

**✓LIGHT AS THE MANIFESTATION OF THE CONCEPT OF UNITY
IN THE SACRED BUILT FORM OF ISLAM;
A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO THE ALHAMBRA, GRANADA, SPAIN**

by

MUSTAQ H. MOOSA

B.Arch., Gulbarga University,
Gulbarga, India, 1990

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

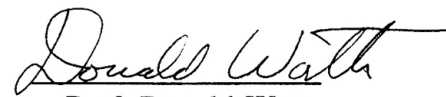
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

Department of Architecture
College of Architecture and Design
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas.

1995

Approved by:



Prof. Donald Watts
(Major Professor)

Abstract

LD22608
.T4
ARCH
1995
M66
c.2

The Holy Quran and the Hadith (Prophetic sayings) are the twin sources of guidance and reference for all matters in Islam - both worldly and spiritual. The various art forms of Islam are inspired by the principles and concepts outlined in the Quran and the Hadith and attempt to symbolically represent in their final form the fundamental concept of Islam - **Unity or Oneness of God - "Tawhid."** As a result of this, one can observe a variety of elements that have been used by the artists, designers and builders to symbolically represent Unity in the sacred built forms of Islam.

Taking this as the point of departure or rather the point of origin, this thesis endeavors to study the Islamic Concept of Unity and one of the various symbolic elements used in the artistic manifestation of this concept. The symbolic element selected for study in this thesis is light. Using references from the Holy Quran, the Hadith and Islamic thought, a detailed investigation of light and its importance as a symbolic element, both from a religious and architectural view point will be made.

The information and knowledge acquired from this study will then be utilized to analyze a sacred built structure - the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. Through a site detailed observations of a selected portion of the Alhambra complex, at different times of the day, will be conducted to study the manner in which the artist has sought to manifest the Concept of Unity in a three dimensional structural form to explore the qualities of light. The end product, a detailed textual analysis, supported by photographs and sketches

(acquired by the site visit), will help contribute towards a clearer and better understanding of Islamic architecture and its symbolic meaning and sacred significance.

Acknowledgements

Personally, the period of this entire study has been a form of tawil - spiritual hermeneutics - a process of knowing and understanding not only one's roots, but also one's destination. The entire study and its completion marks the fulfillment of a much cherished desire, the realization, in letter and spirit, of a life long dream. The achievement of these have been made possible by the direction and guidance provided by my major advisor, Professor Donald Watts. I have had the opportunity of being associated with Professor Watts from my very first semester at Kansas State University and working with him has been a very rewarding experience. I extend my sincerest appreciation and gratitude to Professor Watts for his help and guidance during the entire duration of my study, for which I shall always be indebted. I also take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to the other members of my committee, Professor Gary Coates and Professor Benjamin Tilghman. Their insightful remarks and comments have been a major factor in the successful completion of this thesis.

I also wish to extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Professor at George Washington University, for having graciously accepted to meet me and discuss my thesis in person. To Senorita Rocio Sinan of the Patronato de Alhambra y Generalife, I extend my gratitude for the help and assistance provided to me during my visit to the Alhambra.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to two people that I have the good fortune and honor of having as my parents. Their everlasting love and constant encouragement has been a source of great inspiration and strength. Through everything one person has always stood by me, a person whose simplicity and inner beauty is similar to what this thesis attempted to study. This person whose silent support, unconditional love and affection has made life a wonderful experience. To this person, my wife, Shalini, I can only say - thank you very much.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	iii
Preface	v
Prologue	1
Chapter I - Introduction	2
i. Intent of Research	2
ii. Focus of Research.	9
iii. Methodology of Research	11
Chapter II - Background Concepts from Primary Sources.	13
i. The Islamic Concept of Unity	13
ii. The Quranic Revelation	15
iii. The Prophetic Hadith (sayings) and Sunna'h (actions)	16
Chapter III - Relation between Islamic Art and Islamic Spirituality	18
i. The Spiritual Aspect of Islamic Art	18
ii. Arts and Crafts in Islam	21
iii. Tendency to Abstraction	23
iv. The Concept of Void and its Significance	25
Chapter IV - Concept of Unity and Sacred Architecture	28
i. Sacredness of Space in Islam	31
ii. Cosmology and Creation in Islam	36
Chapter V - The Metaphysics of Light - Light as the Symbol of Divine Unity	39
i. Light and its Symbolism in the Holy Quran - The Light Verse	40
ii. Light and its Symbolism in the Prophetic Sayings	46
iii. Suhrawardi and his Philosophy of Illumination - <i>Hikmat-al-Ishraq</i> ...	48
Chapter VI - Alchemy and Architecture: Body into Spirit - Stone into Light ..	53
i. The Alchemy of Light	55
ii. Artistic Manifestation of Light	59
Chapter VII - The Alhambra	63
i. Historical Perspective of Islamic Spain	67
ii. The Alhambra - a chronological introduction	71
iii. The Alhambra - a palatine city (an overall description)	74
iv. The Alhambra and the Aspect of Light	77

Chapter VIII - Conclusion	117
Epilogue	121
Glossary	122
Bibliography (General)	124
Bibliography (Dealing with the Aspect of Light - Philosophical and Architectural)	127
Bibliography (On the Alhambra)	128

List of Illustrations

(All pictures by the author unless specified)

Fig. No.	Particulars	Page No.
1	Map showing province of Granada in Spain. (source: <i>Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain</i> , p. xxvii)	70
2	Plan of the City of Alhambra. (source: <i>Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain</i> , p. 130)	75
3	Ground plan of the Alhambra palace complex. (source: <i>Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain</i> , p. 136)	76
4	Plan of the Palace of the Lions. (source: <i>Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain</i> , p. 136)	81
5	A view of the Courtyard of the Lions.	82
6	Interior view of the Hall of Kings.	83
7	Detail plan of the Hall of Kings. (source: <i>Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain</i> , p. 136)	83
8	Surface decoration of the space above the columns in the Palace of the Lions.	85
9	Details of two typical columns seen in the Alhambra.	86
10	Slender marble columns in the Courtyard of the Lions.	87
11	Typical surface decoration in the Alhambra.	93
12	Restored part of a ceiling showing the original colors, now displayed in the Alhambra museum.	95
13	Completely restored part of the Alhambra.	96
14	Muqarnas cells in the transition space between the dome and the wall. (source: <i>The Art of Islam: Language and Meaning</i> , p. 71.)	97

Fig. No.	Particulars	Page No.
15	Muqarnas cells in the transition space between the square walls and the octagonal beam above. (source: <i>The Art of Islam: Language and Meaning</i> , p. 72)	98
16	Dome in the Hall of the Abencerajjes.	99
17	Typical jali used in the Alhambra, completely restored and now displayed in the Alhambra museum.	101
18	Dome in the Hall of the Two Sisters.	109
19	Aerial view of the Courtyard of the Lions. (source: <i>The Alhambra</i> , 1978, p. 189)	115

Preface

The aim of this thesis is to study symbolism and its meaning in the sacred built form of Islam as related to the Islamic revelation and tradition. The intent of this study is to present to the reader the artistic manifestation of the fundamental principle of the religion - the Unity and Oneness of God.

Chapter 1 consists of the intent and focus of the research and the methodology adopted for the study.

Chapter 2 discusses the primary background concepts of the religion, such as, the concept of Unity, the Quranic revelation and the Prophetic sayings or *Hadith*. These concepts form the matrix, the base from which everything in Islam takes its precedence.

In Chapter 3 of the thesis the general relationship between the art of Islam and its spiritual significance is discussed in detail. Various concepts highlighting this relationship are outlined in an attempt to help the reader understand the basis of the relationship and its importance in the art of Islam.

Chapter 4 continues to explain the concepts discussed in the previous chapter in a more detailed and specific manner by presenting to the reader the Concept of Unity and the sacred architecture of Islam. This chapter concentrates on explaining that the source of

inspiration for art and architecture in Islam is the fundamental concept of the religion - Unity of God and the manner in which this view unites all of traditional Islamic architecture anywhere in the world.

Chapter 5 studies light and its symbolic significance as outlined in the Quranic revelation, the Prophetic sayings (*Hadith*) and in Islamic thought.

Chapter 6 takes the principles discussed in the previous chapter and tries to understand the various physical elements created by the Islamic artist to explore the qualities of light in the built form.

Chapter 7 is directed at understanding the concepts outlined in the first six chapter vis a vis the built form. As a result, the Alhambra has been studied in detail, with information being gathered first hand through a site visit. The different elements created by the Alhambra craftsmen to symbolically represent light as Unity have been outlined in this chapter.

Chapter 8 forms the conclusion to the thesis, arriving at the that the art of Islam is contemplative in its essence.

Prologue

The human body in either of its forms, male or female, is undoubtedly a perfect work of divine art, while the purified human soul is the highest attainment of truth and eternal beauty - a reflection of Divine Truth and Divine Beauty. The intellect and the soul, the locus of which is the human body, the spark of immortality and divinity, are the fountainheads, the source of origin and emanation of all things that are sacred, including the arts of the world. It is through the knowledge acquired by the intellect and the enlightenment attained by the soul that sacred art is brought into being. It is this intellectual intuition and a knowledge that transcends this mortal world, including the individual artist and collective psyche from which flows an art that injects divinity and eternal beauty to a shape, image or form. This form or shape in turn becomes the fountain of grace and knowledge having been endowed with a spiritual symbolism. Sacred art, therefore, does not merely bequeath an art or an art form to its inheritors - it transmits knowledge of the divine. And since this knowledge is concerned with the truths of the tradition, its origin is not purely human but divine. The divine origin then conforms with the symbolism inherent in the tradition which the form manifests. Through its symbolic message, its adaptation and adherence to cosmic laws, its reflection of the cosmic world and the very manner in which it was taught in combination with spiritual instruction, traditional art, therefore, becomes the vehicle of an intellectual and sapiential message.

Chapter I - Introduction

i. Intent of Research

This thesis is directed at studying architectural symbolism and its esoteric meaning. It aims at presenting to the reader the idea that the built form is not always and solely determined by "commodity, firmness and delight", but is also influenced and regulated by the tradition, culture and the religion of a particular civilization. "In many traditions symbolism dictates architecture's composition, siting, orientation, geometry, proportion and ornament. In such traditions the built form is an *imago mundi*." This *imago mundi* expresses a world view and embodies a teleology. It aims at modelling the manner in which all existence is derived from an Ultimate Principle - how the One is manifested in the many and how the many are united in the One.

