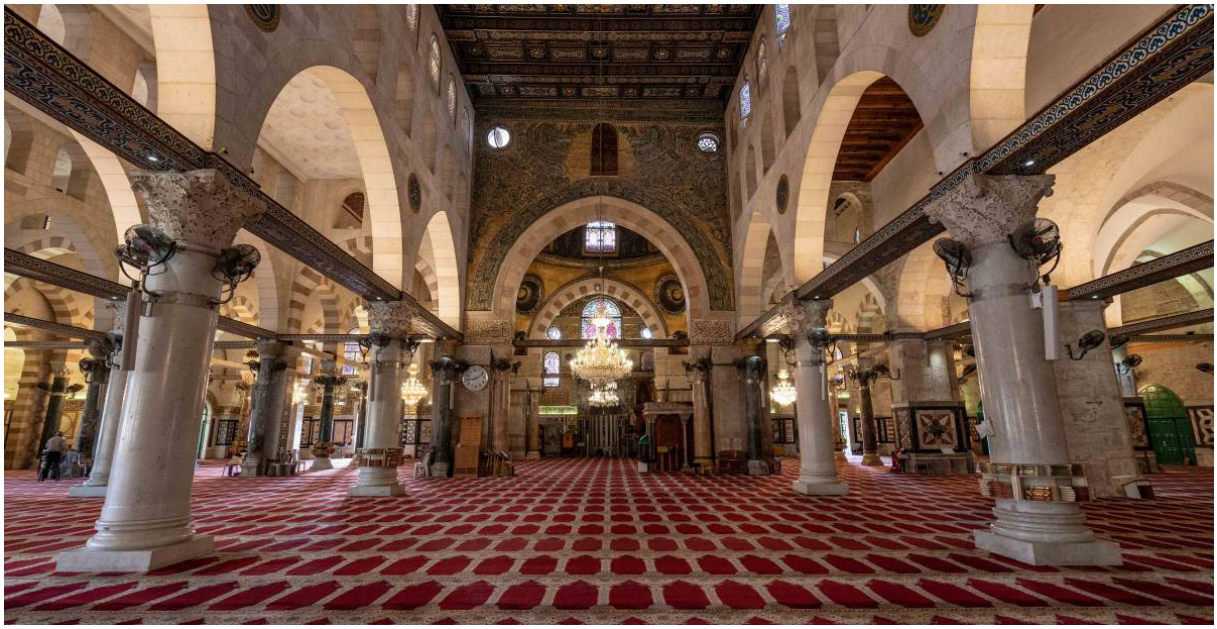


Fig.110 Interior prayer hall.

Mosque of al-Aqsa, Jerusalem, 680, al-Walid ibn Abd al-Malik.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque is a congregational mosque located in the Old City of Jerusalem. It is situated within a larger complex formally known as al-haram al-Sharīf (The Noble Sanctuary), or as the Temple Mount. The mosque, originally constructed likely by the fifth Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705) or by his successor al-Walīd I (705-715), is located on the southern side of the complex, along the same axis as the Dome of the Rock, a notable monument of the Islamic tradition. It has undergone various modifications over time due to atmospheric events as well as intentional renovations. Indeed, it was first struck by an earthquake in 746 and subsequently rebuilt in 758 by the Abbasid caliph al-Mansūr; later, in 780, the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī expanded it, increasing it to fifteen aisles topped by a central dome. Unfortunately, it was destroyed again by another earthquake in 1033. The mosque was then rebuilt by the Fatimid caliph al-Zāhir (1021-1036), who reduced its width to seven aisles but adorned the interior with a sophisticated central arch decorated with mosaics featuring vegetal motifs. The mosque features a rectangular plan set within an enclosure covering approximately 14.4 hectares. Its sides measure 83 and 56 meters respectively. Stylistically, unlike the nearby Dome of the Rock, which represents an example of Byzantine classical architecture, the Al-Aqsa Mosque is characteristic of early Islamic architecture. Beginning the analysis of the building from the dome, nothing remains of the original dome constructed by Abd al-Malik. The current form is that established under the caliph al-Zāhir, which was at first composed of wood plated with lead enamel; however, it was later replaced by the present dome, constructed in concrete with lead sheet covering, after a fire destroyed the previous one in 1969. Together with the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus (715) and the Great Mosque of Sousse (850), it is one of the few domes to have been erected in front of the mihrab during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. The façade of the temple, dating back to 1065 CE and erected under the orders of the caliph al-Mustansir Billah, featured a balustrade composed of arches and small columns. The façade visible today is more precisely composed of a portico preceded by seven stone arches, almost all in Romanesque style, with the central one slightly larger in size serving as the entrance to the mosque. The sacred building features seven hypostyle naves and several additional rooms located on the southernmost side of the structure. 121 polychrome stained-glass windows from the Abbasid and Fatimid eras allow radiant light to illuminate the interior of the sanctuary. 45 sturdy columns, of which 33 are in Italian white marble and the remaining 12 in stone, firmly support the building while also defining the numerous aisles. Their capitals can be divided into four types: those supporting the central nave, carved in a heavy and archaic manner; those beneath the dome, of Corinthian order and made of Italian white marble; those of the eastern nave, with a rough basket-like form, which is shared with the capitals lateral to the dome, though these latter are smaller and more proportionate



Fig.111 Interior prayer hall.

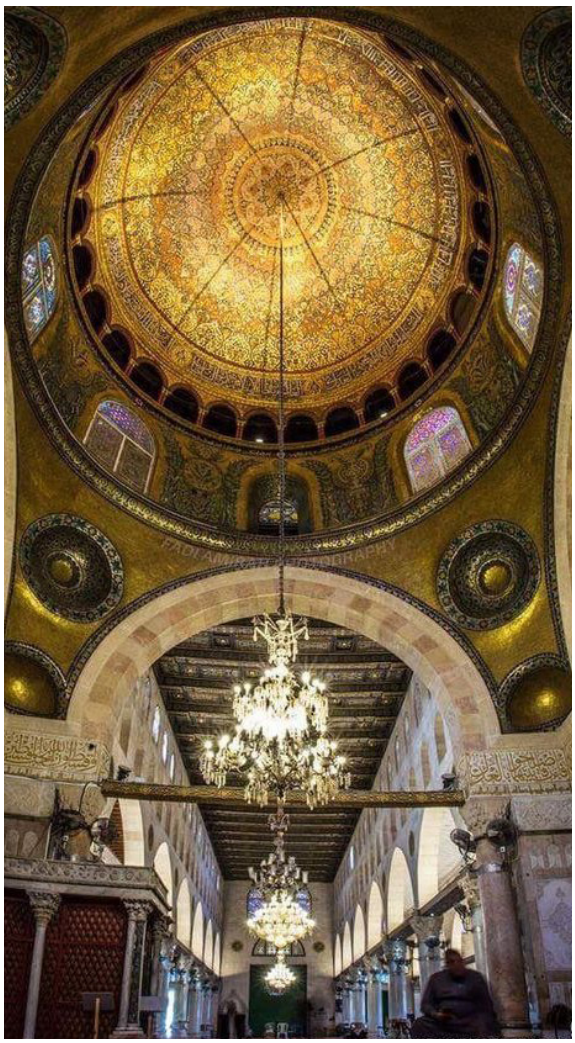


Fig.112 Dome detail.



Fig.113 Exterior view.

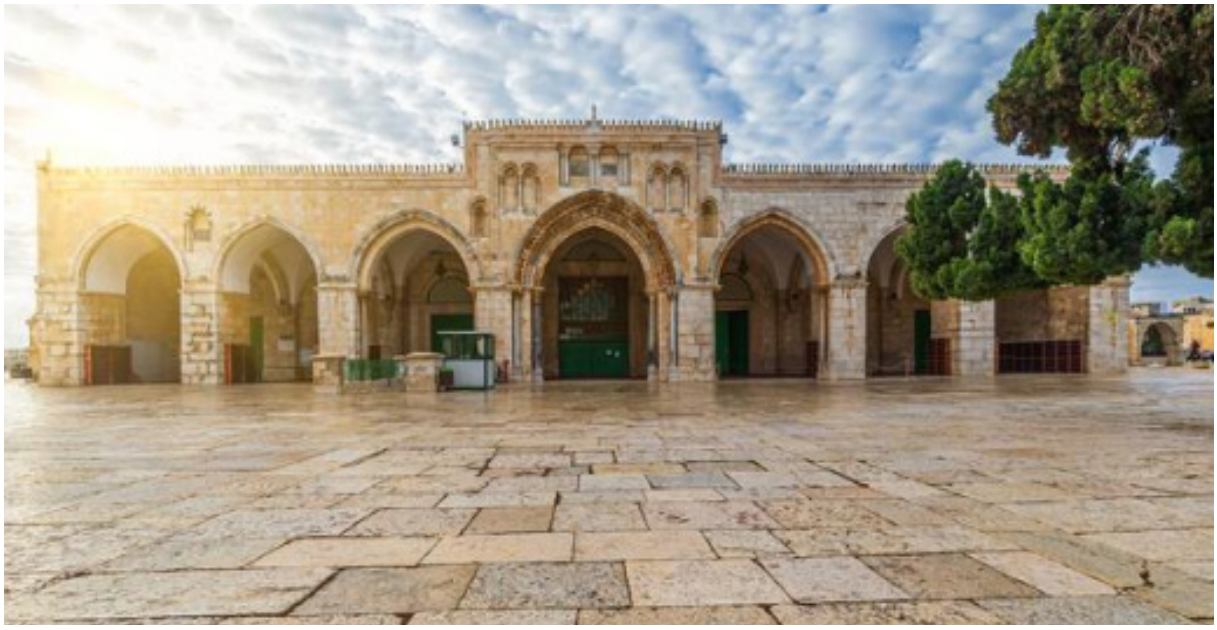


Fig.114 Front facade.

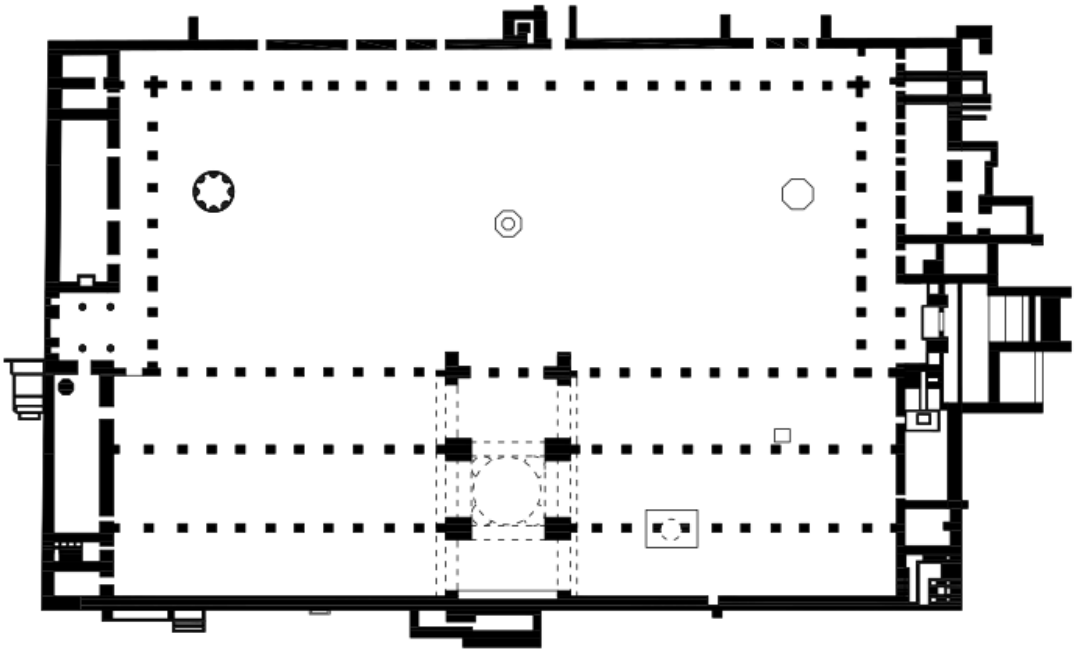


Fig.115 Mosque floor plan.

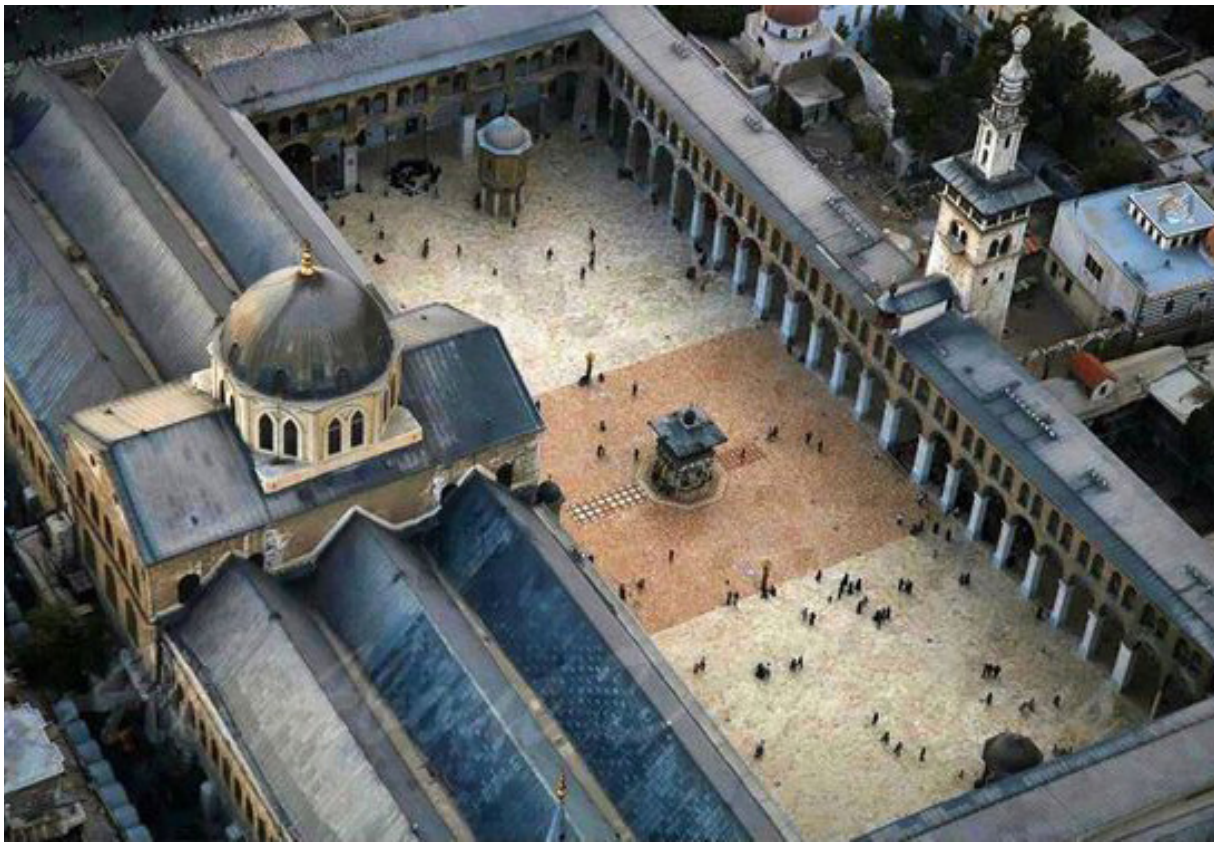


Fig.116 Aerial view.

Great Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, 715, Al-Walid ibn Abd al-Malik.

The Umayyad Mosque, known as the Great Mosque of Damascus, located in the old city area of Damascus in Syria, is one of the most famous and oldest mosques in the world. Its religious significance derives primarily from the historical events associated with it. Both Muslim and Christian traditions consider this space to be the place where the head of John the Baptist was buried. Islamic tradition also states that the building will be the location where Jesus will return before the end of the world. The area has been used as a place of worship since the Iron Age. The Arameans first built a temple there dedicated to Hadad, their rain deity. In the Roman era, from 64 AD, it then became the center for the cult of Jupiter (the Roman rain deity), becoming one of the most notable religious temples in all of Syria. After Syria passed to Byzantine rule and the Christian faith, the then Emperor Theodosius I (379–395) converted the pagan temple into a cathedral. In 634, following the Muslim conquest of the Syrian capital, a portion of the former cathedral was transformed into a musalla (prayer space) for Muslim faithful. With the advancing growth of the Muslim community, the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid I (705–715) also took over the remaining part of the cathedral, giving the Christian community other properties, mostly confiscated churches, to serve as compensation. The structure was demolished and replaced by a large congregational mosque complex. The new complex required nine years of work and workers originating from every Islamic and Byzantine empire. The idea of a new mosque was an innovation and a point of reference in the history of nascent Islamic architecture. The first mosques predating the Umayyad Mosque were simple hypostyle structures, whereas the emerging Damascus Mosque introduced a basilical plan composed of three parallel aisles and a perpendicular central nave, which led from the mosque's entrance to the mihrab (prayer niche). The construction of the new mosque completely transformed the building's layout, while retaining the temenos (sanctuary) walls of the Roman temple, along with the columns and arcades of the cathedral, relocating them in the new structure. Many scholars attributed the design of the mosque's layout to the influence of neighboring Byzantine basilicas. [13] Researchers Rafı Grafman and Myriam Rosen-Ayalon also argue that the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem had a plan very similar to the Damascus Mosque; thus, it is possible that it may have served as a reference for the latter. [14] In principle, the mosque did not have minarets, as these structures were only introduced in mosques later. Nevertheless, externally there were small towers or platforms from which the muezzin could issue the adhān. During the Abbasid era (750–860), new structures were added, including the Dome of the Treasury and the Minaret of the Bride. The Umayyad Mosque gave new life to flourishing Islamic architecture, inspiring other mosque complexes such as the Al-Azhar Mosque in Egypt and the Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain. In addition to being known for its peculiar structure, the mosque was distinguished by its luxuriant ornamental compositions. Series of marble panels covered the lower walls, and on the upper walls, the windows featured carved grilles that anticipated the window styles of the soon-to-emerge Islamic architecture. The most emblematic ornament, however, was undoubtedly the mosaic covering, depicting landscapes and palaces in a Late Roman style, which originally covered much of the courtyard and the internal hall. It is also estimated that the temple possessed the largest surface area of gold mosaics in the world, totaling 4,000 square meters.



Fig.117 Entrance of the mosque.



Fig.118 Entrance of the mosque courtyard.



Fig.119 Mihrab detail.



Fig.120 Interior prayer hall.