Furthermore, this thesis intends to study architectural symbolism by viewing it from within its tradition and in terms of the religion in which the tradition is contained. Symbolism in this study is considered as that which directs the understanding from the physical to the supra-physical level of reality. The supra-physical level in this context refers to that which is not physical or extra physical but that which is meta-physical,¹ belonging to a domain that transcends the sensible and the cognitive mind and is known only by intuitive knowledge. Therefore, a building is a symbol or it can be said that a

¹ The term metaphysical in this context and in the entire thesis does not refer to metaphysics as a branch of modern philosophy but is used in its literal sense referring to that which lies beyond the physical (the meta).

form becomes symbolic in a metaphysical sense when its physical aspect and sensible form are similitudes of supra-physical paradigms, the form representing a that which lies beyond the senses of the discursive mind. Architecture then seeks meaning not only at the physical and mental level but also at the metaphysical level. Symbols can, therefore, be defined and clothed in different modes of expression at different levels. But in a given tradition the various modes² of symbolic expression form a lattice, a network of coincident meanings which is characteristic of only that tradition. Together these various modes and the different symbols form a cohesive totality which represents the sum of the tradition. "This means that no symbol exists in isolation, it forms part of a network of meanings, a reticulation of interlinked significances."³ It can be easily argued, however, that by merely looking at a building any symbolic meaning the form projects cannot be explicitly understood. Since the exegesis of a built form proceeds by reference to this interlinked network of symbols, it can be said that no building stands in absolute isolation. Thus, for example, to know that the plan of a building is based on the mandala is insignificant unless the observer knows the meaning of the mandala itself and what it signifies. If we were to take an example from the architecture of Islam, the dome, the pointed arch, the mihrab of the mosque or the minaret, these would have no significance unless certain religious concepts and traditions from which these forms evolved were understood.

² Adrian Snodgrass describes various modes of symbolic expressions such as verbal, which includes, myth, doctrine or philosophy; sonoral expressions such as music and chanting; geometry and numerology; ritual and so on.

³ Adrian Snodgrass. *Architecture, Time and Eternity*, vol.I. p. 3.

A study of traditional architecture, therefore, offers an insight into the tradition and culture in which the structure is built. The various symbols individually and the network of symbols together provide an entry into the profundities of the tradition of which the building forms an inherent and important part. This study is aimed at unravelling this particular and undoubtedly fascinating aspect of architecture. It is directed at providing the reader an understanding of Islamic architecture, its nature and symbolic aspect and the traditions and religious concepts from which it grew and to which it always belongs. This research serves to demonstrate that in traditional Islamic architecture the built form is extrapolated from symbolic concepts inherent in the tradition as a way to fulfill its intended function - the transmission of the knowledge of metaphysical realities.

Islamic art and architecture has been a subject of study by western scholars since the nineteenth century and has come to receive special attention in the past few decades and the last decade in particular since the inception of the Aga Khan Award for Islamic architecture (AKAA). In comparison to the amount of research conducted on the symbolic significance of the art forms of various other religions, the study of Islam, in this respect, is still in its infancy. There are very few works that look at Islamic architecture from the view point of its spiritual meaning and significance, except for the works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt and Nader Ardalan in recent years. The works of these authors is a study of the relationship between the various art forms of Islam and the fundamental concept of the religion - the concept of Unity. In this process their work clearly implies the existence of a relation between Islamic art and Islamic

spirituality, between the physical aspects of the built form and its symbolic and metaphysical significance. The art of Islam is the "**true manifestation in the world of forms of the spiritual realities of the Islamic revelation.**"⁴ Traditional Islamic architecture everywhere in the Moslem world strives to reflect the intellectual, symbolic and spiritual philosophy and concepts of sacred art as understood through the Holy Quran and the sayings of the Prophet.

Islam as a religion appeared more than fourteen hundred years ago in the deserts of Saudi Arabia and spread across the Arabian peninsula in a short span of time. It was delivered to mankind by the Prophet Mohammed, whom the Moslems consider as the last Apostle of God. The Holy Quran - the `Word' of God - revealed to mankind through the Prophet is the guiding principle of each and every facet of the religion. Together with the sayings of the Prophet (*Hadith*) and his actions (*Sunna'h or tradition*), the Quran is the source of all direction and inspiration for both religious tenets and worldly values including the various forms of art and architecture and the sonoral, visual and performing arts. The different art forms, such as, music, poetry, calligraphy, painting, art decoration, calligraphy and the art of building itself are directly based on the concepts outlined in the Quran and attempt to portray and glorify, complement and enhance the fundamental concept of Islam in their final product - the Unity and Oneness of Allah.

⁴ Refer to the foreword by S H Nasr to the book *The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* by Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar. p xi.

Though the religion of Islam originated in the 7th century AD and spread later to different parts of the world, the various art forms of Islam developed a style and character of their own at a much later time, particularly in places where an Islamic empire flourished and there was significant learning in the fields of theology and philosophy. The architecture of Islam⁵ flourished in regions which were ruled by Moslem dynasties for long periods of time and reached its zenith between the 11/12th century and 15/16th century AD. Islamic art/architecture flourished in Persia under the Safavid Dynasty; Saudi Arabia, the Ummayyad and Abbasid rulers; Turkey under the Ottoman Empire; in Spain under the Nasrid Dynasty; North Africa, the Fatimid Kings and in India under the Moghul Empire. In spite of this vast geographic realm,⁶ extending from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean, consisting of multiple ethnic backgrounds, linguistic variations and diversities in culture and tradition an inherent similarity can be observed in the nature of the various art forms of Islam. The prominent contemporary writer of Islamic art and architecture, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, sums up this feature of Islamic architecture when he states:

"If one looks with an eye of discernment at the extremely varied manifestations of Islamic art over vast expanse of space and time, the question arises as to the source of the unifying principles of this art. What is the origin of this art and the nature of its unifying principles whose dazzling effects can hardly be denied ?"⁷

⁵ By the architecture or built form it is meant both the secular and sacred built forms. Islam does not differentiate between the sacred and the profane, everything in Islam is considered sacred since all art forms were considered to have been inspired by the concept of Unity.

⁶ The Moslem world was spread over eight geographic zones and three continents and was ruled by Moslem kings at some point in history.

⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p.3.

Today, however, the contemporary Moslem world is facing a challenge in determining its present and future physical environment. Influenced by trends in western architecture many Moslem countries are undergoing large scale transformations of their built environment, the urban physical fabric in particular. The influence of foreign technology has created an impact which is far from the ideals and realities of Islam and completely ill suited to the site and climatic conditions of the Moslem geographical landscape.⁸ Architectural rhythm that generates a sense of unity has been forgotten, form has lost its symbolic value and material substance has simply been reduced to Newtonian physics. These are far from the traditional concepts of form and symbol, architectural beauty reflecting divine beauty, rhythm and repetition symbolizing infinity and eternity and the microcosm of the built form reflecting the macrocosm of the cosmos.

In view of the above considerations there is a growing concern as to the manner in which Islamic architecture should be developed today in the Moslem world. Since the built form is reflective of the cultural legacy of a community, its traditional spirit should be preserved and maintained. It definitely cannot be done by blatantly copying the culture of a community that is in contrast to it or by blindly mimicking its past, rather it should be done by studying and analyzing the basic principles used in the traditional built forms and by developing and integrating these concepts in present conditions. Therefore, the specific elements that have made Islamic architecture symbolic of its spiritual beliefs, as

⁸ "An Architecture in the Spirit of Islam", seminar held by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA), Aiglemont, France. 1978. p. xii.

well as both functional and beautiful, need to be researched and redefined. Just as Islam is based on absolute Unity (*Tawhid*) and is the means of integrating all that is in existence and, in fact, all multiplicity into unity, so also the art and architecture of Islam in the spirit of the religion should integrate all principles and reflect unity. Form should regain its symbolic significance and aid the believer to progress from the whole to the essence, from the outer to the inner, from the apparent (*zahir*) to the hidden (*batin*). The infinite pattern of decorations, the exquisite and beautiful calligraphy, the geometrically perfect arabesque, the rhythmic repetitions of forms, the square, the circle, the triangle are not merely shapes and images, but they, "essentially incorporate a reality the understanding of which through "*tawil*" (intellect) leads man to the world of similitudes and ultimately to the truth".⁹

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to analyze the relationship between the architecture of Islam and its spiritual significance, particularly between the concept of Unity and the sacred built form. It is in this aspect that lies the answer to the question of what shape and form, not only the present, but also the future built environment of the Moslem world should adopt.

⁹ Ardalan & Bakhtiar. *The Sense of Unity: Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*.

ii. Focus of Research.

In a traditional civilization, such as that which gave birth to the religion of Islam, the arts and sciences are closely related to the religion and hence to the central and most important event of the religion - the revelation of the Quran. In such an environment as that which surrounds the Islamic civilization, the revealed principle or the presiding/primary idea manifests itself in every aspect of the community - in its social sciences, arts, culture and the entire cosmos in which the civilization lives, breathes and grows. In such civilizations the arts and sciences and, more profoundly, the various art forms become the foremost exponents of the various philosophies, principles and phenomena of the religion. The arts become the primary medium which selects from the multiplicity of forms and expresses those that are in conformity with the spirit of the tradition in whose cradle it has come into being.

Between the revelation in which is contained the presiding idea (as in the case of Islam) and the art forms that put this idea into a world of forms and shapes are the people of the civilization which receive the idea and create the form. It is the individual and collective psyche of the people which takes the spirit of the revelation, concretizing and crystallizing it into form which then symbolizes the essence of the revelation which in the case of Islam is the Unity of God. The revelation or the 'word' of God is then particularized and shaped by the characteristics of the people who receive it and give its physical silhouette. Thereby, in times to come the various art forms that are defined by the perspective and interpretation of the artist are completely dependent on the primary idea of the civilization

in whose matrix they are cultivated. In Islam, since the matrix is the concept of Unity and the integration of all multiplicity into unity, the art forms blossomed in a manner reflecting the common characteristics of the matrix and the psyche of the people. Therefore, a close observation of the built form of Islam will reveal, in spite of the innumerable differences in the cultural, geographical, historical and climatic aspects on the one hand, and materials, techniques of construction, craftsmen, artists and builders on the other, an element, a profound feature, an inherent similarity that is common and binding. Whether it is the Taj Mahal at Agra in India, the Shah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran, The Alhambra in Granada, Spain or the mosques of the Turkish Ottoman empire, a positive effort on the part of the creators to exhibit and artistically manifest a concept that is common and fundamental to them can clearly be observed.