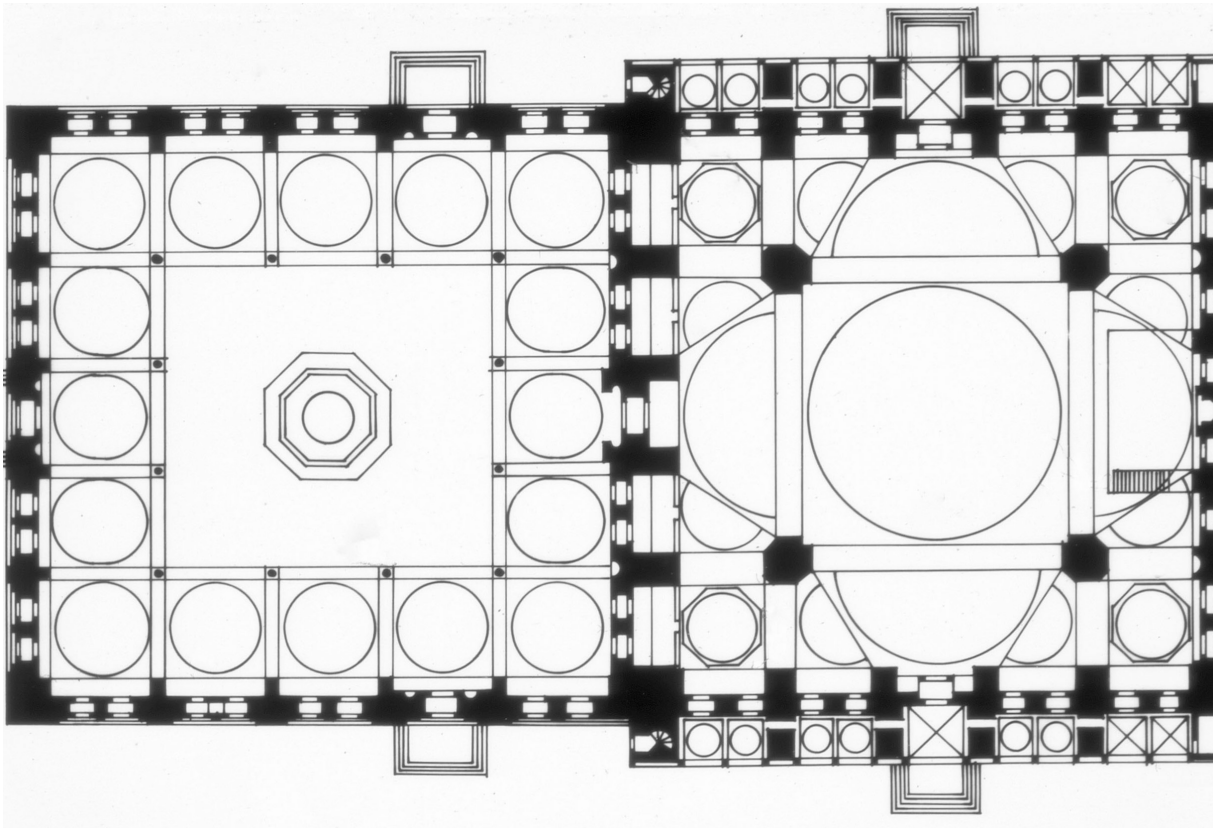


Fig.121 Mosque floor plan.



Fig.122 Aerial view.

Blue Mosque, Istanbul, 1597, Sedefkar Mehmed Agha.

The Blue Mosque, originally known as the Mosque of Sultan Ahmed, is a historic Ottoman-era Mosque located in Istanbul, Turkey. Built between 1609 and 1617 during the reign of Sultan Ahmed I and designed by the then royal architect Mehmed Agha, it eventually became one of the most iconic mosques in the city, so influential that the surrounding district takes its name from it (Sultanahmet). Positioned directly opposite the Hagia Sophia, from which it draws inspiration, the mosque, now part of a UNESCO World Heritage site, was constructed to the southeast of the ancient Byzantine Hippodrome, a symbolic location that allows it to dominate and shape the city's skyline. The design of the mosque is based specifically on that of the Şehzade Mosque, conceived by Sinan, Mehmed Agha's master, in the early 16th century. The building features a classic Ottoman plan with a prayer hall measuring 64 x 72 meters and a central dome with a diameter of 23.5 meters, reaching a height of 43 meters. The main dome, supported by four massive cylindrical pillars, is surrounded by four semi-domes, which are in turn flanked by three smaller semi-domes cascading downward above the musalla. Four small domes close the corners of the prayer hall. Inside, the mosque is decorated with an abundance of tiles from the city of Iznik, depicting floral motifs in shades of blue across the walls and ceilings, giving rise to the mosque's famous nickname. These tones contrast with the whiteness of the pillars and the mihrab. Externally, the mosque features a spacious courtyard in front, as customary, fountains for ablution within the courtyard, and a total of six slender minarets positioned along its longer sides. Sinan's student sought to synthesize, in this work, the theories he had learned from his master, focusing on monumentality and proportions, while adding his own personal innovative touch, which lies in the splendor that the mosque displays. The approach used by Mehmed Agha can be described as "sculptural," with particular attention to architectural detail, breaking down the elements of the sanctuary into smaller compositional segments. This differs from Sinan, who emphasized spatial qualities and placed less importance on ornamentation. We could define this sanctuary as somewhat more "eccentric" than others, given its abundance of minarets and decorations; a proclamation of the peak of Ottoman architecture, pushing itself to its limits, almost as if to "challenge" its neighboring former Basilica as well as the other mosques in the city. Although many theorists criticized the structural details and decoration of the mosque when comparing it to Sinan's works, over the centuries it has become one of the most important monuments of Ottoman architecture.

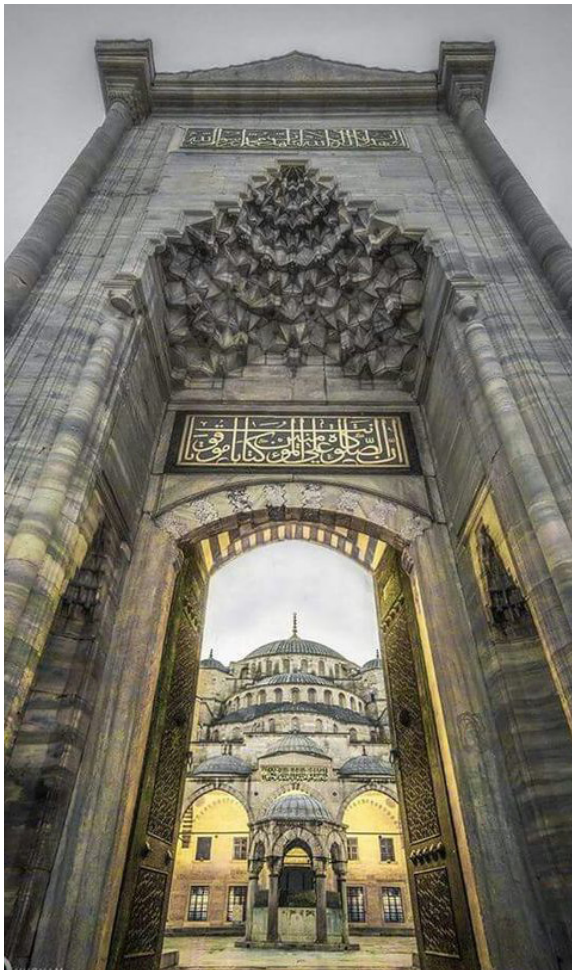


Fig.123 Entrance detail.

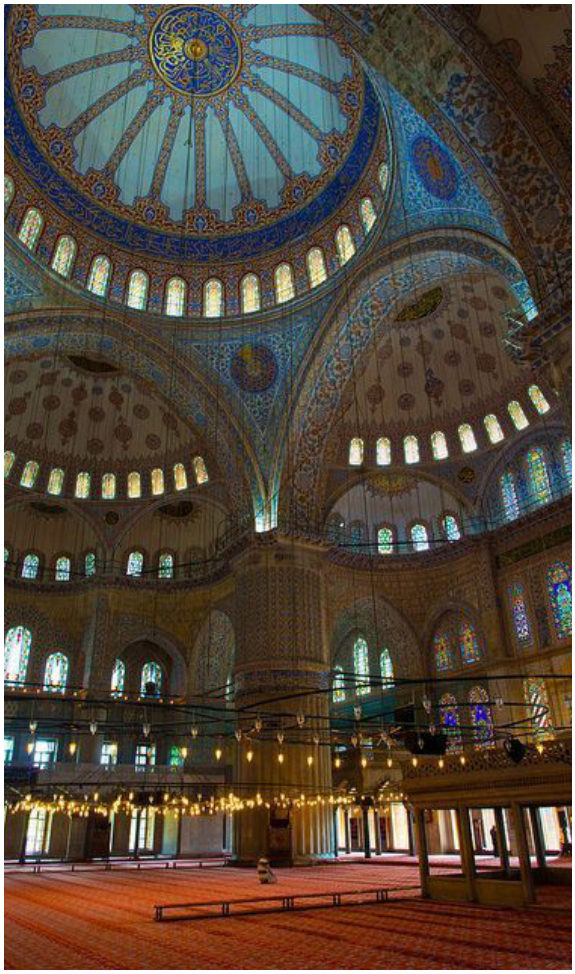


Fig.124 Interior prayer hall.



Fig.125 Courtyard view.



Fig.126 Aerial view.

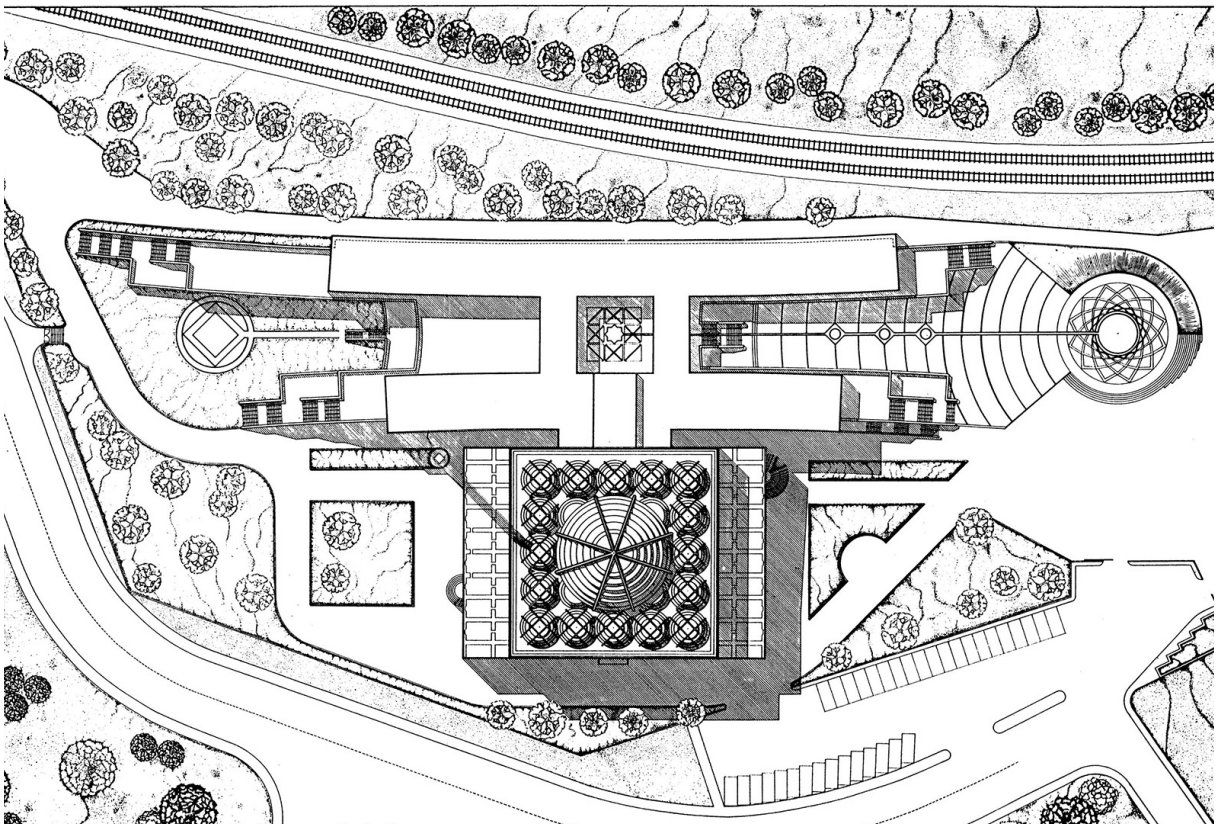


Fig.127 Mosque plan.

Great Mosque of Rome, Rome, 1995, Paolo Portoghesi.

Requested by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, from the very beginning it was the subject of criticism from politicians, architects, and public opinion. During the 1970s, erecting such a structure meant, for the first time, giving life to an Islamic place of worship in Rome, the capital of Christianity. Designed by the architect Paolo Portoghesi, the Great Mosque of Rome holds the record as the largest mosque in the West. Spread over 30,000 square meters of land and able to accommodate 12,000 worshippers, during major Islamic holidays it sees an influx reaching up to 40,000 believers of every ethnicity. The Roman Mosque, a work by Portoghesi supported by the Iraqi architect Sami Mousawi, is the result of an attempt to synthesize various architectural and cultural traditions: from Ottoman mosques to Iberian medieval arches, up to the Baroque domes of Borromini. With a development period lasting more than twenty years, the mosque was inaugurated on June 21, 1995. According to Portoghesi, an essential feature of Islamic architecture is that it has promoted stylistic codes differing from one another during its development. Based on this idea, the Roman mosque sought a common point from both a historical perspective and local tradition, using typical materials such as travertine and pinkish terracotta, which represent the characteristic chromatic tones of the area. Following the same concept, the temple draws inspiration from multiple mosque models: the “forest” type, typical of the Maghreb or the Mosque of Córdoba; the Persian model, where alternating courtyards and open spaces prevail; or the Ottoman Mosque model. The Mosque of Rome represents more than just an architectural work; it stands as a manifesto. It is a convergence of concepts derived from both Islamic cultural tradition and Western-Christian culture, which attempt to engage in an open dialogue. Approaching the mosque, leaving behind the chaotic flow of the city, one enters a state of tranquility that becomes the dominant atmosphere in this area. The noise of the city fades, giving space to a monumental structure with restrained tones. Visitors are welcomed by a material experience that continues throughout the building. Concentric curves in the paving, highlighted by white stone and reminiscent of Michelangelo’s design for Piazza del Campidoglio, guide one toward a marble fountain. On its base, a sequence of concentric circles recalls the seven heavens mentioned in the Qur’an, as well as the much-loved theory of magnetic fields typical of Portoghesi. Through this concept, it becomes easier to understand the geometry assumed by the work and the processes used to “sculpt” its forms, enabling a dialogue between local tradition and Islamic culture. Turning away from the fountain, one is presented with a complete view of the mosque, from which the configuration of the entire building can be understood. To the left, a large, regular volume covered by a darkened dome encloses the main prayer hall. In the center, another portion of the mosque is divided in half by a shallow channel of water, which subtly references the watercourse present in Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute. This channel separates two monumental staircases that rise to the entrance level of the prayer hall. Welcoming visitors at this level is a “forest” of columns, recalling both the palm trees of the Prophet’s house in Medina and the cupped-hand gesture held during moments of worship. Entering the prayer hall, one encounters an almost opposite atmosphere in terms of color tones: from the warm brick paving to expansive stretches of blue carpets. The tree-like pillars, here lighter in tone, are clad at their bases with Moroccan mosaics, which also adorn the walls of the hall and extend upwards to the leafy ceiling supporting the dome. In an instant, one transitions from a warm place to a cool one, from Roman culture to Arab culture, marking the dialogue between two traditions that Portoghesi set out to represent through his poetic architectural expression.



Fig.128 Detail of the ceiling.



Fig.129 Exterior view.



Fig.130 Library.

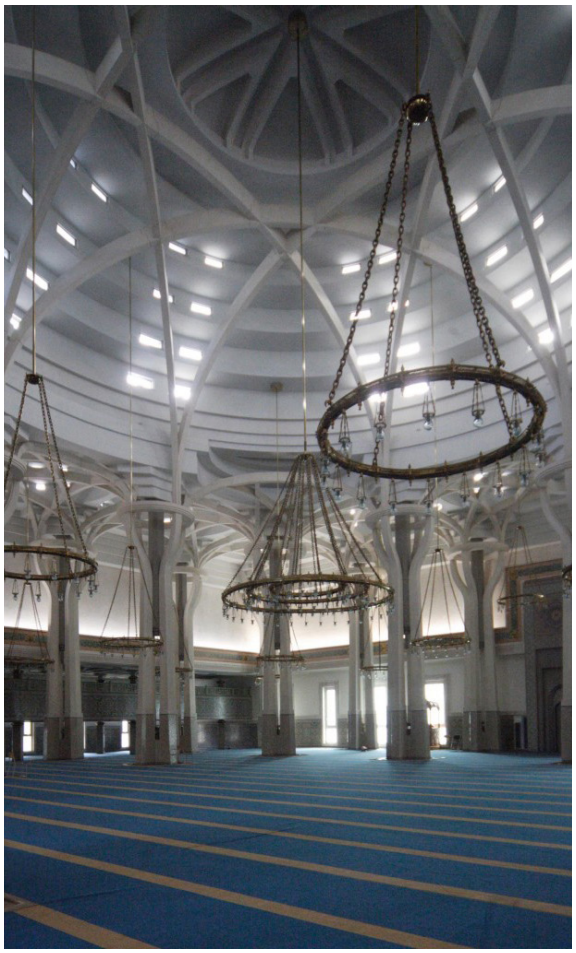


Fig.131 Interior prayer hall.



Fig.132 Porch view.

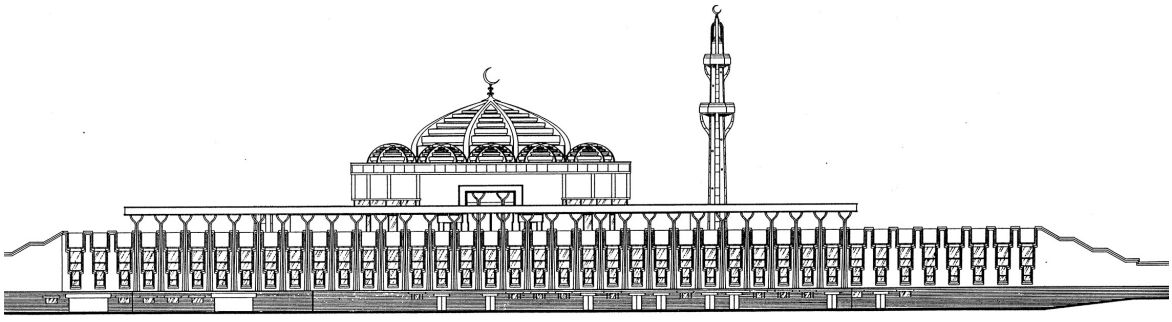


Fig.133 Mosque cross section.