As has been stated earlier, the manner used by the artists in the aesthetic manifestation of the revelation, or rather the symbolic interpretation of the revelation, decisively depended on the dominant idea of the revelation. The forms that represent the spirit/essence of the idea are independent of the personality and subjectivism of both the artist and the observer. For the artist it is Unity that is the source of all inspiration and guidance and the desire that the final product must reflect it in every manner possible. Therefore, any study of the art forms of Islam must take into consideration the Quranic revelation, the presiding idea of the revelation and the relation that man shares with both, the idea and the revelation. Only by studying this relationship can one understand the reason why each civilization chooses a particular method out of a multiplicity of choices

to explain the primary concept of the religion. It is beyond the scope of any one text, including this one, to study all the symbolic elements used by the artists to manifest the primary concept in the built form. This study takes the element of light and its symbolic significance in Islam to study the concept of Unity in Islamic architecture in relationship to the revelation and the perspective of the artist and the observer.

iii. Methodology of Research

The research was conducted basically in two main phases. The first phase consists of a literature review, wherein, the fundamental concepts of Islam pertaining to this thesis was outlined in detail. The 'Concept of Unity', the Quranic revelation and the Prophetic sayings are explained in the initial part of the first phase of the thesis. Using references from the Quran, the Prophetic sayings and the works of scholars, the relation between traditional Islamic architecture and Islamic spirituality were then elucidated in the latter part of the (first) phase. The overall emphasis in this phase was to present to the reader the significance of light as the symbol of Unity and the various architectural elements that have been developed by the artist to manifest light symbolically in the traditional built form of Islam. Chapters II - VI are devoted to this phase of the thesis.

The second phase of the thesis consists of studying and analyzing a built form in order to comprehend clearly the concepts presented in the first phase. The structure that was analyzed in detail was the Palace of the Lions in the Alhambra, which is located in Granada, Spain. Through a site visit the palace was studied in detail in order to explore

the various means that have been employed and the various elements that have been created by the artist to symbolically manifest and represent Unity through the medium of light. Observations were made during different parts of the day and the same are presented through written text and photographs in the thesis. The entire analysis, observations and selected pictures of the Alhambra are presented in Chapter VII of this text.

Chapter II - Background Concepts from Primary Sources.

i. The Islamic Concept of Unity

Every religion in the world believes in a transcendent reality, a reality that is eternal, absolute and infinite. Moreover, every religion is based on a relation between God and man, between the Absolute and the relative, which is central to that religion. The Spirit -God - manifests itself differently in various religions, reflecting in the process the religious beliefs, traditions and concepts of the followers. The believers express and make manifest their religious feelings and their conceptions of the Spirit in different modes and manners. In this respect, though every religion may desire to put forth the same message, the very attempt may differ diversely. It is the purpose of this chapter to present to the reader the transcendent aspect of the religion of Islam, the belief of its people and the central doctrine of the religion. What follows is a detailed discussion of the Islamic concept of Unity.

Islam as a religion is based on the nature of things - divine nature itself. Founded on the principle of Unity - *Tawhid* - the concept of absolute monotheism is central and fundamental to the religion. Unity, "**the alpha and omega**" of Islam, is not merely a theoretical concept of the religion but a concept that is integrated into every practical aspect of the life of the Moslem. Unity is not only a metaphysical assertion about the character and nature of the Absolute, but it is a means of integrating all existence into one complete whole. It takes its roots from the very fact that every creation, the whole world,

the entire cosmos is created by God, or rather it is an emanation from, an overflow of His Being. The concept of creation in Islam is one that is perpetual and dynamic, not having occurred at a particular time in space and then stopped; it is constant, continuous and everlasting with God as its creator and sustainer. It is like a cup that is not only full to its brim but always overflowing. The cup in this case is compared to the Being of God and His creation is all that overflows from His Being. Therefore, the metaphysical concept of Absolute Unity is related to the Islamic concept of creation of the cosmos. It is believed that everything that is created, both visible and invisible, is an emanation having its origin and genesis in the Divine Being of God. Thus the Islamic concept of Unity is clearly expressed in the Islamic concept of the creation and sustenance of the world. The order and harmony of the cosmos, its perfection and infallibility, is considered not only as the direct manifestation of the One in His various aspects, but also as the signs and portents of God and His Divinity. It is this aspect of Unity and its intimate relationship to the notion of creation that characterizes the art forms of Islam reflecting the metacosmic reality in the microcosm of the arts. Furthermore, it should be mentioned in this context, that the concept of unity is not limited to the characterization of art and architecture; it extends to every aspect of a Moslem's life and thought and profoundly influences the social and undoubtedly the religious structure of Islam. From Quranic psalmody to Islamic town planning, from calligraphy to the science of alchemy, it is the concept of Unity that is the determining factor and primary factor of influence.

ii. The Quranic Revelation.

The symbolism in Islamic art is an attempt on the part of the artist to represent divinity. A detailed description of the art of Islam should undoubtedly include the sources from which the concepts of the art forms are derived. "The original source from which all principles and ordinances of Islam are drawn is the holy book called al-Quran."¹⁰ The Holy Quran, considered by Moslems as the "word" of God, is the book in which the message of God to man is contained. Revealed to mankind by the Prophet over a period spanning more than a decade, it is considered divine in both spirit and letter, content and form. From metaphysics to table manners, from theology to art, the principles of all these are mentioned in the Quran. The recorded sayings of the Prophet (*Hadith*) and his actions (*Sunna'h*) coupled with the Quran form the most important sources of reference and guidance on all matters in Islam. As a result the Quran is an essential and integral part of the life of every Moslem. It is a source from which comes not only guidance for his secular life but also prayers for all occasions. The attestation of faith or the *shahada'h* is drawn from the Quran and so are the contents of the daily prayers. In the words of S.H. Nasr, "the Quran is the tissue out of which the life of a Moslem is woven; its sentences are like threads from which the substance of his soul is knit."

The importance of the Quran or the word of God for a Moslem stems from the fact of the importance of 'word' itself in Islam. In relation to the creation of the world it is mentioned in the Quran that it was the word "Be" (*kun* in Arabic) that was uttered by

¹⁰ Maulana Mohammed Ali. *The Religion of Islam*, p. 17.

God and which created the whole world.¹¹ According to a Prophetic saying it is the word which is considered as the first creation of God, having emanated from His Being. The 'word', the Quran, the first creation, therefore, contains the whole world view and everything that is existence. If the religion of Islam speaks of the concept of Unity and its profundity it is in the Quran that it is described. Therefore, it is in the Quranic revelation that the genesis of everything in Islam can be traced, including the principles of its *sharia'h* (doctrines), the *tariqa'h* (the path), the *haqiqa'h* (the truth) and the *marifa'h* (divine gnosis), the four of which comprise the entire religion.

iii. The Prophetic Hadith (sayings) and Sunna'h (actions)

"The Prophet as the founder of Islam and the messenger of God's revelation to mankind is the interpreter par excellence of the book of God; his *Hadith* and *Sunna'h*, his sayings and actions, are after the Quran, the most important sources of the Islamic tradition."¹²

The *Hadith*, the sayings of the Prophet, is a monumental treasury of wisdom and is a commentary on and complement to the Quran. If in the Quran it is mentioned that prayers should be offered to God, then it is the *Hadith* which says what to recite in the prayers and the *Sunna'h* elucidates how to perform them. As an explanation of the Quran it once again covers every aspect of human life and life thereafter. Questions concerning metaphysics, cosmology, eschatology, spiritual guidance, affairs of everyday life, art and

¹¹ In this context the uttering of the word is not to be considered literally. It speaks of immense divine power that it was a word that created this entire cosmic system. The complete verse of the Quran is "Be and it is".

¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*. p. 67.

architecture are all answered by the sayings of the Prophet. Even the latter day philosophers and theologians, while basing the concepts on the Quran, drew a lot from what the Prophet said and did during his lifetime. The *Hadith*, therefore, is the primary source of reference after the Quran for all matters in Islam and together they are the fountainhead, the prime matrix of all life and thought in Islam. If the doctrine of Unity, the fundamental concept of Islam is originally to be found in the Quran, then it is in the *Hadith* that it is manifested in its multiplicity and diversity.

Chapter III - Relation between Islamic Art and Islamic Spirituality

Behind every creative act is a reason that is *a priori*¹³ and the prime motive for the entire creative process. Moreover, form, which is the product of every creative act, is symbolic of a greater truth, an inner truth which the form comes to represent. Man the creator of the form, does not make symbols - the creative process merely produces the form. It is the form that becomes a symbol - symbols in time and space, eventually transcending time itself and transforming man. These forms which now become symbolic of divinity and eternity, never lose their symbolic value and remain etched in the minds and souls of the creators and observers forever. This is relation between Islam and its various art forms - a relation between form and symbol - between concrete matter and abstract spirit and an attempt to bring them together.

i. The Spiritual Aspect of Islamic Art

In the present state, in the world of matter and physics, in the world of forms in which man dwells, the spirit is abstract. This is one level of human existence, wherein, God is abstract and matter is concrete. Once this level is transcended, it is the spirit which becomes "concrete", while the world below, the world of matter, becomes abstract. Forms transcend themselves to become symbols, the physics of matter becomes the metaphysics of the spirit, concrete matter becomes concrete spirit. This is the central idea

¹³ In Islam this reason stems from its fundamental principle - Unity. Unity in Islam, as such, exists *a priori*, pre-existing everything and present everywhere and at all times. The aim of the artist is to recognize it and represent it in his creation.

of the art and architecture of Islam. Since man dwells in this world of forms and understands and relates to forms that surround him, these very forms then aid in reaching the transcendent reality. The creative process in Islamic architecture is such that the forms become symbols in space, the immanent and the immediate reflects the hidden and the transcendent, matter attempts to manifest spirit and the world below becomes a reflection of the world above.

The essence of Islamic architecture is basically the relationship between the created form and its intended symbolism. It is the relationship between the conceived form - the exterior and what the form aims at expressing, which can be termed as its esoteric dimension. The Sufis - the mystics of Islam - explain this relationship with the allegory of the shell and the kernel. The relationship between form and symbol or between the shell and the kernel is similar to that between the exterior and interior dimensions of a religion. The exterior in this context is the outer form of a religion - its customs and practices, its rites and rituals. This constitutes the (outer) shell. The kernel represents the inner aspect of the faith - that is the symbolic significance of the various practices and beliefs and the inner meaning of the rites and rituals. In other words the rites and rituals are the form of a religion, the outer shell, which embodies certain symbolic significance and represents the transcendent aspect of a religion. Form (the shell), the outer manifestation of the esoteric dimension, belongs to the world of matter and materiality and is limited both in its own form and its definition. On the other hand, the symbol which the form attempts to manifest, is timeless, limitless and reflective of eternal truth.

The above allegory can be easily related to the Islamic concepts of *sharia'h*, *tariqa'h*, *haqiqa'h* and *marifa'h*. The *sharia'h* is the outward appearance or the form, while the symbolic meaning or the esoteric dimension which the form represents is the *haqiqa'h* or the truth; the *tariqa'h* or the spiritual path is what lies between the form and the meaning. These are the initiatory paths, the eventual aim of which is to lead the observer to pure knowledge, *marifa'h* or gnosis.

The creative process in Islam is reflective of the above aspects. When the artists sought their sources of inspiration there appeared just one - the Unity aspect of Islam. And since Unity as a concept was itself transcendent, abstract and totally anti-figural and anti-anthropomorphic, the creative process and the final form also became abstract and symbolic. The artists tried to represent their vision of the spiritual world (centered around the Oneness of God) which was directly derived from the revelation. The art of Islam, therefore, is not egocentric or centered around one individual artist or a group of artists -it is theo-centric. In the words of the eminent writer on Islam, Titus Burckhardt:

"Art to the Moslem is a 'proof of divine existence' only to the extent that it is beautiful without showing the marks of subjective individualistic inspiration; its beauty must be impersonal, like that of the starry sky. Islamic art does indeed attain to a kind of perfection that seems to be independent of its author; his triumphs and failures disappear before the universal character of forms."¹⁴

The element of individualism so strongly personified in the final product of any architectural creation, or as a matter of fact in any creative endeavor, completely

¹⁴ Titus Burckhardt. *Sacred Art in East and West*, p. 107.

evaporates and disappears in the traditional architecture of Islam in face of the concept of Unity. Every architectural element, the dome, the arches, the arabesque patterns, calligraphic etchings, colors, light and shadow are all reminiscent of a greater symbolism - the Spirit. Every concerned form is a true attempt to manifest divinity. The dictum "as above, so below" is primary and fundamental to every creative processes and influences it totally. From the macro element of town and city planning to the comparatively smaller elements of surface decoration, all are individually and as a whole reflective of greater symbolism.

In addition to the complete absence of individualism, the tendency to abstraction and rejection of figural representation are the other inherent characteristics of Islamic architecture.

ii. Arts and Crafts in Islam

In a civilization such as that which preceded Islam and in which Islam itself was founded and established, the art and architecture becomes a primary mode of expression of the characteristics of that civilization. The arts inspire the creative abilities of the people with the aim of representing and consolidating the truths of the religion. In a religion such as Islam where all natural phenomena has a symbolic significance and where there is absolutely no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane (everything being sacred since everything has its origination in the being of God) every human creation necessarily assumes a sacred character. Every aspect of life, every action and deed resides within the

premise of the sacred.

The arts of Islam, undoubtedly are the most important external manifestation of the religion of Islam, proclaiming both its esoteric and exoteric aspects. The exoteric dimension is that which concerns the divine law or the *sharia'h*, while the esoteric aspects include the gnostic/metaphysical elements, the way/path or *tariqa'h*, includes those principles which governs Islamic art and architecture.

"The way permeates both formal sciences and the crafts. In fact all Islamic art comes into being as a result of these two."¹⁵ By the sciences it is meant not only the processes of nature but also the laws and principles that govern it, while the art/crafts, on the other hand, includes not just crafting and creating forms, but the whole process that is intimately related to the sciences. Together with the knowledge of the arts and sciences, the guilds¹⁶, which were the primordial schools of instruction, even instructed on the spiritual aspects of the religion. The educational system¹⁷ in these guilds was such that one started with learning the skills of the craft of personal interest, culminating the formal process of education at the center for spiritual instruction. The spiritual knowledge

¹⁵ Ardalan and Bakhtiar. *The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, p.3.

¹⁶ The guilds were usually under a master, who was both a Sufi (mystic) and a craftsman and possessed knowledge of the Divine and the craft. The work was, to paraphrase Ardalan, like the arts of nature - functional, cosmic and imbued with a nobility of expression that seeks the truth all through the way. Refer, *The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, p. 5.

¹⁷ The educational system functioned in a hierarchical pattern. It commenced with the foundation of society as embodied in the craft guilds moving onto the *madrasa'h* or college and culminating in the *khanqa'h* or center for spiritual training.

received was then reflected in the symbolism of the form produced, providing a path for the viewer from the exoteric to the esoteric, from the relative to the absolute. It is in these guilds, starting from the lower level and ending in the school for spiritual instruction, that the knowledge and quest for the perfect form and its symbolic aspects for the various crafts, including architecture can be traced. It is through the outward forms of the various crafts that the craftsmen sought to speak the essence of the religion. The realization through art of the Divine, the perfect synthesis of forms, shapes, color, light, space and surface - echoes in its multiplicity, variety and diversity the transcendent aspect of God in an immediate and immanent manner to manifest the Unity of God. This best describes the art and craft of Islam, the knowledge of which was imparted in these guilds started after the Prophet and continues even today, albeit not in its traditional manner which basically was passed down orally, generation to generation.¹⁸

iii. Tendency to Abstraction

The Islamic concept of unity, though eminently itself a very "concrete" conception, presents itself as an abstract idea. This character naturally stems from the belief that no physical concreteness or shape can even remotely be related to the concept of unity. The religion of Islam, as pointed out, is based on unity and this unity is inexpressible in terms of any image. This is the basis of the tendency to abstraction in all domains of art. This notion gets further significance from the fact that Islam does not differentiate between

¹⁸ According to Keith Critchlow (some of whose teachers were Sufi guild masters), there still exists a guild based oral tradition. However, as expected, the oral tradition is not the only means of imparting knowledge any more as it was earlier. Many historians feel that the disintegration of the oral tradition could be one of the reasons for many crafts becoming totally extinct.

the sacred and the profane or even between the sacred and the secular. By concluding that everything belongs to the realm of the sacred, abstraction becomes a characteristic feature of whatever is created.

Abstraction in the art/architecture of Islam is entirely antithetical to the common modern notion of abstract art. While abstraction in modern art is inherently a humanistic and rationalistic process which is a conscious act, in Islam it is a portrayal of the vision of the artist of the spiritual world. In a world of forms, to the Moslem artist, the abstract is that which is not seen and which essentially dwells in the supra-conscious folds of his mind and which must be brought forth into concrete reality.

This tendency towards abstraction is predominant in every visual art form of Islam. Due to the inherent character of the art of abstaining from any figural forms, the artist instead excelled in perfect geometrical designs, intricate decorations, calligraphic styles, arabesque patterns and other non figural representations. Moreover, even if the artist ventured into including plant or animal figures in the surface patterns, these were so highly denaturalized that the original figure seemed to have completely changed. But it should be remembered in this context that these denaturalized figures were not a substitute depiction of the transcendent. These patterns repeated rhythmically in an infinite pattern were attempts by the artist to stimulate in the viewer awareness of one of the attributes of God -infinity and eternity. Moslem artists from all periods and regions used infiniteness as an aesthetic vehicle to present the ideology of Unity. "The Moslem artist,

therefore, sought to express the non-representableness, the inexpressibility of the divine; and in this pursuit he created structures in the visual arts, music and literature to suggest infinity. Islamic art has commonly been represented as an art of the "infinite pattern."¹⁹

iv. The Concept of Void and its Significance

On the one hand, while the tendency to abstraction produced intricate rhythmic patterns in the visual art forms which can be seen predominantly in external facades, on the other hand, this tendency by which the artist attempted to draw the attention of the observer and lead him to Unity was replaced by the symbolism of the void.²⁰ This belief is once again related to the Islamic concept of creation which speaks of the entire creation being an emanation from the being of God. "One of the consequences of the intimate and profound relation between the spiritual and metaphysical principles of Islam and Islamic art in all its aspects, and one of the influences of the metaphysical principle of Unity is the spiritual significance of the void."²¹ The tendency to abstraction in this case is represented by a void or a negation. The void or negation in this context is an explanation of both the immanent and transcendent aspect of God. In this artistic

¹⁹ Refer to the essay by Lois Ibsen al Faruqi titled "An Islamic Perspective of Symbolism in the Arts: New Thoughts on Figural Representation" in the book *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos Cappadona, p. 173.

²⁰ It is undoubted that the void attempted to represent the Absolute. The significance of this can be related directly to a verse of the Quran which states "**Wherever ye turn there is the face of God**" (2:115.)

²¹ S H Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 185.

symbolism the artist attempts to manifest divinity by nothingness.²²

Though from a particular perspective it may appear paradoxical, for the normal foundation of any sacred art is symbolism and it is forms and images that become symbols, the void in this case represents the epitome of all forms. While the infinity of the pattern draws the attention of the observer to the symbolic nature of the pattern - which is infinity - the void by precluding every image, by abstaining from any figuration, by leaving the space absolutely untouched and virginal in nature, invites man to the realm of the perfect or the real. This is due to the fact that in Islam it is believed, only that which is created by God is perfect - the entire cosmos and the void in it is reflective of the eternal spirit. Therefore, while the style of abstraction consisting of infinite repetitive patterns is reflective of the immanent aspect of God, the void, the nothingness is reminiscent of the transcendent aspect of God.

The arabesque, the ingenious creations of the sacred art of Islam, to take one element, is the perfect example in concrete form of the synthesis of the immanent and transcendent aspect of God. In the arabesque, which is a combination of organic and geometric patterns, the negative space and the positive form play an equally central role. The void in the arabesque relieves it of its heaviness and opacity, making it transparent for the Divine Light to enter its being. While on the other hand, the repetition of forms,

²² This aspect of negation (of space) takes its roots from the fundamental dictum of Islam - the *shahada'h* or attestation of faith, which reads in Arabic as "*La illa'ha illallah*". This itself begins with a negation (*la* in Arabic is no) which is translated as "There is no divinity but God".

interspaced with the void spaces, not only negates symbolically any complete concretization of forms, but leads the observer to an intuition of infinity and hence to eternity.

Chapter IV - Concept of Unity and Sacred Architecture

"See the One, utter the One, know the One,

For this is the seal of the root and the branches of faith."