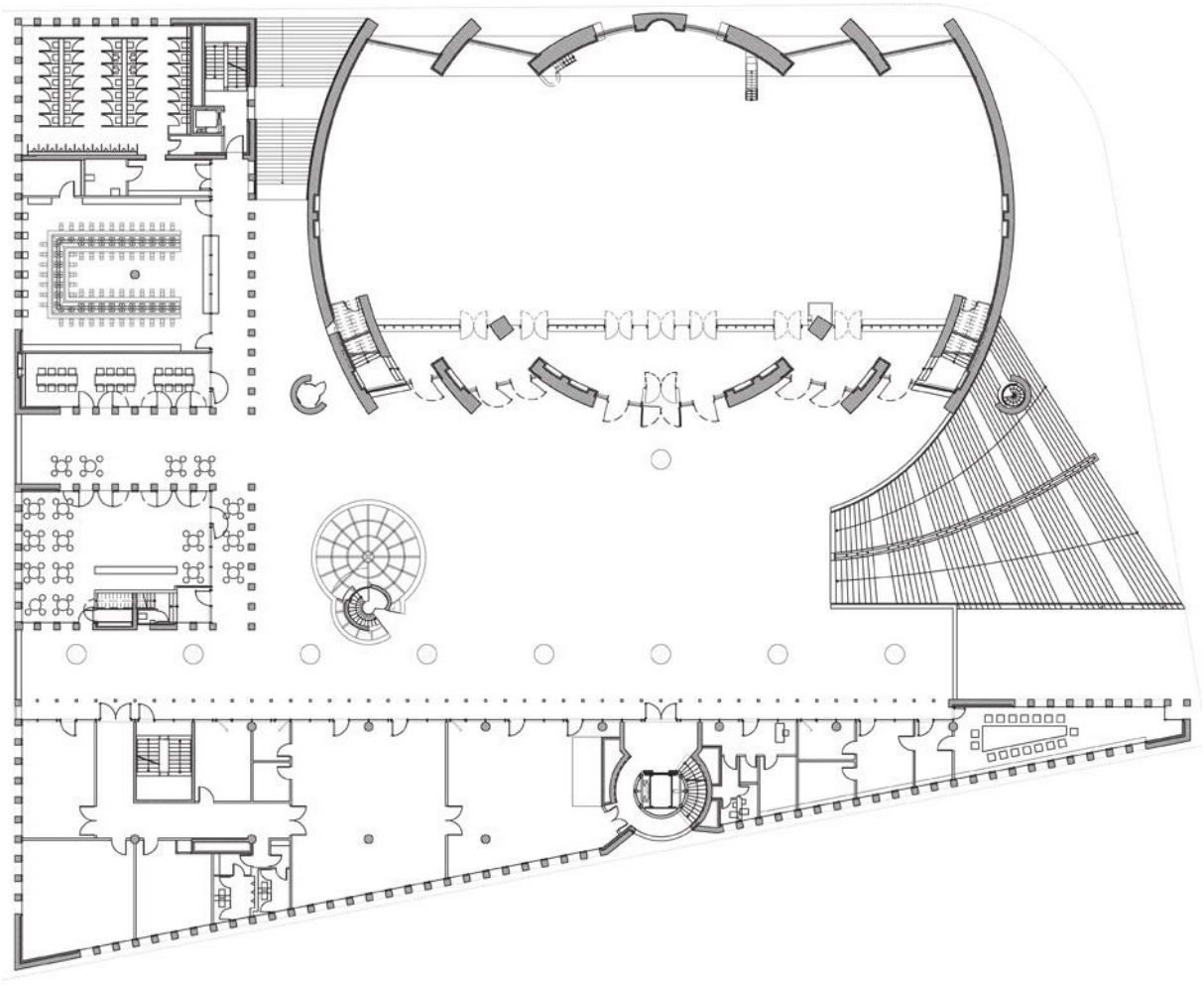


Fig.134 Mosque floor plan.



Fig.135 Interior prayer hall.

Cologne Central Mosque, Cologne, 2017, Gottfried Böhm.

The Cologne Central Mosque, commissioned by the DİTİB organization (the authority for religious affairs of the Turkish government), is the representative building of the local Muslim community in Cologne, Germany; and in the opinion of many, one of the most symbolic ones in Germany and in all of Europe. Designed by the German architect Gottfried Böhm and his son Paul, the mosque, in neo-Ottoman style, features several glass walls that "split" the concrete structure, giving visitors a sense of openness, two soaring minarets, and a massive transparent central dome that opens like a bud crowning the building. Conceived as a place of interreligious encounter, among its ground-floor components are included a commercial area, an open area that allows visitors to stop and rest, enhanced by an inviting staircase that opens toward the street; which according to the architect gives an additional sense of welcome and openness, this latter being necessary given the presence of significant volumes at the sides. Each floor has a function: in the basement there are multipurpose classrooms and a conference hall, while on the first floor there is the prayer hall and a library. The levels are finally connected to each other through a fountain that creates a pleasant atmosphere. The mosque, which measures an area of 4,500 sqm, was built with the aim of accommodating up to 4,000 worshipers of the local community. Featuring a main hall measuring 36.5 meters and two minarets with a height of 55 meters, the Islamic temple of Cologne is one of the most representative buildings in the city's landscape, a characteristic that has earned it the honor of hosting "pilgrimages" of scholars or simple visitors fascinated by the grandeur of this monumental structure.Certainly, he description of this imposing building conveys nothing but its beauty and significance within the context in which it stands. However, it is from that same context that criticism toward it has arisen. Many controversies, in fact, surrounded the development of the mosque, as in the past many supporters of the conservative movement Pro Köln opposed the construction of the Islamic temple, with the intention of preventing its realization. [15] The movement feared that the mosque would become the emblematic sign of a parallel society of Islamic orientation that might risk hosting potential extremists. Indeed, before the building began development around November 2009, on various occasions the minarets of the mosque were targeted as justification against the construction, since they were considered "too large," as they threatened to overshadow Cologne Cathedral. [16] The cathedral, protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, undoubtedly held the right to be safeguarded in its visual integrity; for this reason, several protests took place, and many heated political debates stirred public opinion, until a compromise was reached that required the downsizing of the two minarets. Despite the fact that the debate over the construction of the mosque was "painful," this episode fortunately raised awareness and allowed people to get to know the local Islamic community for what it truly is. Only a powerful medium such as architecture could bring together and allow two seemingly distant cultures to coexist, but which potentially can share (and influence) much with one another, including the territory that hosts them. Islamic architecture, in fact, tends to incorporate its surrounding environment; this is why there are mosques belonging to a Western tradition and others that are more Eastern. The mosque of Cologne can undoubtedly be described as modern and German. The director of the Department of Architectural History at the University of Cologne, Norbert Nussbaum, indeed defined the mosque as: "a milestone for religious architecture in Germany," [17] despite being a building with evident Turkish influences. The professor further elaborates, describing its form as: "a particular shape that is found in Ottoman architecture," [18] and calling it a symbol because it is an example of "a Turkish mosque in the middle of the Islamic diaspora"; a positive factor, as it is able to provide a familiar atmosphere for Muslims of the diaspora.



Fig.136 Stairway entrance.

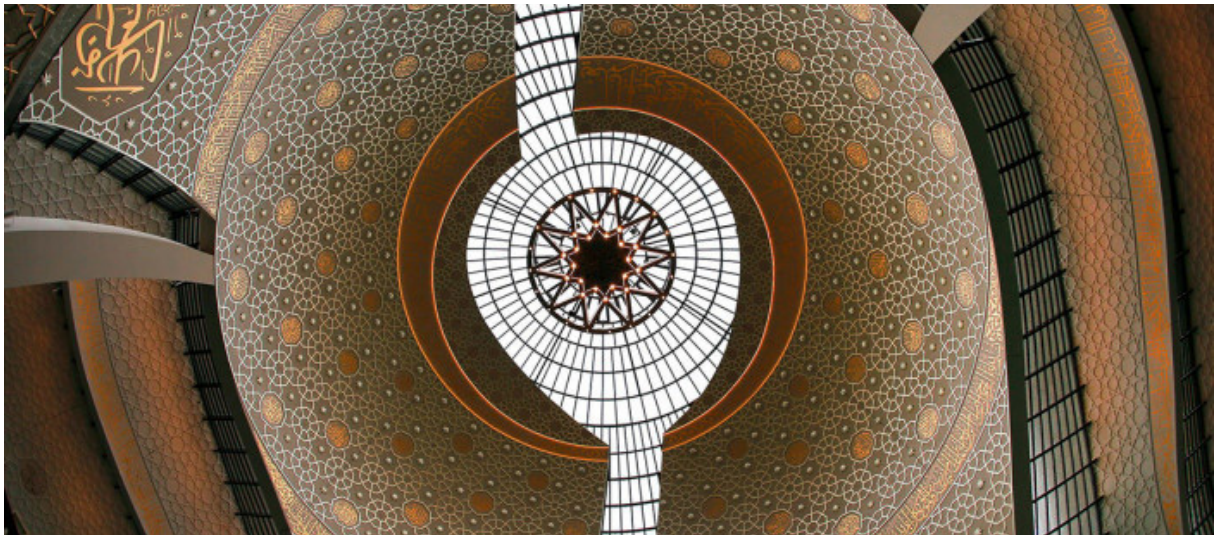


Fig.137 Internal dome view.



Fig.138 Mihrab of the mosque.

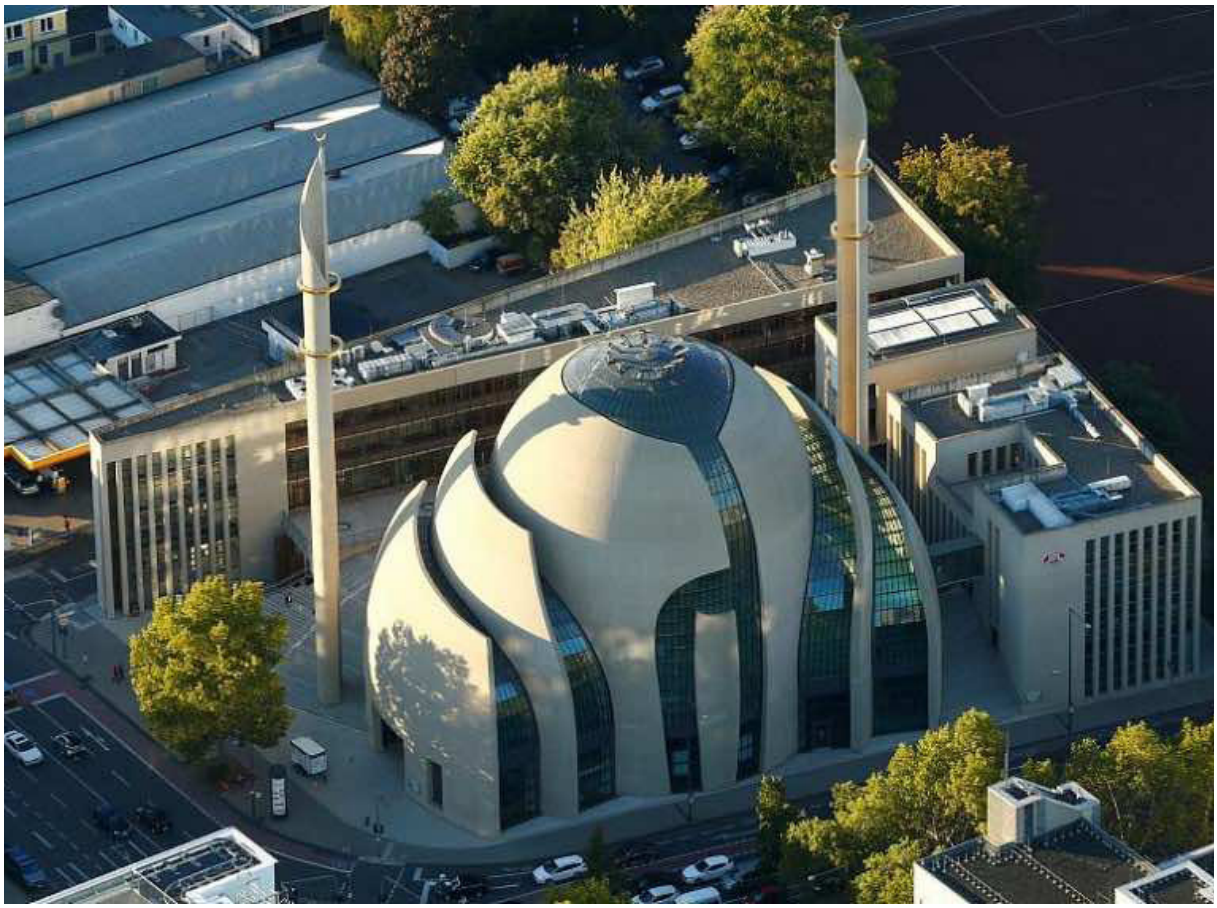


Fig.139 Aerial view.

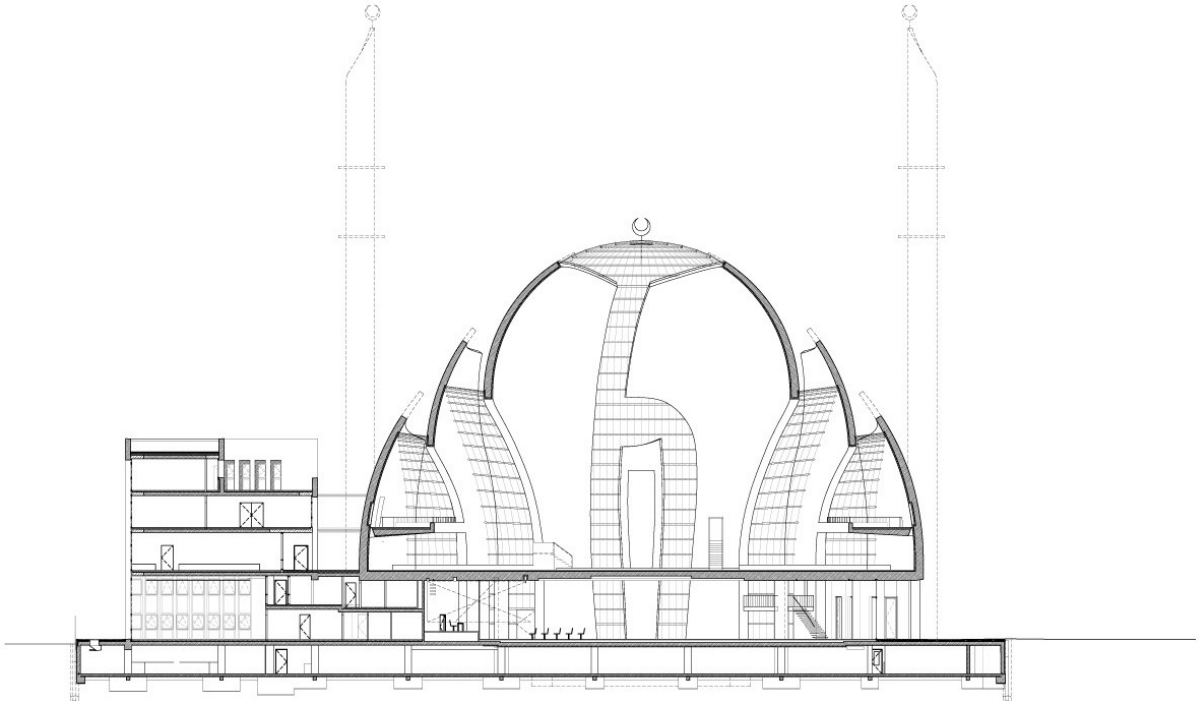


Fig.140 Mosque cross section.

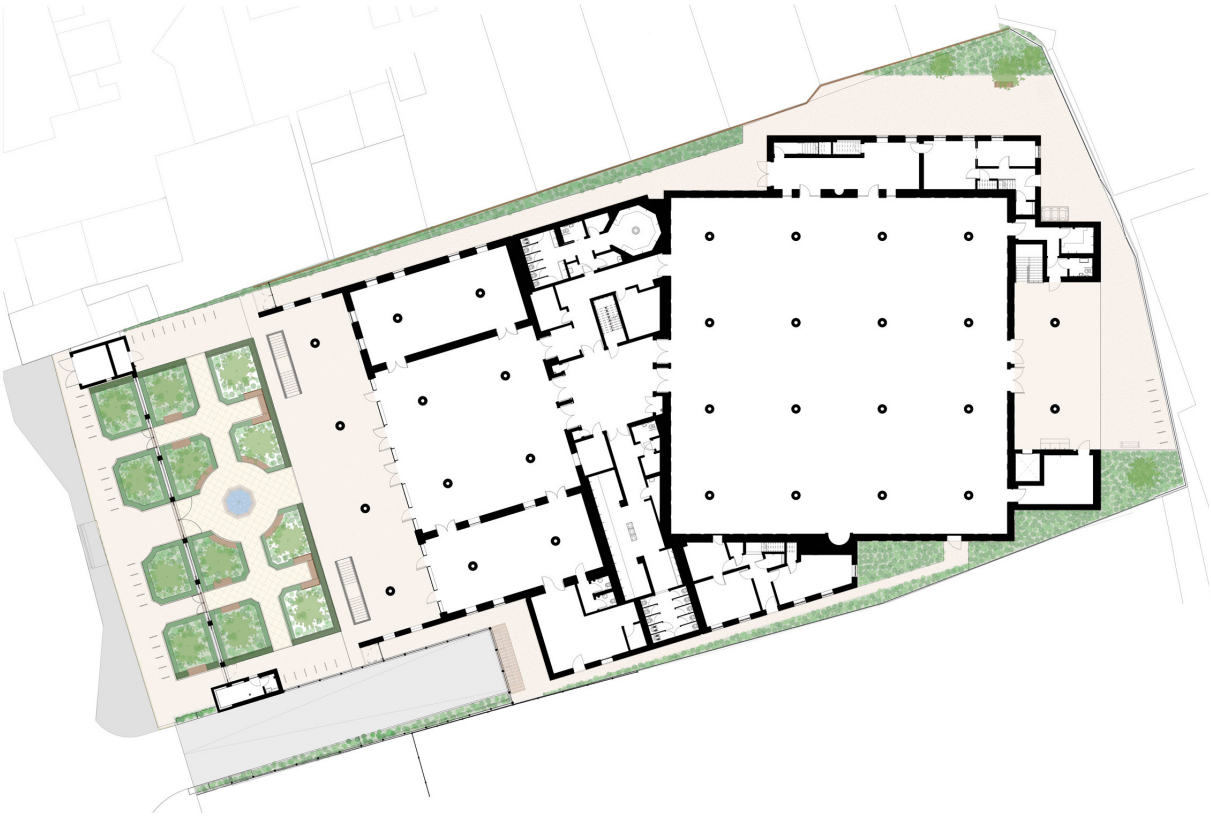


Fig.141 Mosque floor plan.

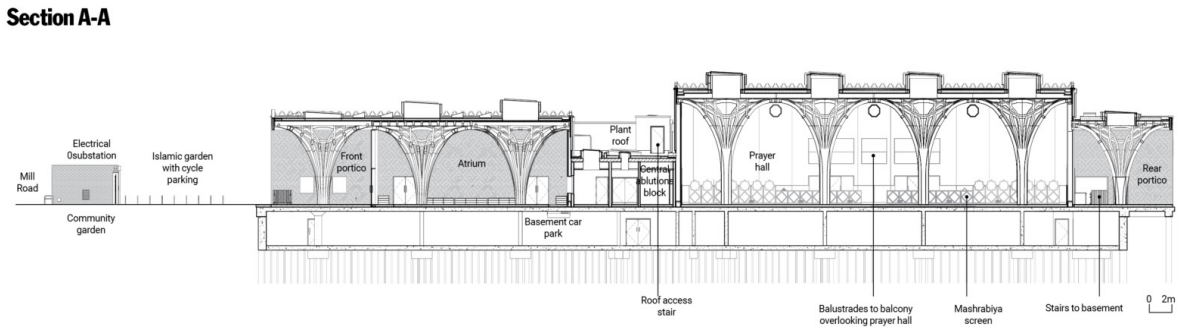


Fig.142 Mosque cross section.