These words from a poem by a Persian Sufi poet summarizes precisely everything that Islam is. While the central doctrine of the religion is Unity, it is the experience, knowledge and realization in thoughts, words, acts, deeds through one's intellect, will and soul that comprises the essence of Unity. Islam is not only a set of beliefs, it is putting these beliefs into practice that makes Islam "not only a religion but a way of life." From birth to death, in every realm of life and in every aspect of existence, it is the endeavor of the believer to practice and proclaim the Oneness of God. Whether in the planning of a house or a city, whether it is the social, cultural or political aspect or whether it is the belief in the creation of the cosmos or a mere stone, God is always the primary and central aspect and the originator of everything. It is the practical Islamic spirit which puts all facts into action including the belief in the Unity and Oneness of God. Moreover, Unity or *Tawhid* in Islam does not only confirm the Oneness of God but it also means that God integrates and assimilates everything into One. This makes the concept of Unity dynamic and perpetual. The Islamic doctrine of unity, therefore, has two facets primarily - "On the one hand it maintains that God is unique and exalted above the whole universe and on the other hand it implies that everything that exists necessarily partakes of divine being. Thus although plurality springs from Oneness, it never supplants it."²³

²³ Titus Burckhardt. *Moorish Culture in Spain*, p. 189.

Though much has been written about the fact that Islamic art and architecture was initially greatly influenced by the Byzantine and Sassanid dynasties preceding it and early Moslem town planning emulated Roman models, not much has been written about what Islamic architects did with the elements and materials they inherited from the preceding civilizations. The question which this thesis attempts to answer is not the historical origination of Islamic art or what elements and materials it inherited. The focus here is on what a particular religion, united in its beliefs, has collectively done with the material in question. What is the nature of the power that has brought all the various elements and materials together in a synthesis that is as unique as it is fascinating? "No one will deny the unity of Islamic art, either in time and space; it is much too evident: whether the work of art be the mosque in Cordoba, the great *madrasa'h* at Samarkhand, a saint's tomb in the Maghrib or a saint's tomb in Chinese Turkestan - it is as if the same light shone through them."²⁴ The Moslems strongly believe in the omnipresence of God, that God is everywhere and the created form must replicate the undefiled and virgin nature that it now occupies.

It should be remembered, however, that neither the Quran, the Prophetic sayings or religious laws directly prescribe any particular form of art or recommend any symbolic element. They merely restrict and forbid the use of any physical or anthropomorphic forms that directly attempt to depict God. Furthermore, it is not quite possible (and

²⁴ Titus Burckhardt. Refer to the essay "Perennial Values in Islamic Art", *Mirror of the Intellect*, p. 219.

difficult to believe too) that a 'religious feeling' or a 'spiritual emotion' could have produced forms, as evident in traditional Islamic architecture, in totally diverse situations that possesses such profound and inherent similarities. It is in none other than the Islamic concept of God and the spirit and essence of the Quranic revelation and Prophetic sayings that the answer to this paradox can be found. The origination of the symbolic nature of Islamic art and the principles which unite this architecture all over the Islamic world must be sought in the contemplative nature of this art and the continuous remembrance of God which is goal of Islamic worship. This unitary element includes architecture in its totality, embracing all the elements that create an architectural form, such as, light, color, space, shape and matter leaving nothing outside its domain. Since Islam does not distinguish between the sacred and profane, all space and form whether belonging to the mosque, house, palace or bazaar is considered sacred and an extension of the mosque from where the whole city itself has its genesis. The mosque, on the other hand, receives its sacred character from the fact that it is considered the extension of virgin nature and emulates the sedentary environment of nature for the worship of God. These elements are manifest examples of the Islamic phenomenon of unity - unity which is as diverse as exhibited in the lands where Islam is practiced and as united as proclaimed in the Islamic *shahada'h* - there is no divinity save God. Though the physical form of Islam is man made, it is a reflection of the crystallization of higher and greater transcendent ideals, always echoing the dictum of "as above, so below."

i. Sacredness of Space in Islam

"We will show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves,
until they know it is the truth." - The Quran Ch. XLI v. 53.

Architecture is the art par excellence of ordering space. And in Islam space is the most direct symbol of Being. "It is the primordial, all pervading and in the cosmology of Islam, the locus of the Universal Soul."²⁵ The primary objective of traditional Islamic architecture is to create an awareness, a feeling, a presence, a stimulation of the sensory perception of the observer of the Divine through the sacralization of space which it orders, orients and creates through symbolic elements. The architect was conscious of the fact that the edifice created on "virgin nature", which is symbolic of the presence of the Divine, should reflect the qualities of the very nature, the space of which it now occupies. By giving the form a symbolic significance, the architect gives it a qualitative aspect which stimulates in the viewer a perception of the presence of a higher ideal. Islamic architecture attempts to place man in an environment that reflects the Divine through the sacralization of the space that it creates. It should be remembered, however, that Islamic architecture does not depend in its creative endeavors and artistic inspiration on social circumstances, monarchical influences or even on the emotions and feelings of the individual artist. It is devoid of any element that may have its origination in anything that is other than spiritual and divine. It would not be wrong to state that Islamic art is above all an art of contemplation of the Divine having issued from the grace or *baraka'h*

²⁵ Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar. *The Sense of Unity: Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, p. 11.

of the Quranic revelation.

The 'making of sacred space' in Islam is not restricted to the realm of mental thought only, but the practical religion that Islam is, space is made sacred in the physical realm too. Unity through the sacredness of space in architecture is achieved both at the microlevel and the macrolevel. At the microlevel unity is achieved through the minimum use of architectural vocabulary; at the macrolevel it is reached through the maximum use of architectonic expressions. Moving between the complex and the simple in an attempt to present unity in multiplicity and multiplicity within unity, the artist raised the contemplative and spiritual aspect of the art form to a higher plateau altogether. Furthermore, the attempt to achieve unity does not stop at the micro and macro levels (at the level of the individual structure and the entire city) but continues at the megascale where the whole Moslem world is united into one single whole. At the focus of this entire process, of unity and sacralization of space, both at the physical and metaphysical level, is the mosque. The mosque, the sacred structure par excellence in Islam, "the recreation and recapitulation" of the harmony, order and peace of nature, is also the center of every realm and facet of Islamic life. This center, the mosque, is moreover dynamic and perpetual, moving in time and space, creating in its motion the bazaar, the house and the entire city itself. "The Islamic city maintained the concept of the center, but a center as a single point in space that moves in time and creates the line or the linear element of the bazaar."²⁶ This concept of movement of the center, as a dynamic and creating entity,

²⁶ *ibid.* p. 89.

introduced to the Moslem planner the natural phenomena of existence - growth and change. "Islamic architecture extends the principle of sacred architecture from the mosque to practically every other architectural unit and finally to town and city planning itself."²⁷

In traditional Islamic architecture the goal of the artist has always been to place man in the presence of the Divine through the sacralization of space which the artist orders, forms and creates. The primordial space for this reason, undoubtedly, is the flagship of Islamic architecture - the mosque. Sacralization is achieved not by merely constructing the mosque with architectonic elements which are symbolic in nature of the Divine, but by the polarization of space through its orientation towards the most sacred structure in Islam - the Kaab'a. Moslems all over the world, whether praying in the mosque or anywhere else, turn towards the Kaab'a, the center of the Moslem world. Mosques all over the Islamic world are oriented towards this primordial sacred structure, which is as inherent as it is canonical, since this dictum comes from the Quran. At this point, to understand clearly the manner in which sacralization of space occurs in relation to the *Kaab'a*, it is necessary to explain the importance and significance of the Kaab'a in Islamic spirituality and cosmology.

The *Kaab'a*, commonly called the "House of God" (*bayt Allah*), is in effect not only the spiritual center of Islam but also the point of spiritual origin in the ontological dimension.

²⁷ *ibid.* Foreword by S H Nasr, p. 1x.

It is the point towards which all Moslems turn while reciting their daily prayers and towards which the *qiblah*²⁸ wall of all mosques is oriented. The *Kaab'a* which the Quran states was built by Abraham²⁹ is not a work of art (in the sense of art and its common concept) but a simple masonry cube, belonging to the world of spiritual art. In Islamic tradition, in relation to art it can be described by the term "proto art"; the harmony of its shape, form and stability and the rites and rituals associated with it being the genesis, the embryo, of everything that is manifested in the sacred art of Islam. Moreover, in Islamic tradition its sacredness mainly stems from the fact that it is the place of the yearly Moslem pilgrimage, a ritual (if possible) every Moslem is supposed to perform at least once in a lifetime. The idea of the center, so highly significant in the Islamic tradition, is perfectly manifested by the structure of the *Kaab'a* by three predominant aspects. Firstly, the rite of circumambulation performed around the *Kaab'a* during the pilgrimage that is considered as the reproduction of the rotation of heaven around its polar axis. The second aspect is the orientation of the *Kaab'a* itself. The *Kaab'a*, which is a cube (*Kaab'a* literally means a cube) has its corners and its faces corresponding to each of the four primary directions and the upward and downward directions - namely, the zenith, the nadir and the four cardinal points. This orientation gains relevance from the fact that in Arab thought the four cardinal points represent the "corner pillars" of the universe. It is in the third aspect, however, that the concept of *Kaab'a* as the center of the Moslem

²⁸ The *qiblah* wall is the wall which the worshippers face while praying in the mosque and is usually indicated by a mihrab or niche on it. It is oriented in the direction of Mecca, the Moslem holy city where the *Kaab'a* is located.

²⁹ It is believed that the *Kaab'a* was initially built by Adam himself and then rebuilt by Abraham at the same site. The *Kaab'a*, therefore, demonstrates Islam's link with the Abrahamic tradition.

spiritual world and the point of origination, meeting and departure of the spiritual axes is demonstrated. The *Kaab'a* chosen by God as the direction of prayer³⁰, determines the direction towards which the mihrabs of all the mosques are oriented. It is through each individual *mihrab* that the collective invisible 'lines of force' diverge and subsequently converge at the center. The whole of the Islamic world is like a sphere with spokes radiating towards the *Kaab'a*. It is at the *Kaab'a* that the heavenly transcendent axis pierces the earth and meets the horizontal spiritual axes emanating from the *mihrabs* and thus uniting the entire Moslem world in an act that is purely divine and eternal. "The fact of turning in prayer to a single point, ungraspable as such but situated on earth and analogous in its singleness to the center of every world, speaks eloquently of the integration of the human will in the Universal Will",³¹ echoing not only the ultimate goal of life in Islam but also the verse of the Quran, "...and to God are all things returned." (Ch. III v. 108.)