Cambridge Centrale Mosque, Cambridge, 2019, Marks Barfield Architects.

Dated to 2009, the competition won by the studio Marks Barfield Architects for the design of a mosque for the city of Cambridge presents the idea of a building intended as a mosque like a tranquil oasis immersed in a dense forest of trees. Inspired by both Islamic architectural traditions and English ones, the Cambridge Central Mosque set out to present itself as the potential British mosque of the 21st century. Blending together ancient and timeless heritages with the most cutting-edge technologies was probably the mission that most challenged this project. Over a decade of work gave rise to a pioneering mosque, which combines technology and sustainability, presenting itself with an organic aesthetic such that it seems to have grown from the surrounding landscape.
Believers and visitors pass through a garden of both Arab and Western inspiration, featuring green areas and fountains designed to enhance the sense of the oasis that the temple also proposes within; then reaching a covered portico that leads to an atrium, which prepares visitors for the serenity of the prayer hall oriented, as customary, towards Mecca. The quality that most distinguishes the Cambridge Mosque is undoubtedly its structure in curved spruce wood. Formed by these columns or, rather, "trees", which rise up to reach the ceiling in order to support the roof, through an interwoven octagonal lattice structure that implicitly recalls the fan vaults typical of English Gothic architecture, employed not by chance in the nearby King's College Chapel. *[19]*



Fig.143 Front facade.



Fig.144 Interior prayer hall.



Fig.145 Dome view.



Fig.146 Wudu area and locker rooms.

4

One Project, One Context, One Mosque


مسجد التقوى
MASJID AL-TAQWA



The Local Islamic Community



Fig.147 Members of the Islamic community in Florence praying during Eid al-Fitr (the festival marking the end of Ramadan), 2021.



Fig.148 Members of the Islamic community in Florence praying during Eid al-Fitr (the festival marking the end of Ramadan), 2021.

Around the 1990s, with the arrival of the first mass migrations from various predominantly Islamic countries, particularly from North Africa, the first local Islamic communities began to form. Among the various communities, one of the most notable and active is that of the city of Florence. Founded on October 12, 1990, by a group of students and workers, the Islamic community of Florence, born under the name A.C.IS. (Islamic Cultural Association), laid its foundations in the Giorgio La Pira International Student Center, located in Via dei Pescioni, a place that promotes culture and inclusion, which served as fertile ground for the emerging community in the Tuscan capital. The newly formed community was created with the purpose of bringing together all practicing Muslims residing in Florence and its province, while at the same time aiming to serve as a reference point for resolving religious and cultural issues that members might raise; in addition to promoting and valuing Islamic cultural identity and its various dimensions. The association, which was free from any political ideology and not aimed at profit, was and still is an open place dedicated to the protection of Florentine believers as well as fostering their integration with the rest of the local community. Among its statutory aims, in fact, are the commitment to assist members in resolving their material and moral difficulties in terms of support and, at the same time, the commitment to organizing cultural conferences to help promote and strengthen Islamic historical and cultural identity; as well as establishing relations with other realities and associations with similar purposes.[20] Unlike other communities, although young, it demonstrated a clear desire to participate actively in city life and to integrate as much as possible with the city that was welcoming it. The approach that the Islamic community of Florence adopted was initially one of friendly relations with the other major religious confessions, particularly the Catholic one and subsequently the Jewish one. As a result, the first of a long series of events that brought the Florentine community to public attention was its participation in a meeting to which it had been invited, held at the Stensen Center, which at the time hosted several informative meetings with the most influential religious realities of the territory. This series of meetings, which placed the community in the spotlight, also gave rise to various associations aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue, one of the most notable being known as “Dialoghi” (“Dialogues”). Having gained a certain degree of public approval, the community sought to bring itself even closer to the core of local society. As a result, it began to be invited to attend significant civic events held in prestigious locations such as Palazzo Vecchio, specifically in the “Salone dei Duecento” and the “Salone dei Cinquecento”, as well as socio-political meetings in city districts, and to collaborate with various branches of the Republic, Tuscan universities, and the Italian Red Cross. This enthusiasm and constant participation eventually led to another significant foundation for the city of Florence: the D.E.C.I. (Jewish-Christian-Islamic Dialogue), as well as, later on, participation in the foundation of the Florence School of Dialogue.



Fig.149 Members of Florence's Islamic community distribute food parcels with the Red Cross, 2020.

L'INTERVISTA Mohamed Abou El Ela, studente fiorentino al quinto anno delle superiori

Il servizio di solidarietà dei giovani musulmani

DI MAURIZIO CERTINI

«Nei momenti difficili non dobbiamo agire separati, ma più uniti. Questa è la lezione che impariamo dalla crisi che ci impone il Covid-19». Con queste parole Mohamed Abou El Ela, studente fiorentino al quinto anno delle superiori, segretario della Comunità Islamica di Firenze e Toscana, inizia il racconto dell'esperienza di solidarietà alla quale i giovani musulmani hanno dato vita.

Come vi siete organizzati?

«Di fronte alla situazione di emergenza che si è prodotta, al dolore di tante persone che hanno perso il lavoro, famiglie intere in difficoltà, studenti universitari privati della possibilità di sostenersi, non si poteva restare con le mani in mano. Forse possiamo dare poco, ma vogliamo dare tutto quello che per noi è possibile; anche un aiuto minimo può fare la differenza. Così, per organizzarci, noi del gruppo dei giovani ci siamo chiesti cosa fare, come farlo e con chi. Abbiamo preso contatti con chi conoscevamo bene e che avesse disponibilità di tempo e di mezzi per darci una mano, sia all'interno della comunità islamica e della moschea, sia fuori: amici universitari e persone adulte. Intorno a noi c'è stata subito tanta solidarietà. Altri si sono uniti, attraverso il passaparola, e adesso siamo un gruppo di circa 30. Chi si è messo a disposizione per confezionare pacchi alimentari, chi per accogliere le richieste, chi ha offerto la propria auto o il furgone per le consegne in varie zone della città metropolitana e così via. Di lavoro ce n'è tanto, perché i bisogni sono aumentati da due mesi a questa parte. All'inizio, a Firenze, compresa la provincia, avevamo 140 famiglie da sostenete, adesso sono 250 e in più ci sono almeno 50 studenti universitari a cui dare aiuto. Alcuni di loro si sono ritrovati improvvisamente soli e senza mezzi, non potendo svolgere i soliti piccoli lavori, come cameriere, portiere di notte ecc. Qualcuno si è rivolto a noi piangendo. Spesso ci chiedono solo un aiuto morale e occorre saper ascoltare. Trovarsi da un giorno all'altro in solitudine, con la preoccupazione per le proprie famiglie lontane, in un altro Paese, non è facile...



Come trovate gli aiuti?

«Anzitutto interviene la Comunità, con la generosità di molti membri. Inoltre, Caritas ci fornisce verdura fresca, interviene il Banco Alimentare, così Conad e adesso anche Coop attraverso Cuore si Scioglie. Anche il Centro Internazionale Studenti Giorgio La Pira, al quale siamo molto legati, si è reso presente perché le necessità sono molteplici...»

So che fate volontariato in vari luoghi della città.

«Proprio perché è necessario non isolarci ciascuno nel proprio gruppo, noi giovani abbiamo preso contatto con la Misericordia, con la Croce Rossa e con Caritas per proporci come volontari: al centralino, per le consegne domiciliari, per aiutare nella distribuzione dei pranzi alle persone indigenti che si rivolgono alla mensa della Caritas, dove abbiamo fatto bellissime esperienze».

Diviene più faticoso, vivere il Ramadan in questo periodo di Covid, oppure questo tempo forte della dimensione religiosa vi aiuta?

«Uno degli aspetti importanti del Ramadan, insieme all'attenzione per la preghiera, è l'azione di amore verso gli altri, cercando di fare più bene possibile, anche per favorire relazioni buone tra le persone. Vivere il Ramadan in questo contesto difficile è una grande occasione per superare la pigrizia e fare il bene. Il Ramadan ha rappresentato una spinta in più per aumentare le buone azioni che dovremmo compiere sempre per costruire una società più giusta».

Tu di cosa di occupi in particolare?

«Ricevo le chiamate delle persone con le richieste che vanno organizzate e poi aiuto nella consegna dei pacchi. Mi sposto in bici e ti confesso che talvolta ho avuto qualche difficoltà, ma il guadagno finale con l'ideale religioso che mi sostiene scaccia tutta la fatica».

Fig.150 Support for the Islamic community in Florence during the pandemic, 2020.

The Islamic communities in Florence, over the decades, have tried to practice their worship collectively as best they could and in the places, they were able to obtain according to the existing legislation (essentially non-existent) in Italy, which still today remains unchanged. According to estimates dating back more than fifteen years, there were about 200,000 Muslims in Tuscany, corresponding to approximately 33% of the foreign population residing in the region. We can count 56 Islamic places of worship, more precisely 55 prayer halls and one actual mosque, that of Colle Val d'Elsa. Florence and its province have about 30,000 Muslim residents, originally from 30 different countries, who in the past used to gather to pray in three separate prayer halls: Borgo Allegri, Sorgane, and Poderaccio (the latter attended mainly by the Roma community). Later, the Poderaccio hall was closed, while new places of worship were opened, such as the prayer halls in the Isolotto area and in Piazza San Jacopino. The main prayer hall for the city of Florence, as well as the home of the Islamic community of Florence and Tuscany, was for many years the one located in Borgo Allegri, led by Imam Izzedin Elzir. It was originally a commercial space adapted as a mosque, located in the first district of the metropolitan city, near the Basilica of Santa Croce. Every Friday around 1,500 worshippers prayed there, and during periods of greater attendance, such as during Ramadan, the number could reach up to 2,000 people, often forced to occupy outdoor spaces as well. Because of these logistical limitations, in 2024 the community permanently left the Borgo Allegri location and moved to a new space purchased in Piazza dei Ciompi, in the former headquarters of Banca Intesa. This transition represented a fundamental milestone for the Florentine Islamic community, which finally has a larger and more suitable venue for its needs, financed through donations and self-funding from its members.The community of Borgo Allegri first, and now that of Piazza dei Ciompi, have had the merit of establishing important agreements with the local population, such as organizing visits for students and for secular, religious, or academic associations. Among the services offered is the organization of free courses for learning the Arabic language, especially aimed at young people, even those who are not native Arabic speakers, which currently take place in classrooms provided by public elementary schools. Among other pioneering initiatives at the regional level, the Islamic community of Florence was the first in Italy to establish agreements with institutions, particularly with the Azienda Ospedaliera Universitaria Careggi, to allow hospitalized Muslim patients the right to a minister of worship and food in accordance with religious requirements. Furthermore, the community has worked to offer cultural and spiritual support in prisons in the area, given the high presence of Muslim inmates, along with concrete assistance in their rehabilitation and social reintegration. During the Covid-19 emergency, the community also actively collaborated with the Red Cross in the distribution of food parcels.



The third millennium mosque

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Islamic community of Florence, together with the other religious communities, began to question and discuss the idea that the places of worship of the contemporary era should be different from the places of worship that had characterized our societies up to that point. Consequently, meetings were organized in which the concept of a place of worship for the "Third Millennium" was explored: not only places for prayer, but places where culture could, and should, be created and shared. At the same time, the need for a proper place of worship had become increasingly pressing for the Islamic community of Florence. This is because it is estimated that approximately 36,000 faithful Muslims reside in Florence, and they require a place to profess their faith and fulfill their obligations of communal prayer; particularly on Fridays, when prayer is already complicated to perform unless done in two or more separate shifts, due to the lack of suitably sized spaces in the available prayer rooms. Approximately 1,000 faithful attend weeklies at the former prayer hall in Borgo Allegri, about 200 in the Sorgane neighborhood, and around 300 in the Isolotto area. The situation becomes even more critical during the two major Islamic festivities, the end of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, when as many as 6,000 to 7,000 faithful gathers for prayer. This forces the community to relocate into large outdoor green spaces or temporary locations granted by the municipal administration to temporarily compensate for the logistical problem. In Florence today, the places that host members of the Islamic communities are these "Islamic cultural centers," which have been independently established and self-financed by the faithful themselves. This ongoing situation, however, saw a turning point in 2010, the year in which the possibility of building a mosque for the Muslim citizens of Florence was first proposed to the municipal administration. This proposal, put forward directly by the Imam of the former prayer hall of Borgo Allegri, Izzedin Elzir, was based on the idea of creating a place that externally would adapt to the architectural and contextual criteria that the city of Florence requires; and furthermore, in line with the previous discussions on the concept of an innovative place of worship, that this space would be suitable, dignified, and safe for Muslim worshippers, while also being a place open to the entire city community, thus able to foster a dialogue regarding the possibility of constructing the new mosque was translated about a year later into the establishment of a participatory process called: "A mosque for Florence, is it possible to talk about it without raising our voices?", since a few years earlier the Tuscany Region had introduced, for the first time in Italy, a regional law (l.r. n. 69/2007: Promotion of participation in the development of regional and local policies), which required the implementation of a process involving the participation of citizens. This process was to be followed by informed consent from them, in cases where there were not sufficient conditions for the public administration to make an autonomous decision regarding an issue of public interest, as was indeed the case with the mosque.

The participatory process. “A Mosque for Florence, is it possible to talk about it without raising our voices?”, organized by the Islamic Community of Florence and Tuscany (in accordance with Regional Law 69/2007), took place between May 2011 and February 2012. Its aim was to involve the citizens in the process of defining the principles for the development of a mosque for the city of Florence. The process was mediated by a facilitator, known as Sociolab, who, commissioned by the Islamic community, ensured impartiality as well as a smooth and balanced course of the discussions.

The Working Method and the Objective of the Process

The various stages that made up the participatory process allowed for the development of a dialogue on an extremely sensitive topic, where differences of opinion are typically the norm. The disagreements that commonly arise regarding the construction of a mosque in European, and particularly Italian, cities can generally be traced back to:

-a practical perspective, aimed at fostering harmonious coexistence in shared public spaces;

-a potential concern regarding the coexistence of different cultures and habits;

-the possible alteration of the symbolic meaning of the urban environment, linked to the fear that the local cultural identity might change.

Focusing more specifically on the local context, the Islamic presence in Florence is structured around three prayer halls (former Borgo Allegri, Sorgane, and Poderaccio). Among these, the former mosque of Borgo Allegri has consistently maintained a tradition of interreligious and cultural dialogue with other religious and secular communities, through recurring events involving reflection and discussion with other Abrahamic faiths, open days for citizens (also included in programs of the city’s Department of Education), as well as free Arabic language courses held at the local primary school. Additionally, major religious festivities were often celebrated in publicly shared spaces provided by the city. On this basis, it is clear that the prayer halls in Florence coexist peacefully within the areas in which they are located. The only issues observed over time have been logistical in nature, linked to the lack of adequate space, which during Friday prayers or nighttime Ramadan prayers often resulted in worshippers extending into public areas.
In terms of social relations, there has never been any conflict, intolerance, or security concerns, neither from the Islamic community nor from the broader citizenry. It was only by assuming this positive condition of coexistence that it became possible to discuss with the inhabitants how a more suitable place of worship for the Islamic community could be conceived, as well as where and in what manner it could be built.

Organization of the process

The participatory process was designed with the aim of encouraging the involvement of citizens, focusing on the needs, expectations, and concerns of the participants, in order to then define the principles on which the construction of the mosque should be based. The process was supervised (by regional appointment) by a guaranteed committee, which established the working methodologies and ensured oversight of the participants, allowing everyone to express themselves democratically on the issues addressed in relation to the topic

The process was developed in three main phases:

1.Interviews with opinion leaders

2.Meetings in the neighborhoods

3.Deliberation sessions

Phase 1: Interviews with opinion leaders

The first phase consisted of collecting interviews with a range of individuals in order to establish an initial foundation of opinions from which to begin the work. Approximately 65 interviewees were selected, including academics; political representatives; members of other religious communities; members of associations involved in immigration and interfaith dialogue; architects, urban planners, and technical staff from the municipal administration. The perspective of the entire Islamic community of Florence was gathered separately through a series of meetings involving the board members of the Islamic Community of Florence and Tuscany, together with representatives of the various Islamic communities in the metropolitan area: (former) Borgo Allegri, Sorgane, and Poderaccio. During these meetings, issues were raised concerning the social, political, and urban implications that a potential mosque for Florence might entail.



Fig.151 Poster for the participatory process.

Phase 2: Meetings in the neighborhoods

The second phase involved the public in the process through five meetings held in each district of the city, open to anyone interested in discussing the topic. The aim of these meetings was to address both the challenges and the opportunities that the construction of the mosque could bring, gathering all the citizens' opinions (both positive and negative), as well as any concerns that might emerge during the discussions.

The meetings, held between October and December 2011, were scheduled approximately every two weeks and took place in the respective neighborhood council offices. The participants—about 180 citizens in total—were divided into working groups moderated by the Sociolab staff. They examined the opportunities and challenges, discussing among themselves and with members of the Islamic community. The main focus of the debate concerned relationships between different cultures, including both design-related and social considerations, and also helped to identify some initial criteria for integrating the mosque into the urban context. Other topics addressed during the discussions covered a range of issues, including Islamic culture, coexistence with the Islamic community of Florence, Islamic terrorism in Italy, the presence of Christian places of worship in predominantly Muslim countries, and questions related to the planning of the mosque, particularly concerning its urban placement.

The outcomes that emerged from the working groups were largely positive, although some participants expressed strong skepticism regarding the potential construction of the mosque, which in certain cases resulted in a complete rejection of the idea.



Fig.152 The usual situation of overcrowding during Friday prayers in the Borgo Allegri hall.

The collaborations with the members of the community

The participatory process, promoted primarily by the President of the Islamic community of the former Borgo Allegri prayer hall, also involved the other local communities, namely those linked to the prayer halls of Poderaccio and Sorgane in order to form a committee that would share the objectives as well as the outcomes achieved throughout the process. The committee regularly held meetings to stay updated on the progress of the initiative and also designated its own representative for the oversight panel. Initially, a limited participation of members of the Islamic community in the discussion groups had been planned, to encourage dialogue and the exchange of ideas with the rest of the citizens. Subsequently, the committee of the three prayer halls organized a series of training sessions for some members of the Florentine Muslim community who had sufficient fluency in the Italian language, allowing them to take part in the meetings and help support the discussions. These training sessions, held inside the premises of the prayer halls, were conducted by Sociolab, who explained the purpose of the participatory process and simulated the types of debates that might arise. This "participatory training" path became an opportunity for the involved members of the community to test what they would soon face, to internalize the subject they would defend, and to develop, together with the wider citizenry, a shared point of view regarding the issue of building a new mosque.

This training process proved to be extremely beneficial for the Islamic community, as it allowed for a cohesive definition of the project's objectives, helped to empathize with the concerns that might arise in discussions with the non-Muslim citizenry, and made it possible to imagine the potential characteristics, functions, and criteria that a mosque in Florence should possess in order to be considered meaningful for the entire community. In addition to the positive impact that the participatory process gained from this preparatory work, an important side effect also emerged: the community experienced a noticeable strengthening of internal cohesion among the three Islamic communities in the city, as well as a development of organizational and relational skills in addressing sensitive topics with individuals belonging to different perspectives and cultural backgrounds



Fig.153 Greetings from Imam Izzeddin Elzir during the first meeting, 11 February 2012.

Phase 3: Deliberation sessions

The final phase involved the participation of 108 citizens, including a minority of members of the Islamic community, in three days of discussions aimed at defining the criteria for the construction of a mosque in the city of Florence. A few days before the first meeting, all participants received an informational guide previously prepared to ensure that everyone shared a basic level of knowledge. The guide, approved by the guaranteed committee, was drafted by selecting specific topics that had emerged as most relevant during the earlier phases. Its contents included: information on the participatory process, the history and activities of the Muslim community in Florence, the architectural components of mosques, as well as an overview of the urban planning process required for developing a place of worship

The first meeting saw citizens divided into seven working groups, beginning with a reflection on the main characteristics required for the construction of the mosque, considering the various concerns, doubts, and benefits that such a place could represent. The functions of the building were defined, and participants discussed possible locations suitable for hosting the mosque.

The second meeting featured the presentation of the results produced by a team of professors from the Faculty of Architecture of Florence, who proposed six hypotheses for possible sites. This was intended to help visualize how the mosque could be integrated into the fabric of the city. Participants then examined the opportunities and challenges of each proposal, thereby establishing criteria for identifying the most appropriate site.

The final meeting saw the Sociolab team present a summary of the principles that had emerged from the previous sessions. After this presentation, participants identified which of the listed criteria should be considered essential.

Opportunities and Challenges

During the participatory process, opportunities and challenges associated with building a mosque in Florence were collected, reflecting shared assumptions or points raised by various participants. Citizens recognized a potential opportunity for the construction of the mosque if it could lead to:

a dignified place of worship for the Islamic Community

a meeting place between cultures for the whole city

a place of architectural interest.

The most fundamental prerogative is that the Islamic community, like all religious communities, be granted a proper place of worship, not only in terms of function but also in terms of size. It was repeatedly stated that a "unique, large, recognizable, beautiful" place would facilitate the integration process of community members, thus ensuring peaceful coexistence. The more the visual recognizability of the Islamic community is supported, the greater the awareness towards more marginalized groups will be. In this sense, a cultural "monument" of such relevance could also serve as an important reference point especially for second generations, who may feel "lost" in their personal growth. The mosque would be an opportunity for Muslim citizens to deepen their cultural origins and pass them down to their children. Furthermore, the issue of safety would also benefit: a facility specifically designed for worship would guarantee the safety of visitors as well as that of the rest of the population. Another point raised was the benefit for residents living near the current prayer rooms, who would no longer experience inconveniences related to the inadequacy of those spaces, such as overcrowding of public areas or the reverberation of sermons and prayers. In the realization of the place of worship, many participants saw the opportunity for a possible "osmosis between cultures", which is currently a central theme in a city and country that have historically been crossroads of people of diverse origins. To support these aspirations, participants described the mosque not simply as a place of worship, but as a space that is a "place of cultural encounter and promotion", pleasant, suitable, and recognizable enhancing both the reputation of the Islamic community and of Florence itself. From an architectural point of view, citizens argued that a well-designed, recognizable building of significant quality would be a "cultural enrichment" for Florence, and that it should help "contribute to defining the city", as a potential guardian and promoter of the architectural and urban identity that characterizes the Tuscan capital. The construction of the mosque would also represent "an opportunity for renewal", allowing Florence to present an image of openness in a cultural sense, an aspect very much consistent with its tradition, given the presence of various historic places of worship. The concerns expressed by citizens regarding the mosque relate mainly to the relationship between the Islamic community and the city, as well as among the mosque's own attendees. The most significant fear is that the place of worship could become a tool for the marginalization of a minority, rather than a space of exchange and mutual enrichment. The possibility that the mosque might not encourage inclusion raises considerable alarm among residents. Another frequently mentioned concern relates to the role of women in Islamic culture. Many participants requested clear guarantees regarding equal opportunities, proposing that the mosque should provide women with a space that encourages engagement with the city rather than detachment from it. A further point of apprehension concerns the risk of ghettoization. There is fear that the building could become a gathering place only for Muslim worshippers, potentially creating isolation within the Islamic community. To avoid these risks, citizens described the mosque as a space that must function as a cultural center, ideally situated in an accessible, dignified, and non-peri-

pheral location. Another worry is that the mosque could contribute to degradation or insecurity in the surrounding area due to the possible presence of socially disadvantaged individuals. Conversely, while a peripheral location might provoke suspicion, according to some participants, an excessively central location could be perceived as conflicting with the dominant Catholic architectural heritage of the city. The final set of concerns involves urban and architectural aspects: citizens fear that the large number of potential worshippers could overload the hosting area, creating traffic congestion and difficulties with parking and mobility.



Fig.154 Example of the various working and discussion groups.



Fig.155 Professor Francesco Alberti illustrates the initial location hypotheses of the working group of the Faculty of Architecture of Florence, 18 February 2012.

Considerations on the Site Identifications

From the six locations presented by the team of professors from the Faculty of Architecture, the participants immediately excluded two areas: the former gasometer site and the Campo di Marte railway area. The former Campolmi site and the former Military Bakery were considered of moderate interest, while the greatest interest was shown for the former “bunker” courtroom site and the storage area in the Anconella Park. The first two locations, the former gasometer and the Campo di Marte railway area, were rejected because of the overwhelming presence of railway lines, inadequate spatial conditions due to the limited size of the area, the difficulty of redevelopment as railway zones, and the significant issues related to accessibility. The moderately acceptable locations, the former Campolmi site and the former Military Bakery, were described as complex to recover due to administrative and cost-related challenges, heavy traffic and accessibility issues, and the presence of social fragility that could lead to the risk of ghettoization of the incoming Islamic community. Finally, the two areas identified in the historic center (Q1) and in the southeastern part of the city (Q3), namely the former “bunker” courtroom and the storage area in the Anconella Park, were unanimously the most appreciated by the citizens. These two areas were considered the most suitable because they are located in zones considered appropriate, in the first case due to centrality, in the second due to their placement within a park. Both offer easy access by public and private transport, and both provide the possibility of interaction with the surrounding neighborhood: in the first case through cultural exchange (Q1), in the second through encounters naturally generated within the park (Q3). Both sites also offer a degree of public visibility for the mosque: in the first due to its proximity to major historic religious buildings and cultural landmarks, in the second because of its location at the threshold of the city, able to attract visitors and inspire initiatives connected to the park that would strengthen community relations. Alongside these opportunities, participants also expressed concerns. Regarding the former bunker courtroom site, issues included: difficulties in access and parking, potential social pressure on the neighborhood due to the high concentration of religious buildings and cultural activities, the risk that such an enclosed place might attract illicit activities, and the prominent symbolic exposure the mosque would have in the city. For the Anconella Park site, criticisms focused on: the technical challenges of building near the riverbank, perceptions of insufficient public transport service, and the concern that building the mosque could restrict access to existing green spaces, altering the established skyline. Analyzing the perspectives shared regarding the two preferred locations, it becomes clear that, despite differing opinions, with some groups favoring one area and others favoring the opposite, the underlying principle remains consistent: to determine the most suitable location to ensure the mosque receives adequate dignity and importance. What can be concluded from the results is that the citizens unanimously aspire to a mosque for Florence that is dignified and capable of enriching the urban context, while ensuring the best experience possible for its users. Only under these conditions does the development of the building truly make sense

The results of the process

Roles and Characteristics of the Mosque

Analyzing the opinions that emerged during the meetings, it is possible to identify a shared idea of what the mosque should be. More specifically, the citizens outlined characteristics, functions, and criteria that the place of worship must unquestionably possess. Most of the aspects discussed refer to the idea of a mosque that acts as a cultural bridge, while conveying a strong sense of harmony and beauty within its context.

The primary objective expressed by participants was that the mosque should enhance the city, rather than serve solely as a space for the spiritual practices of the faithful, since this could risk marginalizing a religious community that instead needs to be connected to the urban environment. The suggestions shared pointed toward the concept of an open and welcoming space, accessible to anyone, and one that should rightfully be located within the city rather than positioned on its margins. From a design perspective, in addition to the architectural value repeatedly emphasized, the most significant aspects discussed were the location of the building and the functions it should host. These functions, in particular, fueled much of the discussion: the mosque should include areas dedicated solely to religious practices, specifically, two separate prayer halls for men and women, as prescribed, along with an area for ritual purification (wudu).

Furthermore, to express the cultural dimension of the mosque, the building should also include a publicly accessible library, a conference hall, and spaces dedicated to learning, particularly for the teaching of Arabic language and culture.

Principles and Suggestions

By gathering the positive and negative aspects mentioned throughout the process, the participants summarized a series of parameters upon which the construction of the mosque must necessarily be based. The conclusions referred to two key questions: location (“where?”) and practical feasibility of the building (“how?”). At the end of the cycle of meetings, a shared agreement led to the formulation of a set of criteria addressing both questions: six criteria related to location, and seven criteria concerning the practical realization of the project. Suggestions for recreational spaces were also put forward, such as the possibility of including a hammam, or a restaurant complete with a tearoom. Other proposals focused instead on cultural programming, spaces capable of hosting theatrical performances or film screenings, as well as exhibitions and art displays. Finally, there were proposals of a more social nature, envisioning the mosque as a place of hospitality: a space that could assist migrants in need, serve as a social meeting place for elderly citizens, and act as a gathering point for children. Both indoor and outdoor spaces were proposed, allowing the mosque to establish a meaningful dialogue with the surrounding urban context.

Where?

-Located in an area that enhances the proposed intervention.

-Placed in a neighborhood already characterized by a significant presence of community and cultural organizations.

-Positioned in a district not congested by excessive functions and traffic flows.

-Inserted in a neighborhood accustomed to welcoming and appreciating diversity.

-An opportunity for the recovery of disused areas and buildings.

-Accessible by both public and private transportation.

How?

-Possible to complete within a reasonable timeframe.

-A spacious place suitable for hosting social and cultural functions, open to the city.

-Economically sustainable for the community involved.

-Equipped with an open space and an area for interaction with the neighborhood, such as a garden.

-Visible and easily recognizable.

-Ensured design quality through an architectural competition.

-Harmonious with the city's urban landscape



l'Unità TOSCANA 26/01/12

Moschea, l'imam dice sì all'ipotesi aula bunker

OSVALDO SABATO
FIRENZE

Per definire l'estetica con cui dovrà essere realizzata la moschea di Firenze «è già al lavoro un pool di architetti con il compito di elaborare lo stile architettonico misto italiano-islamico che vorremmo caratterizzasse la struttura». A dirlo è l'imam di Firenze Izzedin Elzir durante un incontro sull'iter di consultazione avviato nel capoluogo toscano riguardo la costruzione di una moschea in città. Il percorso di partecipazione si concluderà a fine febbraio e solo allora partirà il confronto con il Comune di Firenze. Quanto all'ipotesi di trasformare l'attuale aula bunker in moschea per l'imam «sarebbe una buona soluzione».

→ A PAGINA IV

IL DOSSIER

La moschea nell'aula bunker? Ora c'è il sì dell'imam di Firenze

Con il trasferimento degli uffici giudiziari al Palagiustizia presto lo spazio si libererà Izzedin: «Sarebbe una buona soluzione». I fiorentini: sì al minareto, no al muezzin

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FIRENZE
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Sono pronti a investire la bellezza di cinque milioni di euro per costruirne una nuova di sana pianta. Ma a loro andrebbe bene anche una soluzione diversa: trasformare in moschea una struttura già esistente, l'importante però che non sia in periferia, e che sia in grado di raccogliere un migliaio di fedeli. Per una moschea da costruire ex novo la comunità islamica è pronta a lanciare un concorso di idee, dopo aver presentato mesi fa un progetto dell'architetto Napolitano, ormai in soffitta. Nel secondo caso, come ammette l'imam Elzir Izzedin, l'aula bunker, in odore di chiusissime con il trasferimento degli uffici giudiziari a Novoli, sarebbe una soluzione che andrebbe bene, vicina al parcheggio di Sant'Ambrogio e a piazza Annigoni.

Quando l'Unità alcuni mesi fa pubblicò per la prima volta la notizia sulla possibile conversione dell'aula bunker in moschea il presidente del Q1 Stefano Marmugi disse che era favorevole. Ora anche l'imam di Firenze apre a questa opzione: «Sarebbe una buona soluzione» dice. Naturalmente se ne dovrà parlare con il Comune di Firenze per capire se è fattibile. La comunità musulmana è pronta ad accollarsi le tutte le spese. Intanto come rivela lo stesso Izzedin Elzir sulla nuova moschea «è già al lavoro un pool di architetti con il compito di elaborare lo stile architettonico misto italiano-islamico che vorremmo caratterizzasse la struttura». Nel frattempo va avanti il percorso di partecipazione curato da Sociolab e finanziato dalla Regione Toscana, giunto all'ultima fase come hanno ricordato lo stesso Elzir ed alcuni dei componenti del tavolo di garanzia tra i quali la preside della facoltà di scienze politiche Franca Alacovich e la rappresentante della comunità ebraica locale Hukla Liberanome. Entro fine marzo, quando si concluderà questo iter, prenderà ufficialmente il via il confronto con Palazzo Vecchio. L'obiettivo è una moschea «che possa ospitare circa 1000 fedeli, capienza giusta per la nostra comunità, e che sia, oltre che uno spazio di preghiera, anche un centro culturale aperto alla città» spiega l'imam fiorentino, che aggiunge di «non dimettere, una volta costruito il luogo di culto, i tre punti di preghiera presenti già adesso in città, uno in centro (Borgo Allegri) e due in periferia (Iocalità Poderaccio e Sorgane). L'importante che la moschea non sia «ai margini estremi della città» dice l'imam, che ha anche voluto tranquillizzare i residenti della zona dove in futuro la struttura sorgerà. «I nostri vicini potranno stare tranquilli - ha sorriso - non ci saranno le preghiere dei muezzin a svegliarli durante le prime ore del mattino».

Continua da pag. 1

Fig.156 Article in L'Unità on the identification of a location for the mosque, 26 January 2012.

By analyzing the set of criteria that emerged from the working groups, at least regarding the first theme, namely, the choice of location, the most emphasized principle concerns the social characteristics of the area that should host the mosque. More specifically, this is expressed in the second and fourth criteria, and can be summarized in one overarching guideline:

1.That it be integrated into a neighborhood with a strong presence of associations, cultural openness, and social interaction, promoting an environment that encourages dialogue between the mosque and the city:
A requirement considered essential by the citizens for the development of the new place of worship is that the mosque should actively relate to the area that will host it. Therefore, the location cannot be selected arbitrarily but must be chosen through a careful analysis aimed at identifying the most suitable context. According to participants, the neighborhood should be one where diversity is already familiar, accustomed to coexisting with residents, students, workers, or tourists of different ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, it is fundamental that the mosque be placed in an area characterized by a strong network of associations, which would facilitate relationships and shared initiatives.

2.That it be reachable both by public and private transportation:

Citizens emphasized that accessibility, whether by public transit, private vehicles, or on foot, is extremely important, highlighting the need for adequate parking space with the possibility of expansion. The ideal situation would allow the community to reach the mosque with ease, enabling the building to connect smoothly with the rest of the city. Additionally, if the chosen location already suffers from high congestion, measures should be taken to mitigate the issue.

3.That it be located in a neighborhood not already overburdened by excessive activity and traffic congestion.

4.That it provides an opportunity for the redevelopment of unused areas and abandoned structures.

5.That the mosque be situated in an area capable of enhancing and giving value to the intervention:
Participants expressed the desire for the chosen area to be qualitatively suitable for hosting the mosque. The surrounding context should possess characteristics that support the proper functioning of religious and cultural activities, and that allow the creation of a building with architectural and social significance.

Regarding the question of implementation, citizens focused primarily on the architectural qualities of the building as well as the practical challenges involved in completing such a project. More specifically, for the first set of criteria, excluding the more independent fifth and seventh points, the discussion centered around the idea of the mosque as a place that must display a certain beauty and dignity. For the second set, the same reasoning allows the first and third points to be grouped together.

1.That the architectural quality be ensured through an international design competition:

According to many participants, guaranteeing the quality of the mosque's design requires organizing an international competition, preceded by a targeted participatory process that defines the design guidelines. The project should then be evaluated by a competent commission, including experts in both architecture and Islamic cultural heritage.

2.That it be a large enough space capable of hosting social and cultural functions open to the entire city community.

3.That it includes an outdoor area intended to serve as a meeting place:

Participants emphasized that locating the mosque in a socially active and inclusive neighborhood is essential. In this sense, the presence of an outdoor public space belonging to the mosque would reinforce these qualities, increase the building's attractiveness, and encourage cultural exchange, interaction, and community activities in the surrounding area.

4.That it be easily visible, recognizable, and harmonious within the cityscape.

5.That it be completed within a reasonable timeframe:

In addition to execution times, participants also highlighted the importance of economic sustainability. Meeting both conditions is considered crucial to preventing the construction process from becoming excessively long or burdensome.

In the context of the future mosque, citizens emphasize the importance of making it an inclusive place for all Islamic traditions and nationalities. They recognize that Islamic culture extends beyond the Arab sphere and propose that sermons be delivered in Italian in order to promote inclusivity and transparency, avoiding the exclusion of minority groups. Participants consider it essential to establish shared management rules among the various national and religious groups present in the mosque. Regarding the practical procedures, they urge both the community and the administration to move forward toward the actual construction of the mosque. It is suggested that the community accept funding from foreign governments only if it is free from conditions affecting management and religious leadership, and some propose launching a public fundraising campaign to gather financial contributions. From the administration, concrete responses are expected in terms of urban planning procedures and feasibility assessments, with the aim of overcoming the limitations of the current prayer halls, or at least reducing their pressure, in order to guarantee an optimal management of the new place of worship.

Conclusions

Based on the insights gathered, it is important to keep in mind that during the phases of the process the participants held heterogeneous opinions. This diversity encouraged them, throughout the discussions, to address the various issues by considering both the concerns and aspirations of citizens who held different viewpoints. During the course of the process, participants debated the topic of the mosque, examining the question from a social perspective, particularly in terms of coexistence with diversity, through a cultural lens, while also analyzing the urban and architectural aspects. They proposed suggestions regarding a possible location, along with specific criteria that should be respected. The idea of the mosque that emerged was that of a space designed for the city, one that would facilitate cultural exchange and enrich Florence both through the activities hosted within it and through its integration into the urban fabric. This idea made clear that the citizens do not wish to conceal the presence of the Florentine Islamic community; on the contrary, they want to allow it to thrive, encouraging its visible inclusion in the social fabric. The mosque, therefore, should assume the responsibility of contributing to and enhancing the cultural value of the Tuscan capital.



Relationship between Context and Settlement



Fig.157 Aerial view of the Aula Bunker, north-west side.



Fig.158 Aerial view of the Aula Bunker, south-east side.



Fig.159 View of Via dell'Agnolo.



Fig.160 View of Via Paolieri.