The *Kaab'a*, therefore, is the single most important element, both in the terrestrial and celestial realm, radiating the concept of Unity and Center in Islamic architecture. It determines the direction of the mosque, the city, its people and their experience of space towards one single universal point. In other words, it determines and orients their entire life. Added to this is the convergence of all gestures of spiritual adoration during the circumambulation around this single point when all men stand equal in prayer in front of

³⁰ Prior to the *Kaab'a* being chosen as the direction of prayer through a Quranic revelation, Moslems used to face Jerusalem while praying.

³¹ Titus Burckhardt. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*. p. 5.

God. There could be no more immediate, profound and tangible expression of Islam and its belief of Unity than this ritual. It is by studying the *Kaab'a* and its spiritual significance, the symbolism of its orientation and qualitative polarization and the relation which it creates between the form (of the mosque) and the space (that exists between each mosque and the *Kaab'a*) are proto-typical elements of Islamic architecture and the key to the understanding of its principles. The square of the *Kaab'a* so persistently repeated in the inner courtyards of mosques and homes is not merely a square, it is the symbol of stability and completion and the earthly manifestation of the quadrangular temple of paradise.³² The *Kaab'a* is the *axis mundi* of Islamic spirituality, cosmology and divinity and at the same time the most immediate as well as transcendent expression of Islam and its belief in the unquestionable and unconditional Unity of God.

ii. Cosmology and Creation in Islam

Any theory that attempts to explain the origination of the symbolic nature of Islamic art and architecture and its relation to the concept of Unity and the Quranic revelation, must include the Islamic theory of creation of the cosmos. The notion of creation of the world, of the cosmos, is once again related (as everything in Islam is) to the Islamic concept of God. The concept of creation of the universe is based on the idea that everything that exists, everything that is created, has its "Unique Origin" in the Being of God. The Spirit is the apex, the center of all cosmic existence and all of nature is considered as that

³² The square of the open courtyard which is an inherent part of any mosque is the earthly recapitulation of the heavenly paradise and derives its form from the cube of the *Kaab'a*. The ablution fountain usually placed in the center of this courtyard is reminiscent of the heavenly *spring of kauthar*, ablution being the first step in the entire ritual of prayer.

"inexhaustible masterpiece of His creative act."³³ Every phenomenon of nature, the various aspects, the seasons, the moods of nature is considered by the believer to be the sign and manifestation of God. The impeccable order and harmony of the cosmos and the perfection of its creation is proof of the direct manifestation of the One on the plane of multiplicity. Every element, every aspect of nature is nothing but the sign and portent of God and His Divinity. The entire concept of Islamic cosmology is based on the cosmological verses of the Quran, such as the Throne Verse (Ayat al Kursi - Ch.II v. 255) and the Light Verse (Ayat al Nur - Ch. XXIV v. 35). The Light Verse and its corresponding Prophetic saying are discussed in the latter part of the thesis.

The Quran often speaks to the Moslem in terms of allegories and parables and therefore, nowhere in the Quran or as a matter of fact in the sayings of the Prophet or the religious laws can one find direct principles governing art and architecture.³⁴ It is from the essence of the Quranic revelation, from the spirit of the divine message that various forms of art flowed and symbolized the Word of God. Many Quranic verses and Prophetic sayings envisage a hierarchy of existence in relation to the cosmic world. At the apex of this hierarchy is the Spirit or *Al-Ruh*, below it stands the archangelic world, followed by the

³³ For further details refer to the book by S H Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. p. 37.

³⁴ It is important to note at this point that very little construction took place during the lifetime of the Prophet (except for the first mosque which was an extension of the house of the Prophet) and therefore, the Prophetic sayings and traditions which covers practically every realm of human existence contains very little on the subject of form and space in architecture. This is because Islam was still in the initial stages of its growth and the beauty and splendor of Islamic architecture occurred with the development of Islamic theology and philosophy at a later date. The use of forms and figures (anthropomorphism), however, was an element that was totally absent right from the initial creations of Islamic art and this is definitely due to the essence of the Quranic revelation and the sayings and actions of the Prophet which strictly forbid the representation of God in any manner whatsoever.

angelic world, which is related to the next level of existence - the intelligible world and finally the world of matter and form. It is such symbolic explanations that Islamic artists took and attempted to manifest in the built form. S H Nasr in his book *Islamic Art and Spirituality*³⁵ explains the various levels of the cosmic world. Correlating them to the structure and form of a typical mosque, Professor Nasr presents the connection between the spirit of the message and its artistic representation. In the classical domed mosque, the center of which is occupied by the dome, the apex of the dome symbolizes the One. The dome itself is symbolic of a "cosmic tent", downward and expanding as if encompassing the whole world; or upward and contracting towards a point or Unity. The octagonal belt on which the dome rests symbolizes the angelic order and the four sided base of the dome, the lowest element in this hierarchy, symbolizes the material world.³⁶ Moreover, the dome, while creating a ceiling which is climatically suitable, protecting from both the heat and the cold, is also the symbol of the heavenly vault, the center of which is the axis mundi which relates all levels of cosmic existence to the One. Therefore, in Islamic architecture the specific symbolism and various geometric forms not only relate outward form to inner meaning but also architectural utility is combined with spiritual significance.

³⁵ S H Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 41.

³⁶ In Islamic cosmology, the heavens or the celestial realm is considered as round, while the world of matter, the earth, is square. The relation between the round dome and its square base is based on the notion and the effort of elevating the square (the earth) to the form of the sphere (the heavenly world) in a symbolic movement from the material world to the world of the spirit.

Chapter V - The Metaphysics of Light - Light as the Symbol of Divine Unity

In the Islamic sphere every phenomenon has or rather implies a noumena. To elucidate this further, every exterior (*zahir*) has an interior (*batin*). To travel from the apparent to the hidden, from the immanent to the transcendent, from the exoteric to the esoteric is the reason d'etre of life, the final destination being spiritual gnosis or *marifa'h*. Spiritual hermeneutics, or the process of *tawil*, takes a person from the world of concrete archetypes to the world of abstract formlessness. Therefore, a constant need of "transcendent archetypes" is felt to travel from the path of *tawil* - that is from the apparent (or the world of concrete forms) to the hidden³⁷ (or the world of divine form). As a result of this, philosophers, mystics, theosophers, artists and poets used the language of symbolism to explain this transcendent nature of God and help man tread the path of spiritual hermeneutics or move on the *tariqa'h* (path) to achieve *marifa'h* (gnosis). Various forms of symbolism were used - from poetical to geometrical to mathematical to represent the absolute unity of God. While philosophers used the symbolism of the cosmos and the concept of creation, theosophers quoted from the Quran and the Hadith. Architects used the vast repertoire of architectonic forms in their effort to represent the individual structures and the city as a complete unity on the plane of multiplicity. There was, therefore, a constant effort by different persons in different realms to use symbols to represent the concept of unity without in any manner compromising on the essential

³⁷ Hidden in this context is not that which is merely veiled from the human eye in a physical sense, but that which can be seen by the soul or spirit because of the divine illumination one is capable of acquiring.

characteristics of the concept.

To highlight and present the fact that light is the primary element used in the symbolic representation of God in Islam, it is necessary to understand it as it is explained and understood from different perspectives. Light is discussed in this thesis from three most important view points of Islam:

- i. in the Holy Quran.
- ii. in the Prophetic sayings - *Hadith*.
- iii. in Islamic thought.

i. Light and its Symbolism in the Holy Quran - The Light Verse

Many philosophers of Islam have commented on and discussed the famous and celebrated Light Verse of the Quran. Different branches of philosophy and entire schools of thought have evolved as a result of this verse, indicating the importance of the symbolic nature of light in Islamic spirituality. Since this thesis looks at Islamic architecture from a philosophical perspective and attempts to study its mystical and metaphysical significance, it is the belief of the writer that a philosophical interpretation of the Light Verse would be appropriate. As a result, the Light Verse is discussed in this thesis as interpreted and presented by the Sufi jurist and philosopher - Al Ghazzali (Latin - Algazel). The "*Mishkat-al-Anwar*" or the "**Niche for Lights**" , a treatise on the Light Verse is considered as one of Al Ghazzali's best works and the commencement of a new tradition

in Islamic philosophy.³⁸ It is undoubtedly one of the most precise and complete discussions of the celebrated verse of the Quran. Though the primary objective of the opuscle is to expound a certain verse of the Quran, it also discusses a certain Prophetic tradition (saying) - namely, the Veils Tradition, which incidentally is in reference to the Light Verse.

"God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth;
the likeness of His Light is as a niche in which is a lamp,
the lamp is a crystal,
the crystal as it were a shining star;
lighted it is from a blessed tree,
an olive, neither of the east or the west,
whose oil would well nigh flare though fire touch it not;
Light upon Light;
God guideth to His Light whom Her Will,
for God coineth parables for men,
and God is All knowing of all things.

- Ch. XXIV v. 35.

The first part of the treatise is directed at analyzing light itself and its symbolic significance to place it in the right perspective. After that an effort is made to elucidate and analyze the entire verse. Since this thesis primarily deals with the significance of light, it is the belief of the writer that by studying the first line of the verse (in comparison to analyzing the entire verse which may quite be beyond the scope of this thesis) the intent and objective of the research is fulfilled.

³⁸ The advent of Al Ghazzali and his philosophy marked in Islam a shift from the traditional Aristotelian or Peripatetic mode of philosophy which was based on rationalism and which had dominated the trend of thought from the very beginning. The works of Al Ghazzali (and the Illuminationists that followed) oriented Islamic intellectual thought in a direction which it followed ever since.

"God is the Light of the Heavens and Earth"

and to this may be added a Prophetic saying

"The first thing that God created was light."

In the treatise by Al Ghazzali light is employed and analyzed with a threefold signification. The first is light as a "physical light"; the second is light as it is understood as visualizing light or the "light of the eye"; and the third significance which is the most important aspect, light is "intelligence" or the "intellect" and which is capable of seeing the Real Light.

In its first signification the light referred to is that which is a phenomenon. This light which is a physical light, an appearance, is basically apparent to us as a result of our senses, in this case through the sense of sight. Furthermore, this physical light is divided into three categories :

- a) that which cannot produce any light of its own and is not visible,
- b) that which is visible by itself but cannot make anything else visible,
- c) that which is visible by itself and makes other things visible. It is to this third category that the name "light" is given. Light is an expression for that which "is by itself visible and makes other things visible."³⁹

The essence of light is appearance which is related to our sense of perception or sight.