According to the Zoli Law of 1973, an agreement was reached between the Ministry of Justice and the Municipality of Florence for the transfer of ownership of the penitentiary institutions located in the Santa Croce district, namely S. Teresa, S. Verdiana, the Murate complex, and the adjoining gardens, through a property exchange. In the following years, the Municipality acquired most of these prison facilities in return for granting the Ministry the land required for the construction of the new Sollicciano prison, located in the municipality bearing the same name, about a dozen kilometers away. Subsequently, the Municipality assigned the significant architectural complexes of S. Teresa and S. Verdiana to the University of Florence (Faculty of Architecture), while the Murate complex underwent a large-scale redevelopment project to create Public Residential Housing, the new Madonna della Neve square, commercial spaces, and more. The land formerly used as gardens for the inmates was assigned by the Ministry for the construction of the Judicial Courtroom, known as the Aula Bunker, built to ensure security during the major trials held during those years. The Aula Bunker was completed in 1982 and remains in use today as the only facility of its kind, despite having been slated for demolition for several years. This place evokes tragic events and represents a dark period in Italian history, the years of political violence and terrorism, fortunately now overcome, yet calling for a symbolic new beginning. The area of the former Aula Bunker is located in the Historic Center of Florence, specifically between Via dell'Agnolo and Via dei Paolieri, surrounded by several existing structures, including the La Nazione building, the renovated Murate complex, the Faculty of Architecture housed in the nearby former monastery of Santa Verdiana, and Viale Giovine Italia. It is located near major transit routes, close to Piazza Beccaria and adjacent to the State Archives, representing a significant access point to the Historic Center for both vehicles and pedestrians. The site faces the tourist bus parking area and sits above an underground parking facility, making this area a strategic gateway into the city.

Area Identification

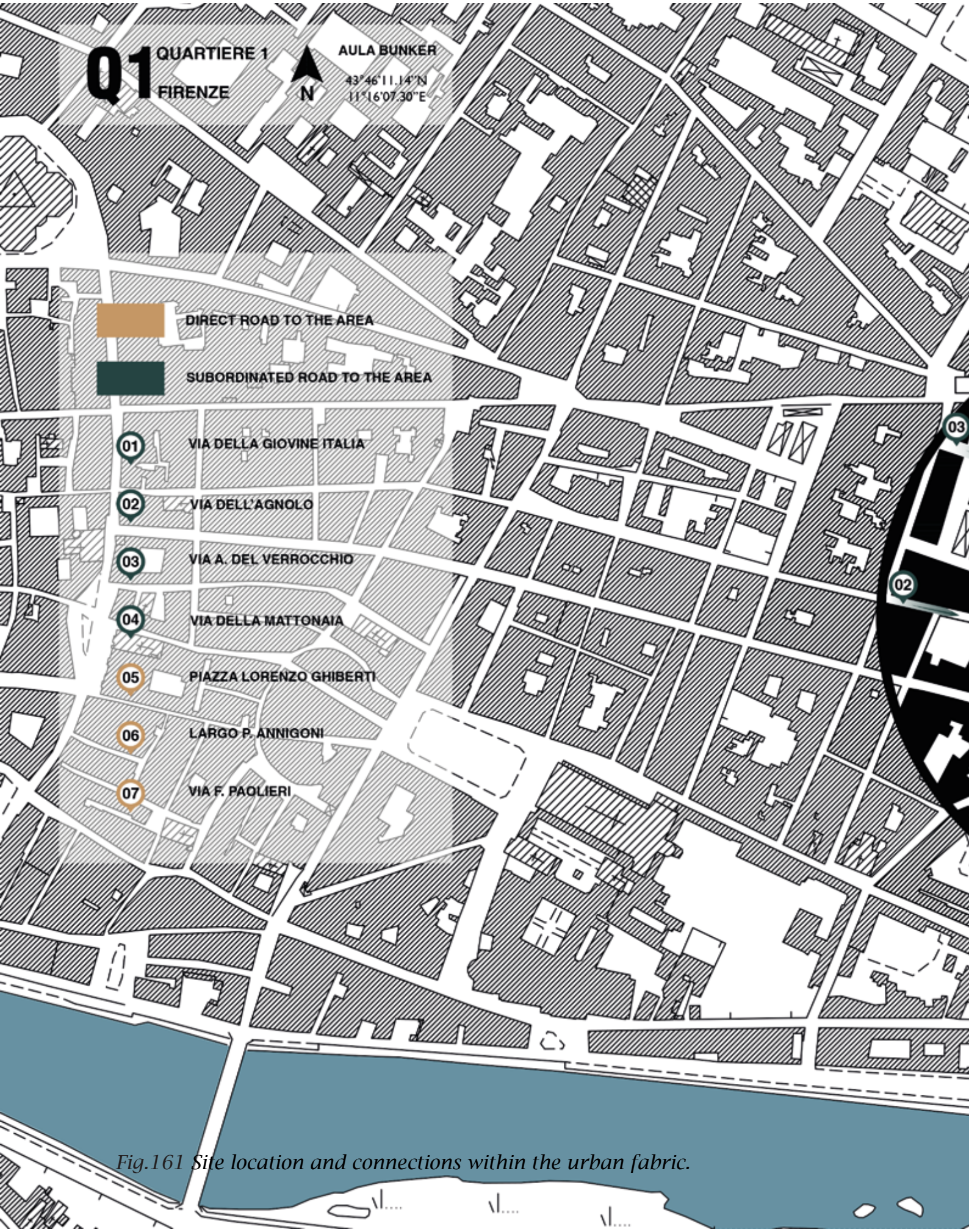
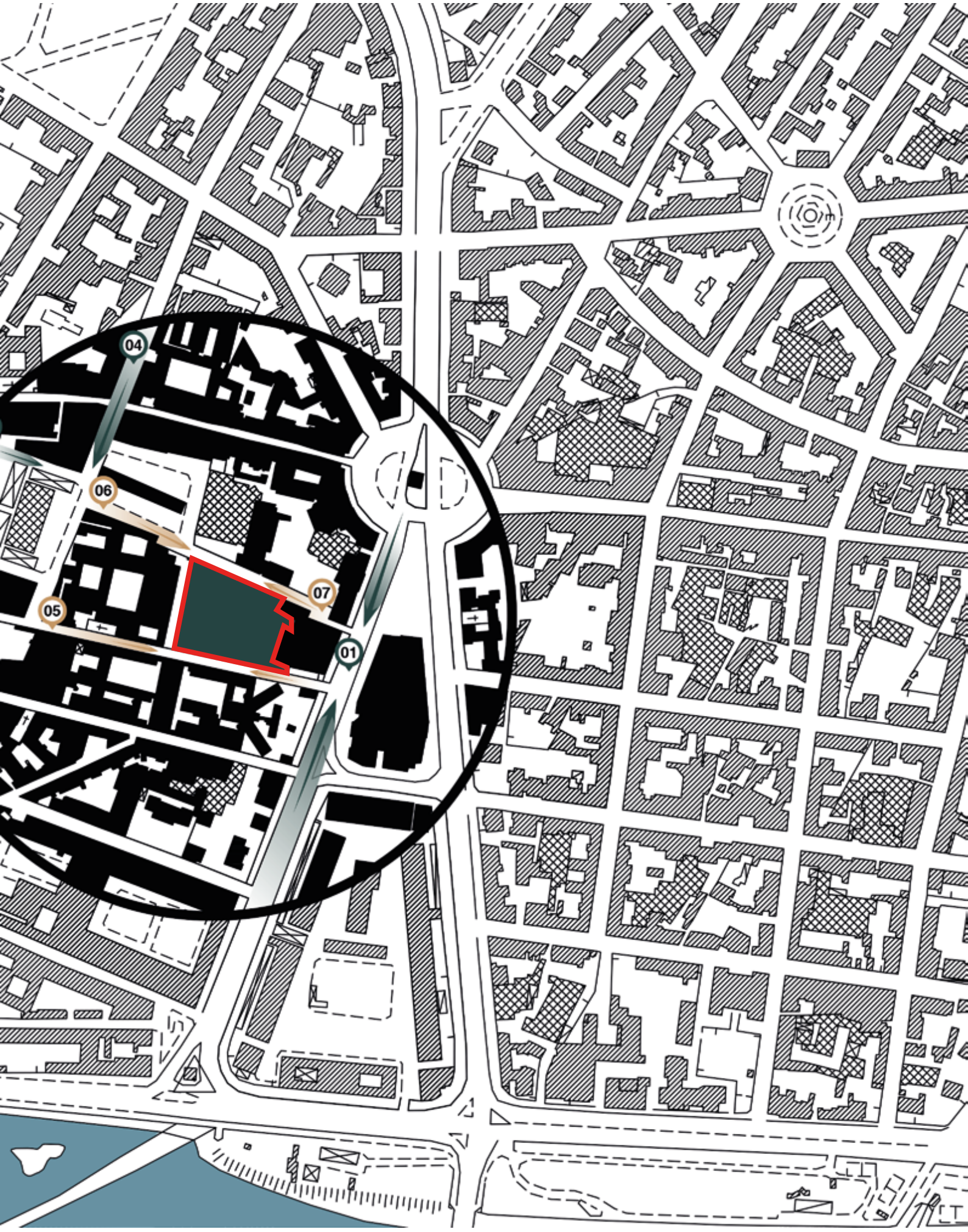


Fig.161 Site location and connections within the urban fabric.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Distribution of Places of Worship

1. Basilica di Santa Maria Novella, 1279. 2. Oratorio della Congregazione dei Vanchetoni, 1602. 3. Convento San Paolino, 1094.

4. Ex Chiesa di San Pancrazio, 931. 5. Chiesa dei Santi Michele e Gaetano, 1597. 6. Basilica di Santa Trinita, 1250.

7. Chiesa dei Santi Apostoli, XI secolo. 8. Chiesa di Santa Maria Maggiore, VIII secolo. 9. Basilica di San Lorenzo, IV secolo.

10. Chiesa di Santo Stefano al Ponte, 1116. 11. Chiesa di Orsanmichele, 1337. 12. Chiesa di San Giovannino dei Padri Scolopi, 1579.

13. Battistero di San Giovanni, 1059. 14. Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, 1296.

15. Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci, 1508. 16. Chiesa di S. Michele Arcangelo Visdomini, 1346.

17. Chiesa di Santa Maria in Campo, XI secolo. 18. Chiesa di Santa Margherita dei Cerchi, 1032.

19. Chiesa di San Carlo dei Lombardi, 1349. 20. Badia Fiorentina - Monastero, 978. 21. Chiesa di San Procolo, XIII secolo.

22. Chiesa di San Filippo Neri, 1640. 23. Chiesa di San Remigio, 1350. 24. Chiesa di San Marco, XII secolo.

25. Basilica della Santissima Annunziata di Firenze, 1233. 26. Rotonda del Brunelleschi, 1434. 27. Chiesa di Sant'Egidio, XIV secolo.

28. Oratorio di San Tommaso d'Aquino, 1568. 29. Chiesa dei Santi Simone e Giuda, 1243.

30. Chiesa di Santa Maria di Candeli, XIV secolo. 31. Basilica di Santa Croce di Firenze, 1294. 32. Cappella Pazzi, 1318.

33. Chiesa di Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, 1257. 34. Chiesa di Sant'Ambrogio, XII secolo.

35. Oratorio Santa Maria Vergine della Croce al Tempio, XII secolo. 36. Chiesa Parrocchiale di San Giuseppe, XV secolo.

37. Ex chiesa dei Santi Jacopo e Lorenzo, 1542. 38. Chiesa del Santissimo Sacramento e del Suffragio, 1898.

39. Basilica di Santo Spirito, 1444. 40. Chiesa di san Felice in Piazza, 537. 41. Oratorio di San Sebastiano de' Bini, 537.

42. Chiesa di San Jacopo Soprarno, 537. 43. Chiesa di Santa Felicita, 1055.

44. Chiesa di San Giorgio e dello Spirito Santo alla Costa, 1432. 45. Chiesa Parrocchiale di San Leonardo in Arcetri, XI secolo.

46. Chiesa di Santa Lucia dei Magnoli, 1078. 47. Chiesa di San Niccolò Oltrarno, 1184. 48. Istituto la Fantina.

49. Chiesa di San Salvatore al Monte, 1498. 50. Abbazia di San Miniato al Monte, 1018. 51. Parrocchia Santa Maria a Ricorboli, 1906.

52. Chiesa Santa Maria dell'Umiltà, 1382. 53. Chiesa Riformata Svizzera di Firenze, 1827. 54. Chiesa Evangelica Coreana.

55. Chiesa Evangelica Metodista, XI secolo. 56. Chiesa Ortodossa di Nostra Signora degli Angeli, 1938.

57. Sinagoga di Firenze, 1874. 58. Moschea di Borgo Allegri, 2005.



Fig.162 Religious buildings distribution across Florence.

Contextual Height Comparison



Fig.163 longitudinal section on the north side



Fig.164 longitudinal section on the west side

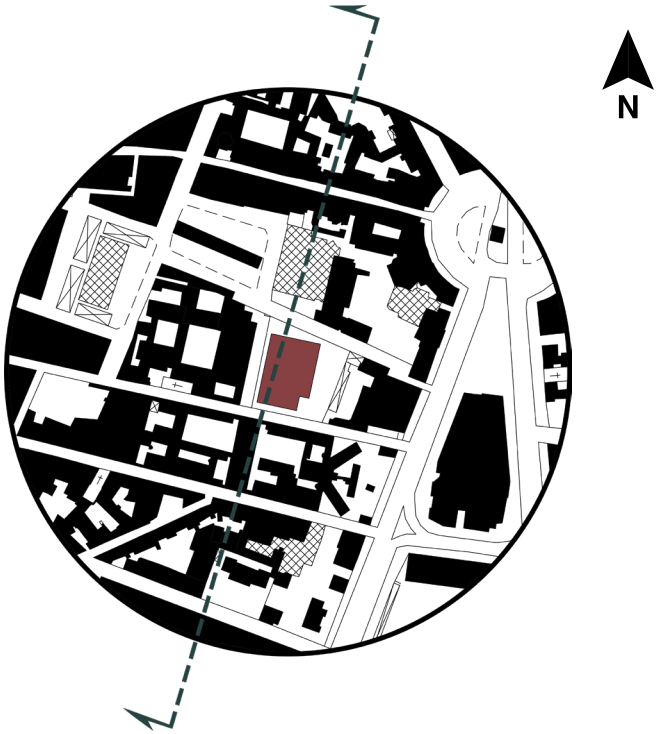


Fig.165 Height ratio between the bunker area and the surrounding environment.









AULA BUNKER

INTERVENTION AREA

SURROUNDING CONTEXT

URBAN CONTEXT

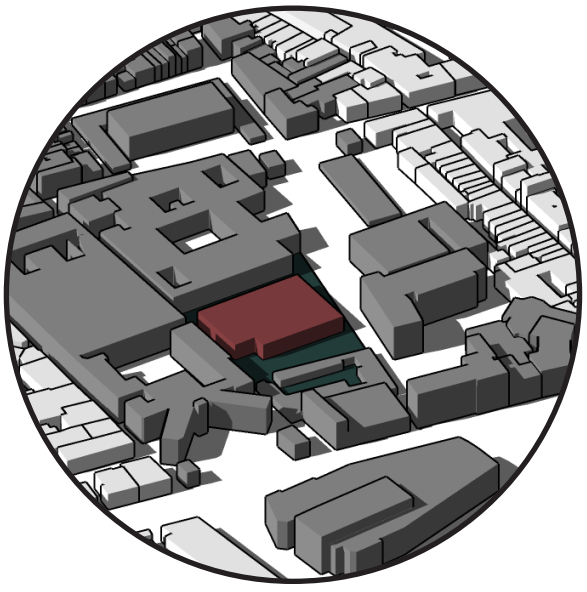
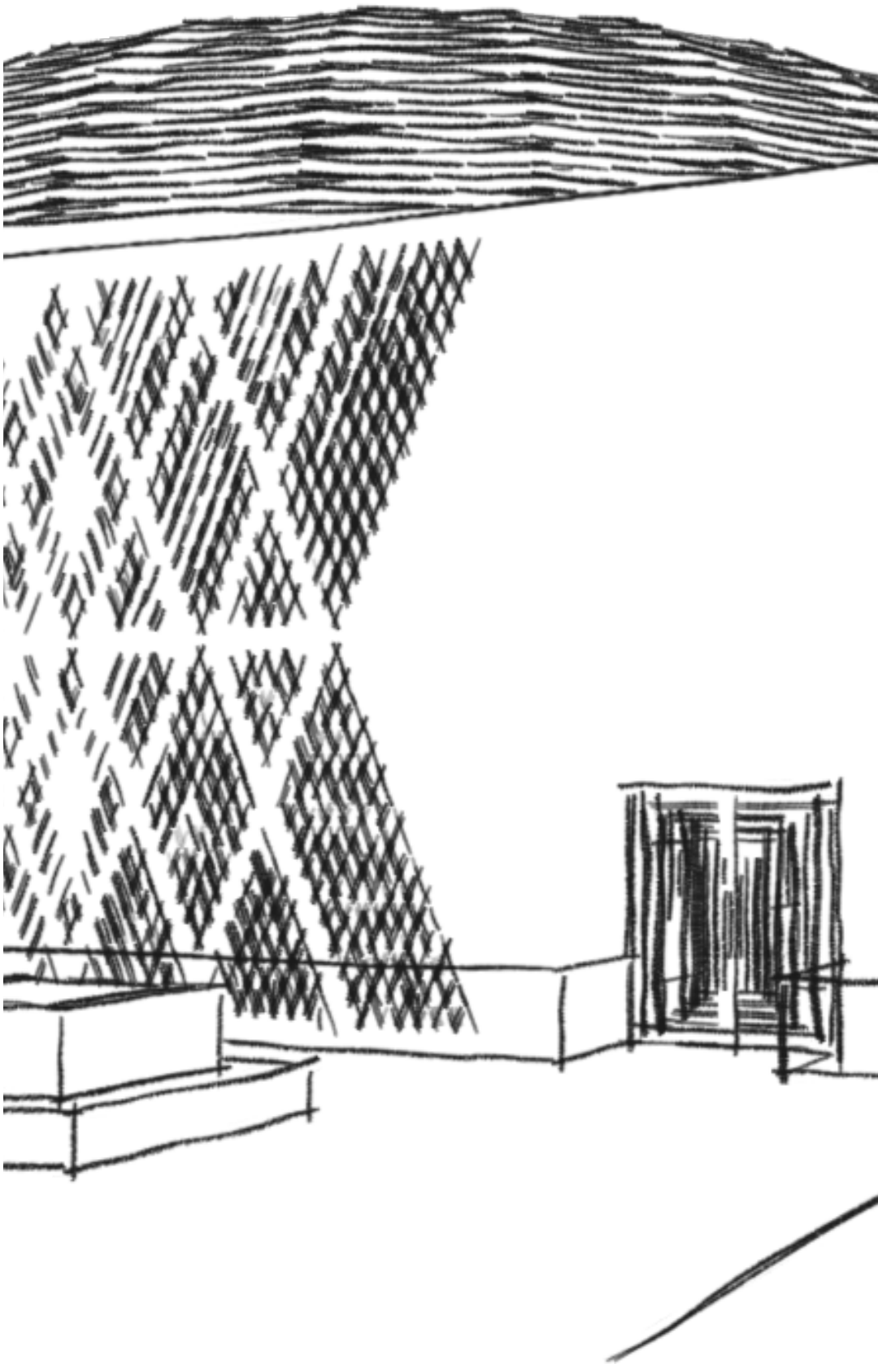


Fig.166 Detail of the height relationship between the bunker area and the surrounding context.