³⁹ Al Ghazzali's *Mishkat-al-Anwar*, translated by W H T Gardiner. p. 46.

Perception itself depends on two things -light and a seeing eye. Though light is that which is visible and causes things to be visible it does so only to the seeing eye. In other words the physical function of light does not appear to one whose sight is impaired. Thus the spirit or essence of perception is as important or rather more important than perception itself. It is the perceptive spirit which apprehends and causes apprehension to take place, whereas light itself does not apprehend. Moreover, the light of the physical eye is not perfect and is marked by several defects.⁴⁰ So is there a light or eye that is free from physical defects and which is infallible. If there is such a light or eye it should be given the name "light". And it is in the mind of man that this light (eye) is present and which is manifest in itself and also makes other things visible. It is this inner eye which Al Ghazzali terms spirit, human soul or intelligence. "Let us call it intelligence.....it is the Intelligence that is more properly called light."⁴¹ Thus in every man there exists two types of eye -the external and the internal (one belongs to the world of senses and the internal eye belongs to the Realm Celestial). The physical eye is prone to defects and thus it is the inner eye, the soul, which is the true light or intelligence. It is the inner eye - the intelligence - that must only be considered as light. "It is the mind which is the faculty of discrimination and knowledge, reflecting the pure Intellect. In an even wider sense, the intellect itself is the mirror of the Divine Being. Plotinus says of the intellect (nous) that it contemplates the Infinite One....."⁴²

⁴⁰ Al Ghazzali lists seven defects of the physical eye in his treatise.

⁴¹ *ibid.* p. 47.

⁴² Titus Burckhardt. *Mirror of the Intellect*, p. 118.

In this context it is important to mention that the intelligence or the intellect referred to is that which belongs to every human being and it has certain basic knowledge which is given or inherent in the intellect. This basic intelligence has to be aroused and, to the Moslem, that can only be done by the Word of God or the Quran. Therefore, it is the Quran - the word - that acts as the source which inspires the inner eye, similar to the manner in which the physical eye is aroused by the light of the sun. "..... the verses of the Quran, in relation to intelligence, have the value of sunlight in relation to the eyesight..... the Quran is most properly of all called Light."⁴³

The Quran in Islamic philosophy is symbolic of Divine Light, illuminated and that which illuminates the intellect, which is the direct link to the Divine Intellect. Through the illumination received from the Quran - the intellect becomes the internal light or the internal eye - visible due its own light and also makes other things visible. The intellect becomes the cause, the cause for other things to exist (by making them visible) and the key to all knowledge. Thus the intellect now becomes dynamic as a result of its association with the `Word of God' and sees not only itself but also the light above it. As the relationship between the internal light and the Quran becomes profound, the intellect transcends greater barriers in its travel from the immediate to the distant in the process of *tawil* or spiritual hermeneutics (movement from the world of concrete archetypes to the realm of formlessness). Light is thus seen as an element that creates

⁴³ Al Ghazzali. *Mishkat-al-Anwar*, p. 53.

A verse of the Quran can be related to this:

"There hath come sure proof from your Lord and we caused a clear Light to descend." Ch. IV v. 173.

by making things visible, by actually bringing the unseen and, therefore, the unknown into existence - both in the physical and celestial worlds. While the sun makes the physical objects manifest through its light so that the physical eye can see and comprehend, the inner eye, the intellect, through its association with divinity can see the objects made manifest by the illumination of the Ultimate Light.

While the first part of the treatise on the light verse is directed at analyzing the element of light itself and its symbolic significance, the latter part of the doctrine is directed at explaining the ultimate source of all lights and the meaning of the Quranic line, 'God is the Light of the Heavens and Earth'.

The source of all grades of light - God

"..... degrees of light do not ascend in an infinite series, but rise to a final fountainhead who is Light in and by Himself, upon which comes no light from any external source, and from Whom every light is effused according to its order and grade."⁴⁴

The meaning of the doctrine that God is the light of the Heaven and Earth can be understood in relation to both physical or phenomenal light and celestial light. The first type pertains to our sight or senses and the second type pertains to our insight or intelligence; God is the source of both these types of light. The light of the sun is the phenomenal or physical light and since Islam believes that the entire cosmos is a creation of God (refer to Creation and Cosmology in Islam - Chapter 4 of this thesis) having

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 57.

emanated from His Being, the Spirit is present in every creation. The physical light makes everything in the physical world manifest, thus bringing it into existence, which the eye apprehends. This is the manifestation of God on the plane of multiplicity which everyone can see and comprehend. It is through the other faculty of our being, through our insight or intelligence (intellect), that we can comprehend God as the Light of the Heavens. It is through the knowledge of the Divine which only the intellect comprehends and which is illuminated by the Word of God, that one sees the various grades of light and their Ultimate Source. The rays that emanate from this Light illuminate the 'World Supernal' manifesting the splendors of this world. Thus the whole world is filled with the external light of perception and the internal light of intelligence. Furthermore, all these lights rise to the Light of Lights (refer to the Light Verse), the Origin, the Fountainhead of lights. It is from this Source that all lights, physical and celestial borrow their luminosity, making manifest to man what is in the earth by sight and what is in the heavens by insight.

ii. Light and its Symbolism in the Prophetic Sayings

The tradition during the time of the Prophet was that whenever a revelation was made the Prophet later explained the meaning and significance of what had been revealed. The particular Hadith (Prophetic saying) quoted below is considered to be in conjunction with the Light Verse. This saying later came to be known as the Veils Tradition for it speaks of the symbolism of light and its various degrees of illumination.

"Allah hath seventy thousand veils of light and darkness: were He to withdraw their curtain, then would the splendors of His Aspect surely

consume everyone who apprehended Him with his sight."

(the same Hadith is sometimes read as seven hundred veils - though the number seven may have certain symbolic significance, the number as a whole is intended to denote an indefinitely great quantity.)

This saying speaks primarily about the obstacles or barriers (veils) between Pure Light and the least manifested being. Various grades of light and darkness veil a being from God. Al Ghazzali divides these beings into four basic categories:

- a) those veiled by pure darkness
- b) those veiled by mixed darkness and light
- c) those veiled by Pure Light, and
- d) those who attain vision of the Unveiled.

The first category belongs to one who is completely in darkness, in the sense that the physical light also does not inspire the feeling of a higher ideal. Similarly, Ghazzali goes on to explain the various categories of people, who are characterized by the illumination they have acquired or received.

It is another saying (which has been quoted earlier in this thesis), however, that more specifically speaks of light as the genesis of all creation.

"The first thing created by God was light."

This can be understood in reference to another saying which states that the `word' was the creation from which emanated all creations by the decree of Allah. Light is,

therefore, synonymous with word and thus the originator of the entire world. This can be better understood by another saying of the Prophet,

"Allah created the creation in darkness, then sent an effusion of His light upon it."

In Islam light has always had a significance that is spiritually symbolic and life giving. It is the book of Genesis, in the Bible, that a wonderful symbolic expression of light can be seen, "In the beginning the earth was without form and void. and darkness was upon the face of the deep." With these words, "Let there be light", God began the creation of the universe, in an act that was significant in separating light from darkness, the visible from the hidden and existence from non-existence.

iii. Suhrawardi and his Philosophy of Illumination - *Hikmat-al-Ishraq*

Peripatetic philosophy⁴⁵ had always dominated philosophy in Islam from the very beginning and it had been widely translated into Latin. It is this part of Islamic philosophy with which the West has been familiar. It was the emergence of Al Ghazzali first and later Suhrawardi and his School of Illumination that were largely responsible for starting a new tradition of thought in Islamic philosophy. The "Philosophy of Illumination" or "*Hikmat-al-Ishraq*"⁴⁶ is a work of 250 pages written by Suhrawardi (1153 AD-1191 AD) which is based on the symbolism of light and basically consists of two

⁴⁵ Peripatetic philosophy in Islam has been influenced primarily by Aristoteleianism, whereas Ghazzali and the Illuminationists were influenced by the philosophy of Plato.

⁴⁶ "*Ishraq*" means the splendor or illumination of the sun when it rises in the morning. For further details refer to the book, *History of Muslim Philosophy* by Henry Corbin, published by the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 1993. p. 209.

parts:

- a) "On the rules of thought" (logic) and
- b) "On the divine lights" (physics, philosophy, metaphysics).

His work was greatly influenced by Sufi doctrines, particularly the writings of Al Hallaj and Al Ghazzali, whose *Mishkat-al-Anwar* had a direct bearing on his '*ishraqi*' philosophy. The 'Master of Illumination' (as he later came to be known) and his illuminationist theories⁴⁷ and the school of thought (*ishraqiyun*) which followed, are probably the best exponents of the symbolism and mystical significance of light in Islamic thought.

Hikmat-al Ishraq and its basic doctrines

The first section of this book by Suhrawardi consists of an introduction to logic, discussion of Peripatetic philosophy and criticism of both original Peripatetics (such as Aristotle) and Islamic Peripatetics such as Avicenna and Al Farabi. It is the second part of the book that is devoted to the discussion of Illumination.⁴⁸ In this section Suhrawardi asserts that all of reality is nothing but light which possesses various degrees of intensity. Light has no definition, for its very presence makes it evident and manifest and only that which is obscure and not manifest needs to be defined. Light, therefore, cannot be

⁴⁷ Suhrawardi himself contends that his work is based on both discursive reasoning and mystical intuition - formal training of the mind (intellect) and purification of the soul.

⁴⁸ This section is divided into several chapters which deal with the meaning of light, its various gradations and ontology based upon light symbolism, the angelic hierarchies, physics, psychology and finally questions of eschatology and spiritual union.

defined and in fact, all things are made evident by it and should be defined in reference to it. "If there is anything in existence that does not need to be made known, it is the manifest. Since there is nothing more manifest than light, then there is nothing less in need of being made known."⁴⁹ Similar to the manner in which Al Ghazzali in his treatise divides light into different categories, Suhrawardi divides things into those that are light in their own reality and those that are not. Though the primary objective of the work is to explain the Ultimate Light, the book speaks about lights - not just light - all things being caused by light, but not all beings are light themselves. It can be observed that the importance of light in Suhrawardi's thought comes from the aspect of the concreteness of things - the fact that we are aware of them. A thing that is visible and manifest is best known to us - the concrete things that we can see and touch, as compared to something which is beyond our sight. Since physical light is the most conspicuous and tangible example of what is manifest and what makes other things manifest, it is the best symbol of the fundamental knowledge of things. Therefore, we should realize that substances are not essentially manifest but are made manifest (manifested). It is only the immaterial lights which are manifest by themselves.