From Concept to Project

Architectural Development: functions, materials and spatial articulation

The project for the mosque and Islamic cultural centre in Florence, located in the strategic area of the former Aula Bunker, is the architectural expression of a hybrid design. This strategy was essential in order to coherently blend the functional imperatives of religious practice with the need for integration into Florence's dense urban and historical fabric. The architecture itself acts as a vehicle for civic openness, transforming a functional necessity into an urban opportunity.
The design strategy is entirely based on the principle of permeability of the complex, achieved through the creation of a permeable base. This solution not only addresses the logistical and flow complexities imposed by the urban location, but also defines an architecture that opens up generously to the city.

1. Functional strategy

The volumetric and spatial layout reflects the nature of the 'Mosque of the Third Millennium', where cultural and social integration plays a predominant role. The functional programme has been carefully calibrated to encourage interaction, ensuring that community and cultural activities prevail in terms of surface area.
The complex is divided into main functional areas, dedicated to the sacred, the social, the cultural and services. It is crucial to note that most of the built space is dedicated to secular and public functions, confirming the complex's role as an active cultural and social hub. The spatial and distributive hierarchy ensures dignified and balanced access, transforming the mosque into a place of dynamic contact with the urban environment.

2. Spatial organisation

Groun floor

The ground floor is the heart of civic interaction and the level of direct contact with the city. The absolute protagonist is the courtyard, a vast open and enclosed space that is a real gift to the city, an extension of the public sphere. This space acts as a hub for traffic and connections, welcoming and distributing urban and pedestrian flows.
The functions on this level are spatially divided between the sacred and the cultural:
• The body of the mosque is introduced by its entrance hall, a space dedicated to access and preparation for worship.
• The cultural centre is developed in clearly separated volumes, located along the façade and dedicated to interaction: here you will find the restaurant-café, the exhibition area and the bookshop. This volumetric distinction ensures that the cultural centre operates with maximum permeability, facilitating urban integration.

Basement

The basement serves as the logistical base and contains the spaces that require the most space. The main prayer hall for men is located on this level. It is flanked by facilities that support the community and education, such as classrooms and a conference room.

First floor

The first floor completes the functional distinction in height. Part of this level is dedicated to the sacred area, where the women's prayer hall is located, positioned in a privileged spot overlooking the main prayer hall below to allow full participation in the ritual. The rest of the floor is entirely devoted to the cultural centre, housing the library and the centre for Islamic heritage studies, consolidating the complex's role as a hub for research and cultural dissemination.

3. Urban integration, materials and symbolism

The project is set in an urban context of great historical and institutional significance, close to prestigious civic and military complexes such as the Antonio Baldissera Barracks, the Murate Complex and the former monastery of Santa Verdiana.
The volumetric modelling has been carefully studied to achieve a contemporary style that is understated and respectful of the context. The architecture of the main body avoids invasive monumentality; the height and dimensions of the building envelope are in line with those of the surrounding buildings.
The choice of materials pays homage to Florentine tradition, ensuring sobriety and integration:
- For the structure and external cladding, pietra forte stone was used to define the volumes and pietra serena stone for the external paving.
- Carrara marble is used for the external finishing elements that require particular prestige.

The only design element that intentionally stands out and defines itself as monumental is the minaret. This tower, which has a ritual function, also acts as a vertical indicator and landmark in the urban landscape. Its height is calibrated to be the only element visible from a distance, establishing the presence of the complex unequivocally with a single architectural gesture.

Ground floor



Fig.167 Ground floor board.

Basement

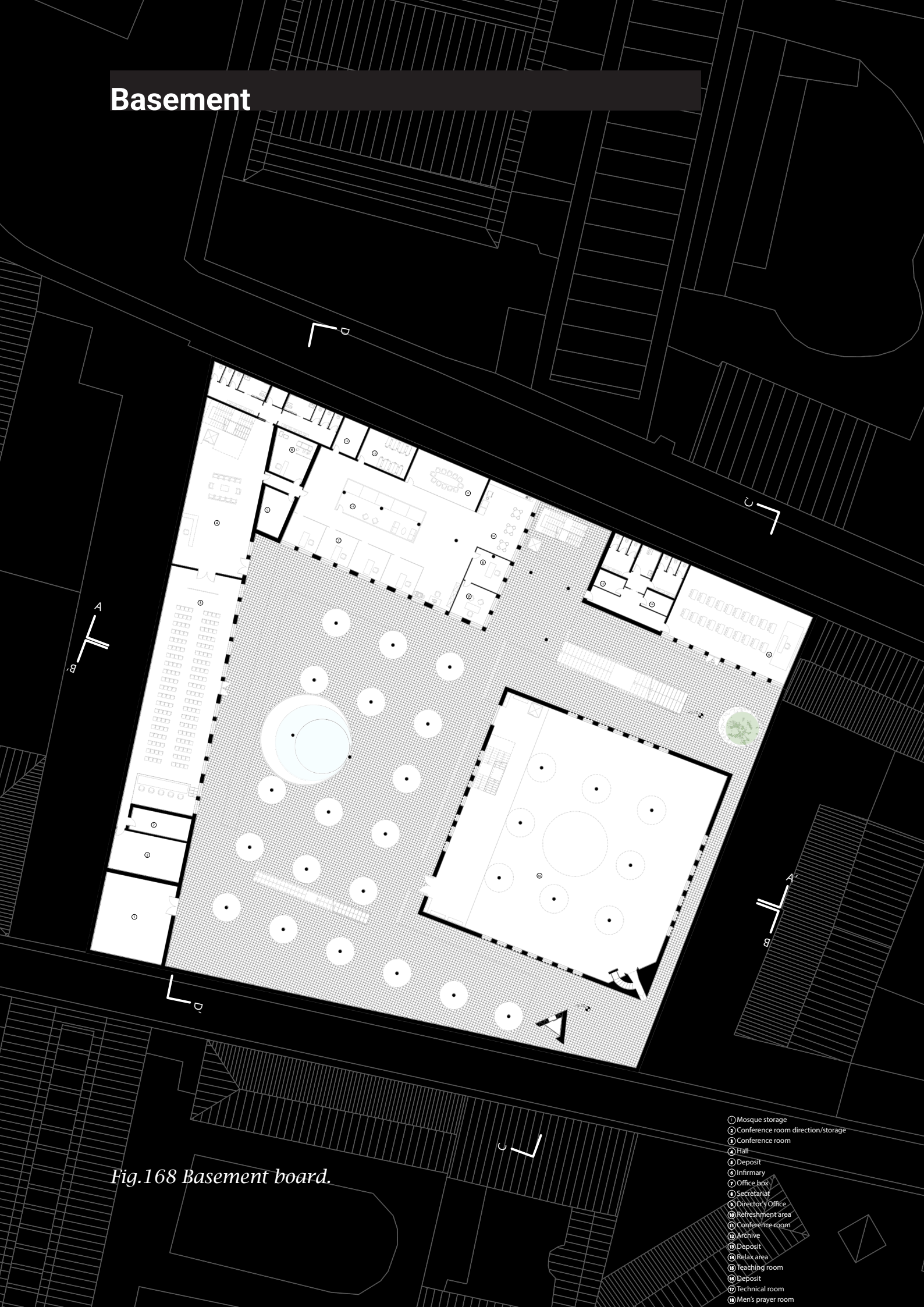


Fig.168 Basement board.

First floor



Fig.169 First floor board.

Roof plan

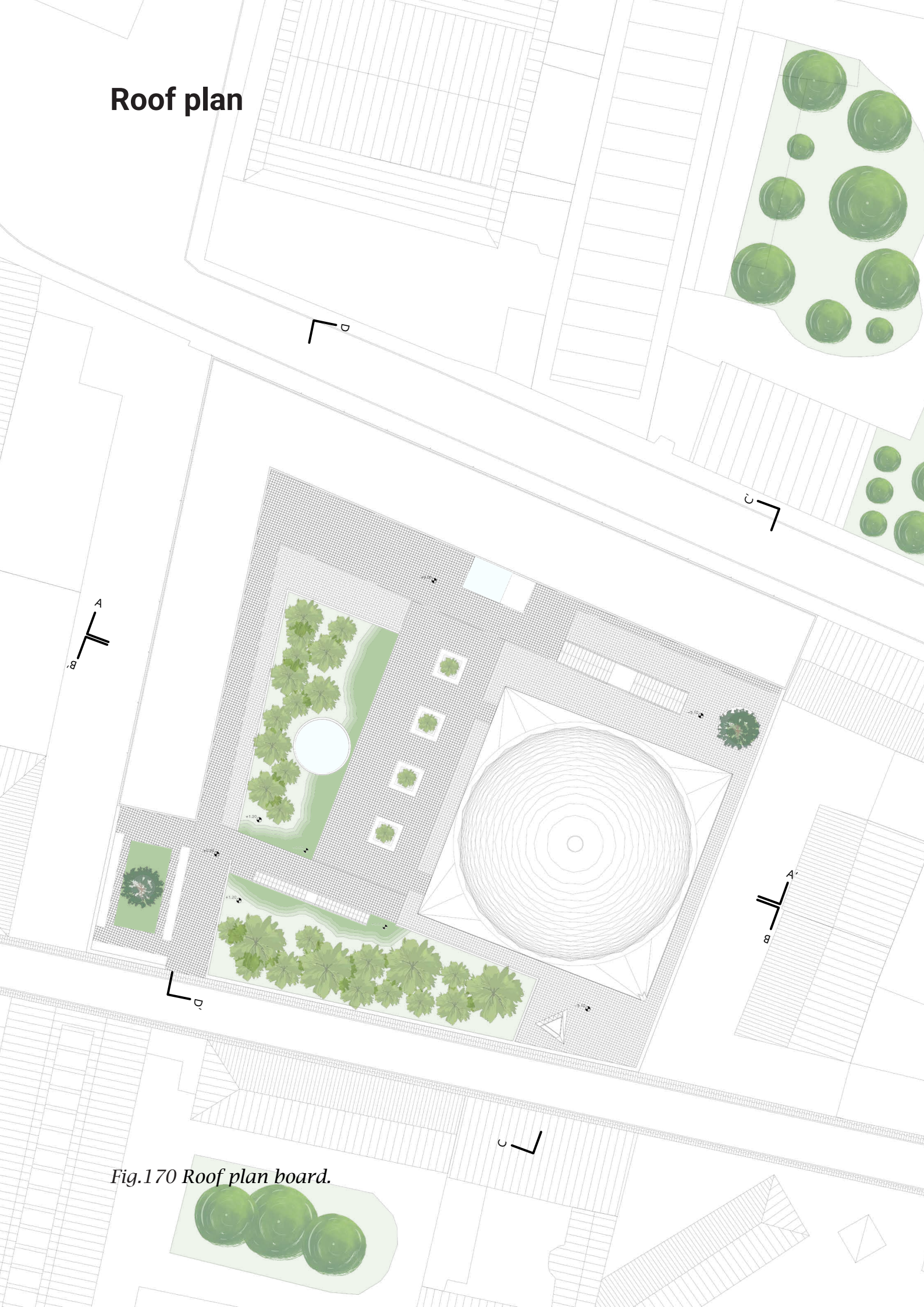
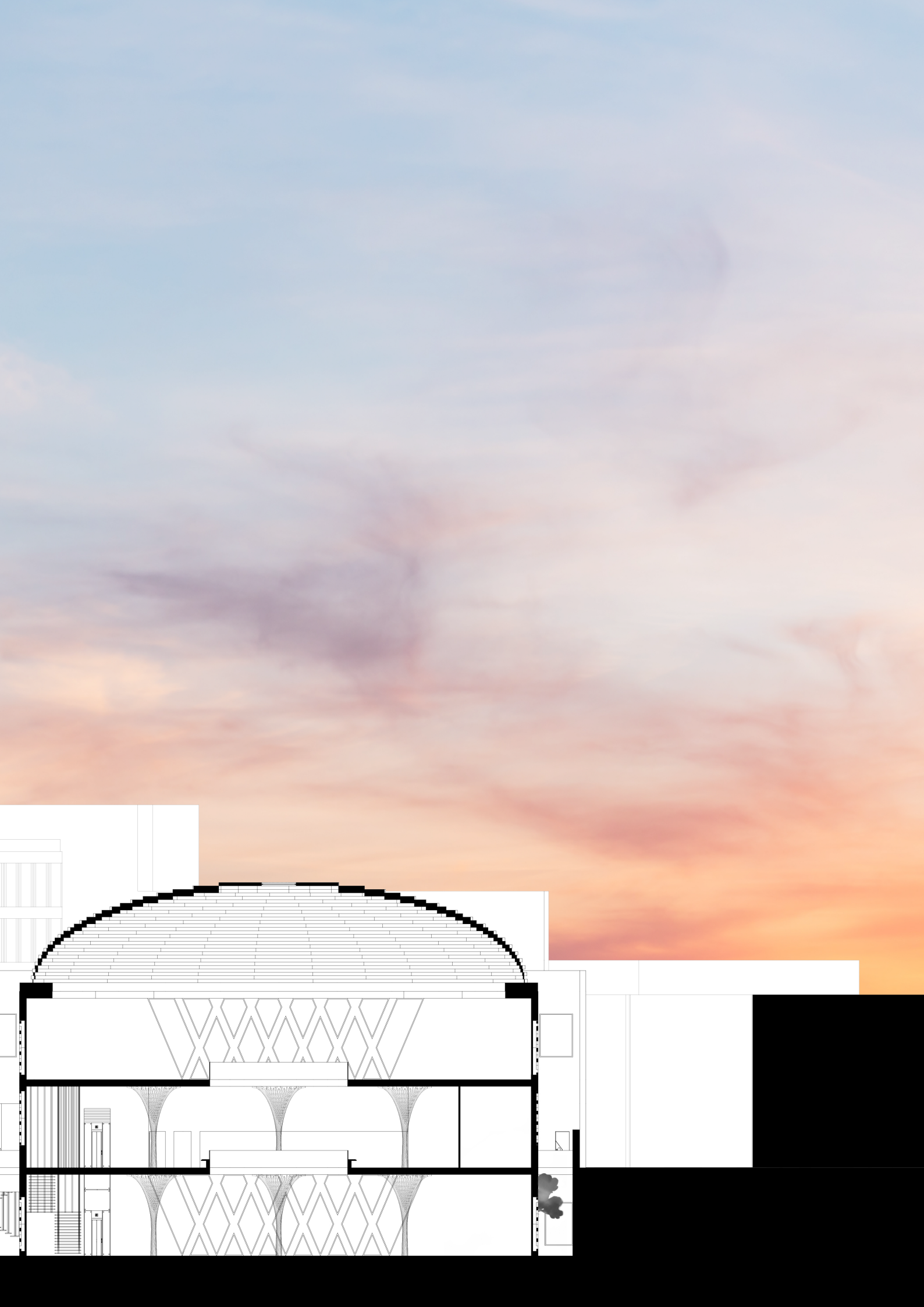


Fig.170 Roof plan board.

Section A-A’



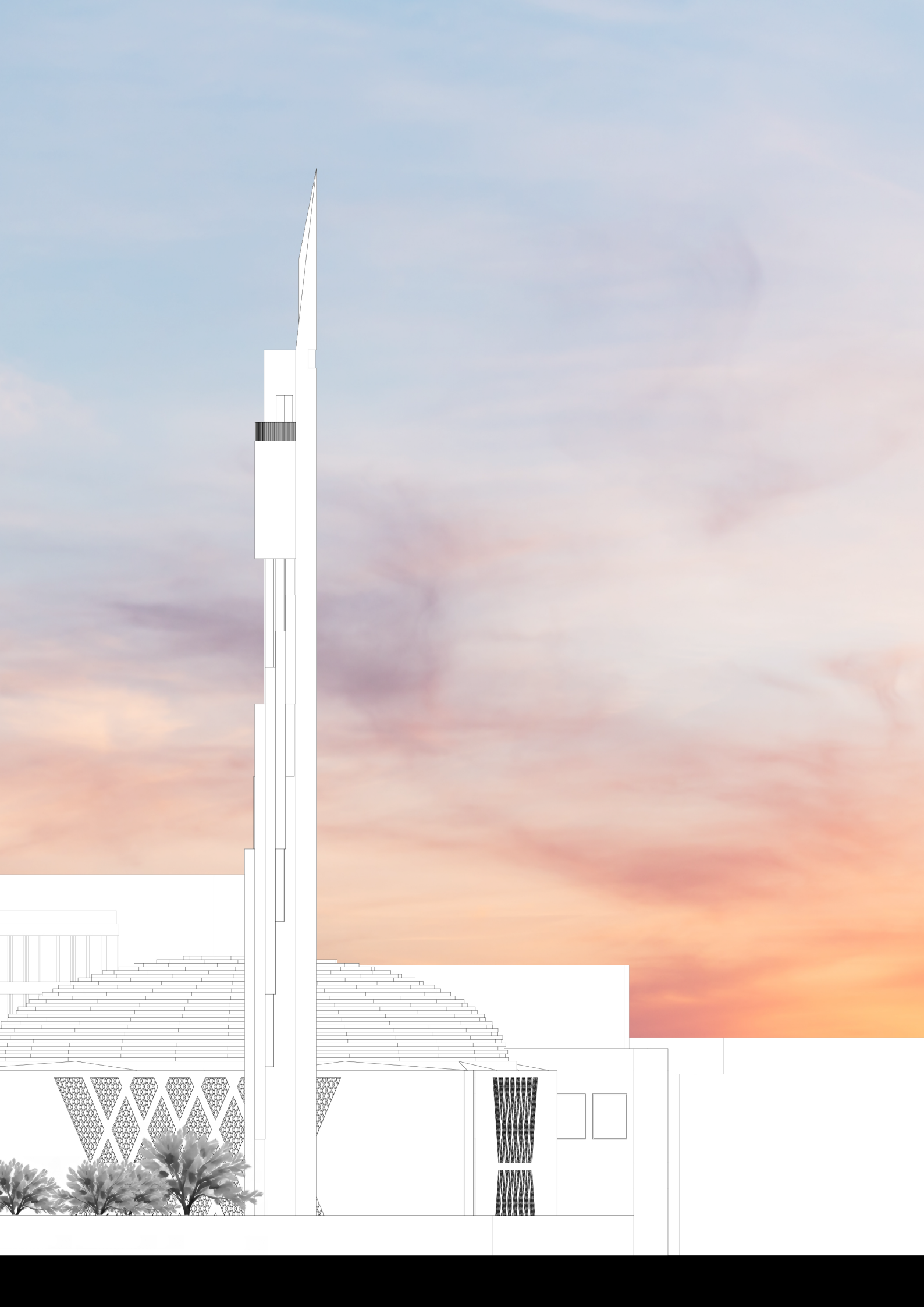
Fig.171 Section A-A’ board.



South elevation



Fig.172 South elevation board.



Section B-B’

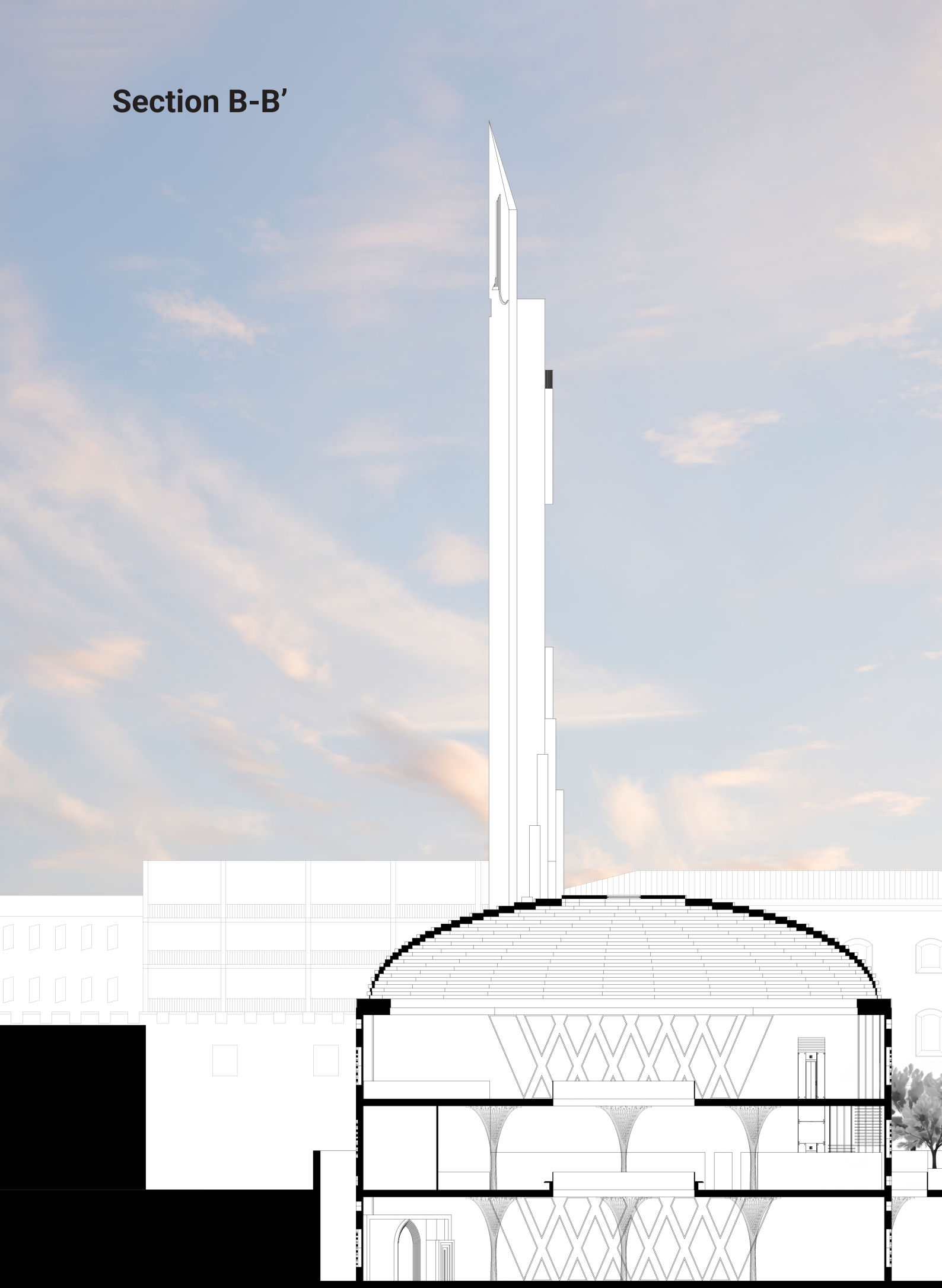
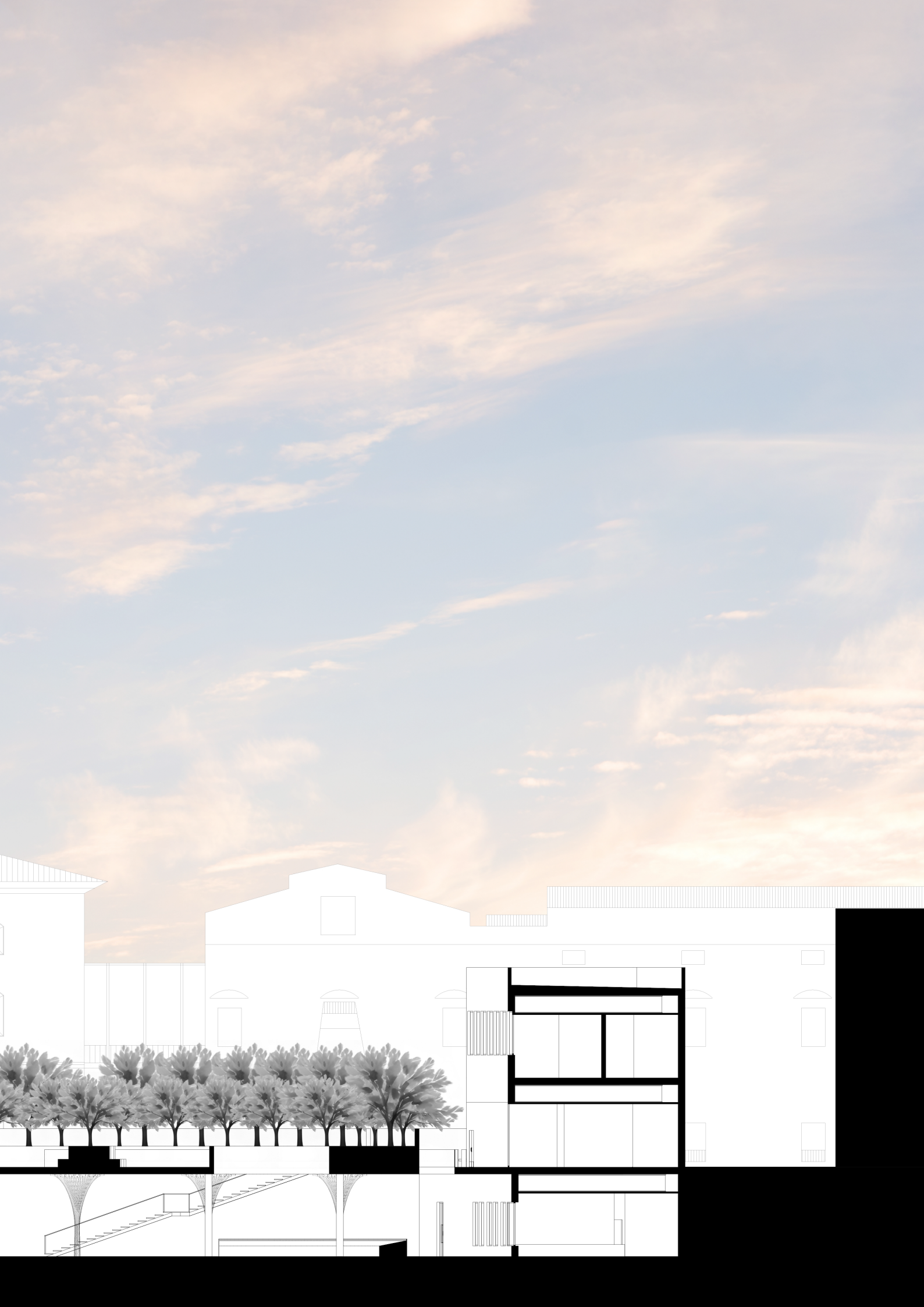


Fig.173 Section B-B’ board.



North elevation

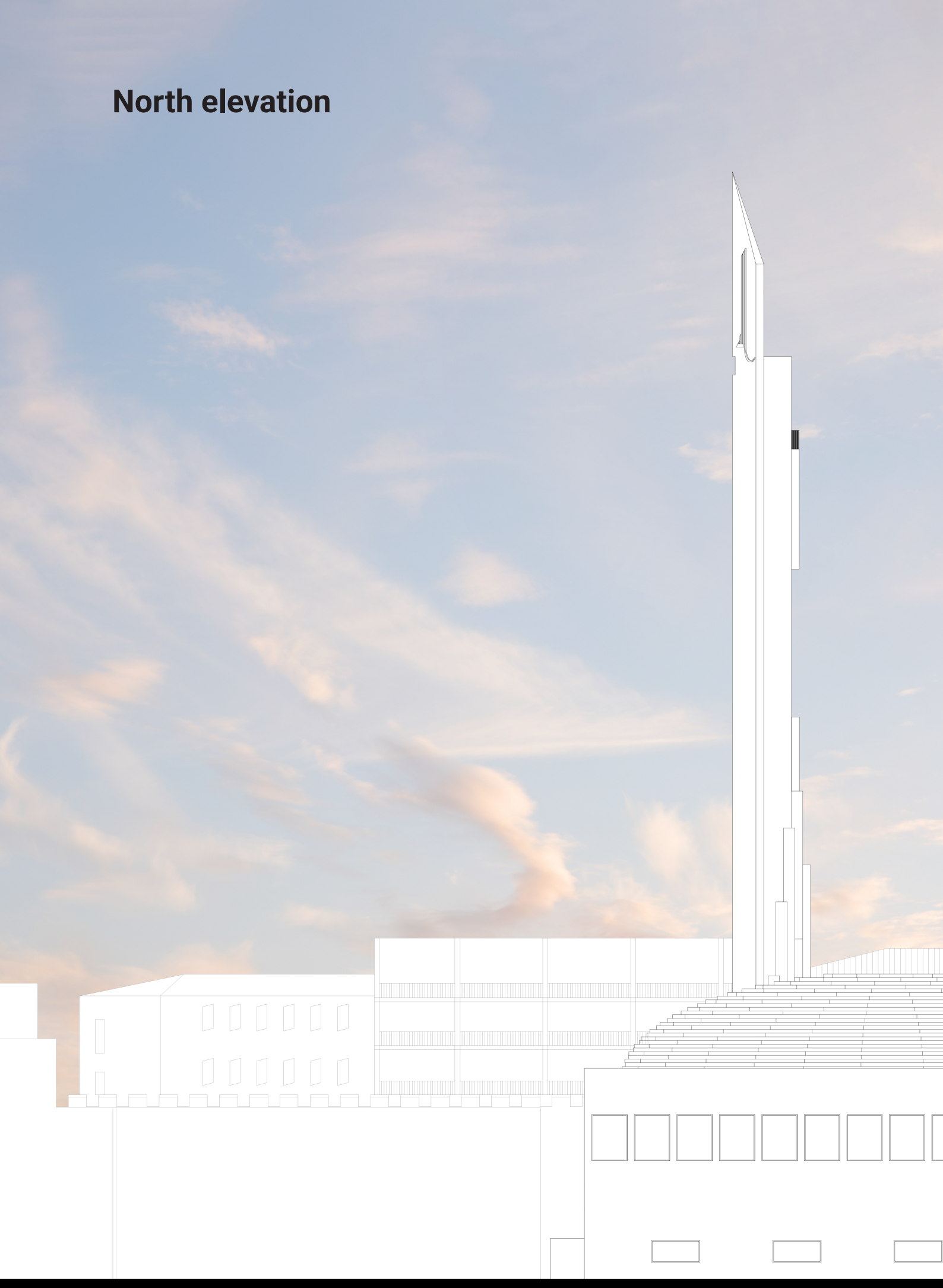


Fig.174 North elevation board.



Section C-C’

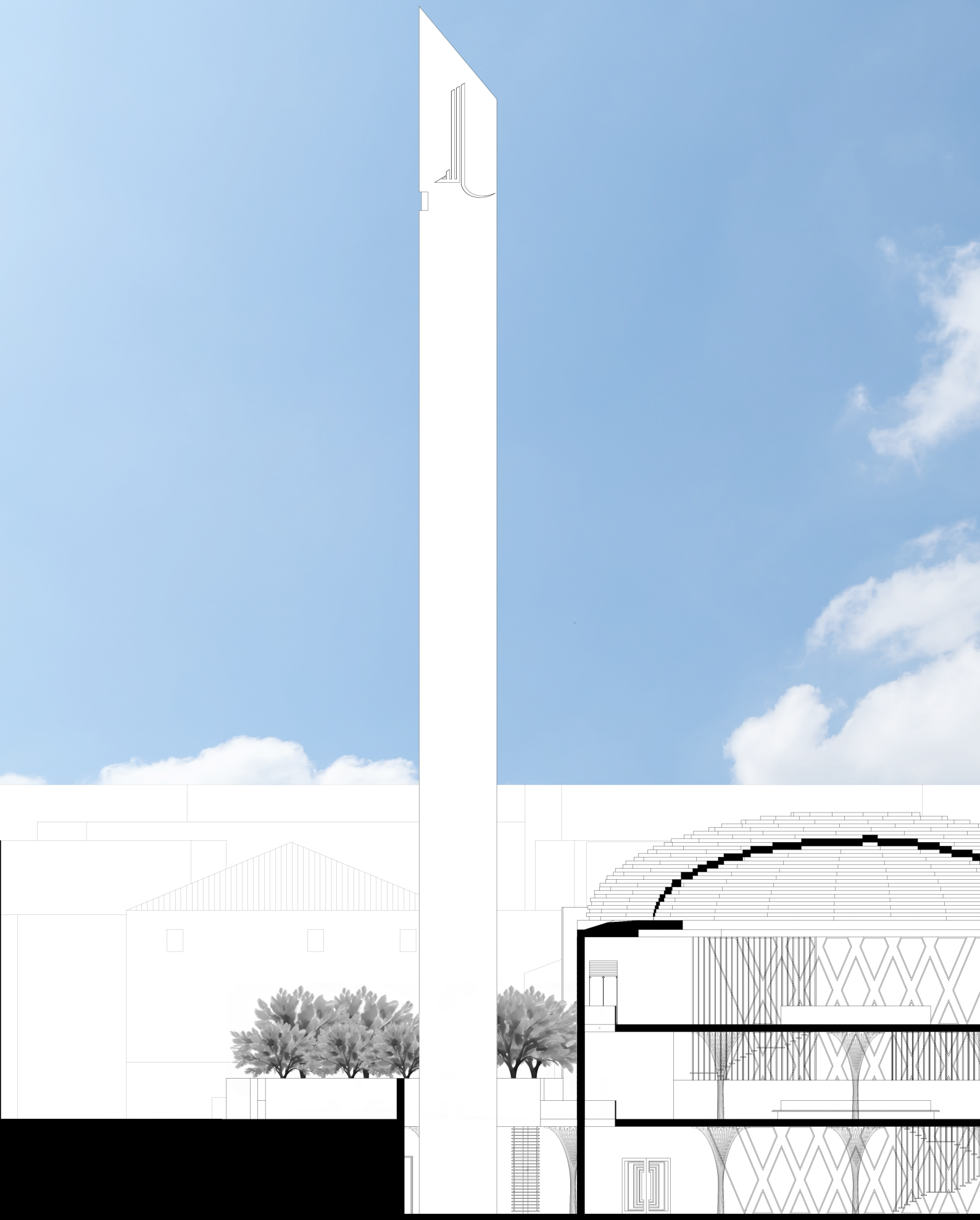


Fig.175 Section C-C’ board.



East elevation

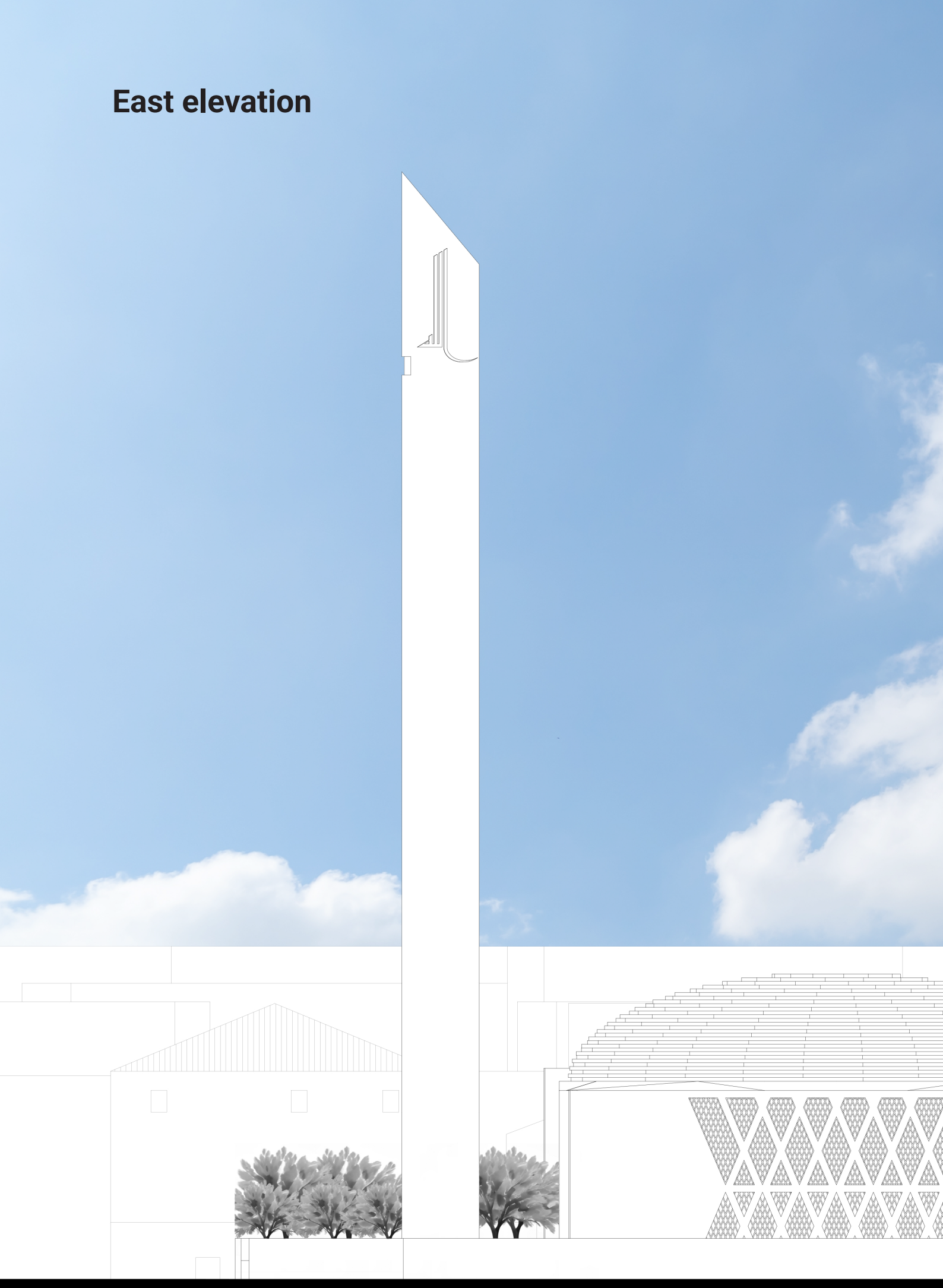


Fig.176 East elevation board.



Section D-D’



Fig.177 Section D-D’ board.





Fig.178 West levation board.



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