Having thus explained the symbolic significance of light from a mystical and philosophical perspective, Suhrawardi goes on to the source of origin, the very Source of all grades of light and therefore, the source of life itself. It is this source that Suhrawardi

⁴⁹ John Walbridge. *The Science of Mystic Lights*, p. 44. This quote is a direct translation of the original text by Suhrawardi.

refers to as Pure Light or the Light of lights (*Nur-al-Anwar*). This Supreme Light is the source of all existence, since the universe consists of nothing more than degrees of light and darkness - whatever being visible or manifest is light and whatever is not seen, what is hidden or veiled is referred to as darkness. This theory is better explained by Suhrawardi's own words,

"The Essence of the First Absolute Light, God, gives constant illumination, whereby it is manifested and it brings all things into existence, giving life to them by its rays. Everything in the world is derived from the Light of His essence and all beauty and perfection are the gifts of His bounty, and to attain fully to this illumination is salvation."⁵⁰

It is in his doctrine of "Emanation of the Cosmos from the One" that Suhrawardi gives a description of the cosmos, stating that lights originating from the Supreme Light are the cause of the effect which is manifested in the form of the cosmos.⁵¹ According to this theory the ontological basis of all things is immaterial light, light that is self-subsistent, manifest in itself (it is self conscious) and makes other things manifest. He further explains in his doctrine that the hierarchial or ontological status of all beings depends on their intensity of illumination. For example, all things can be considered from the viewpoint of their light and darkness. Beings are also divided according to their degree of comprehension and awareness. A being is either aware of itself or oblivious to itself.

⁵⁰ This passage from the *Hikmat-al-Ishraq* is taken from the English translation of *Readings from the Mystics of Islam* by M Smith, London, 1950. p. 79. For further details refer, *Three Muslim Sages* by S H Nasr, p. 69.

⁵¹ The philosophical system adopted by Suhrawardi is purely Neo- Platonic and is characterized by a hierarchy of causation, in which the continued existence of a thing is dependent on a cause due to a higher order of being. The Philosophy of Illumination is based exactly on this theory.

If aware, it subsists by itself or it depends on something other than itself to be aware of itself. This depends on the degree of light it possesses, which is analogous to knowledge and awareness (a similarity with Ghazzali's concept of intelligence as the inner eye can be seen here). The universe, therefore, issues from the Supreme Light - the Light of Lights Who has His direct symbol in every domain, "the sun in the sky, fire among elements and the lordly or `signeural' light within the soul of man, so that everywhere His signs are manifested and all things attest to his presence"⁵²for "Where ever ye turn there is the face of God" because "God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth".

The latter part of the Philosophy of Illumination is directed at discussing the concept of light in terms of Angelology, Physics and Psychology and finally Eschatology and Spiritual Union.

⁵² S H Nasr. *Three Muslim Sages*, p. 70.

Chapter VI - Alchemy and Architecture: Body into Spirit - Stone into Light

"To make of the body a spirit and of the spirit a body"⁵³ this adage sums up the whole of alchemy. Alchemy, the well known theme of transmuting a base metal such as lead into gold, has forever been a dream of alchemists. Gold, as a metal, does not merely have a high economic value, it represents an opaque body having become luminous. Or rather it signifies a solid body transformed into light, as if the rays of the sun had become solid or frozen. "Lead is the base metallic substance, shapeless and opaque, whereas gold, the solar metal is in some way light made corporeal."⁵⁴ If this idea of alchemy is related to the worldly and spiritual order, it can be considered as the process of transmuting body into spirit and spirit into body. If the underlying principle of this process is understood in reference to the architectural order of Islam, alchemical symbolism assumes a significant stature. It is the transformation of stone into light - light being the perfect symbol of divine unity. It is the process of dematerializing matter, where the heaviness of the material subtly dissolves in an effusion of light. However, this chapter is not directed at discussing alchemy and its spiritual relation. To understand and relate to the idea of transformation of stone into light, which apparently is not merely a physical action, but depends more on the state of the mind, it is necessary to briefly discuss the actual concept of alchemy. The objective here is not to discuss the method of turning base metal into gold, but to explain the essence of alchemy which symbolizes

⁵³ Titus Burckhardt. *Mirror of the Intellect*. p.132.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.19.

moving from a lower level to a higher level, which in Islamic terminology can best be explained as the process of *tawil* or spiritual hermeneutics.

Alchemy has existed since at least the middle of the first millennium before Christ and to this day it has been considered as a primitive precursor of modern chemistry existing in diversely separate civilizations such as those of the Near East and Far East. Throughout history, alchemy has been considered to be the attempt to turn base metal, mainly lead, into gold, in order to reap from it high economic value. This is far from the truth. Its critics do not seem to realize the improbability of the fact that despite the non-success of the effort through the ages, the practice and effort continued for centuries on end in the most diverse cultures of the east and west. Titus Burckhardt, one of the most prominent contemporary writers on the subject of the spirit of alchemy states:

"If alchemy were nothing but a sham, its form of expression would betray arbitrariness and folly at every turn, but in fact it can be seen to possess all the signs of a genuine `tradition', that is, to say, an organic and consistent doctrine, and a clear cut corpus of rules, laid down and persistently expounded by its adepts. Thus alchemy is neither a hybrid nor a haphazard product of human history, but on the contrary represents a profound possibility of the spirit and the soul."⁵⁵

In archaic cultures gold and silver (the reflection of the sun and moon) were considered as sacred metals prior to becoming the measure of all commercial transactions, and thereby, acquiring an economic significance. As a result, the obtaining and minting of these metals was considered a priestly activity carried out in holy places, while the

⁵⁵ Titus Burckhardt. *Alchemy*, p.8.

preparation of ores - the removing of impurities - was considered a sacred procedure. The sacredness of the entire act stems from the fact of its significance and relation to the spiritual order. For archaic civilizations which do not artificially separate matter⁵⁶ from spirit, metallurgy was not merely a worldly invention, but something that was divinely revealed and authorized. The removing of unwanted and impure substances by using fire and other agents to extract gold, which was the actual chemical procedure, is analogous to the conquest of dark and irrational impulses of the body, mind, spirit and soul to achieve gnosis. It is in this that the root and symbolism of alchemy lies - reaching the essence of things and it was this very reason that this symbolic procedure was orally transmitted and practiced for generations. The extracting of the noble metal from the base metal through the use of solvents and other agents is similar to using the intellect and soul, the agents and spiritual solvents of the human body, to achieve the essence and reason for human life and existence.

i. The Alchemy of Light

The previous chapter very clearly elucidates the significance of light in Islam, its symbolic value to the Islamic artist and also its use to describe the formless nature of God from the perspective of the Quran, Hadith and Islamic thought. Light has always fascinated philosophers, mystics and artists. In the third century Plotinus wrote in his *Enneads*, ".....and why is gold beautiful, and what accounts for the beauty of lightning one

⁵⁶ It must be mentioned that in this context matter is not referred to that as understood in terms of Newtonian physics - but to that which is the intelligible reality of a thing.

sees at night ? Fire is beautiful in itself..... It lights up and glows..... The things inferior to it, eclipsed by its dazzling light, cease to be beautiful."⁵⁷

A journey through the history of architecture will undoubtedly reveal various examples of the magnificent use of light. It is in the architecture of Islam, however, that the use of light as an element creating order and being symbolic of the sacred is taken to its highest pinnacle. Furthermore, it is the only element that is directly used as the symbol of the divine and the formless nature of the God of Islam to manifest in the built form the concept of unity. The reality of the verse, "**God is the light of the Heavens and Earth**" (The Holy Quran - Ch. 24 V. 35) manifests itself not only in the luminous skies and is not only characteristic of the heartland where most of classical Islamic architecture originated, but is amply demonstrated in the architecture of Islam anywhere in the world. Whether it is in the Shah mosques of Isfahan, the Taj Mahal or the Alhambra, God is manifested through light and light itself is crystallized - illuminating and illuminated. "The identification of light with the spiritual principle that at once creates, orders and liberates is a determining factor in the sacralization of the architecture of Islam."⁵⁸ Light, therefore, is the dominant feature in the architecture of Islam - not only as a physical or architectural element but also as the symbol of the presence of the Divine.

The art of alchemy, as discussed earlier, though literally consisting of changing any base

⁵⁷ Henry Plummer. *Poetics of Light*. A+U, Dec. 1987. p.15.

⁵⁸ S. H. Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 51.

metal to gold, is more properly related to the transmutation of body into spirit. In the architectural order of Islam this concept translates into an alchemy of a different kind - it is the alchemy of transforming stone to light - the crystallization of stone in an attempt to manifest the divine. The artist who desired to express the "**unity of the real**" or "*wahadat al wujud*" had basically three means at his disposal : geometry, or rather the infinity inherent in regular geometric figures of which the arabesque is the best example. The second means was rhythm, of which the arcades and the colonnades provide the best expression and thirdly, light. "There is no perfect symbol of Divine Unity than Light. For this reason, the Moslem artist seeks to transform the very stuff he is fashioning into a vibration of light."⁵⁹ As a result of this various physical elements were introduced and integrated in the overall form of the structure, exploring and using the various properties of light, transforming the heaviness of matter (stone, brick) into the lightness of the spirit. "Light is a spiritual presence which pierces the heaviness of matter and transforms it into a noble form...."⁶⁰

The eminent sociologist and historian, Janet Abu-Lugod once remarked that the greatness of Islam lies in the fact that it is not only a religion and a people who merely believe in something, but that they actually practice it. It is not the belief in the doctrine of unity that makes Islam great but the practice of this doctrine. It is not the belief in God that is important but the declaration of God through the *shahada'h*. It is not the idea of prayer

⁵⁹ Titus Burckhardt. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, p. 77.

⁶⁰ Foreword by S H Nasr to the book *Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* by Ardalan and Bakhtiar. p. xiii.

but praying itself, it is not the idea of stating that all men are equal but the fact that at the time of prayer all men in the community stand as equals before of God. In the month of *Ramadhan*, the Moslem month of fasting, it is not merely the idea of not eating or drinking anything during the day,⁶¹ but the importance of observing the fast. Islam, therefore, is not only a system of beliefs but also a set of actions. The spirit of this idea is very profoundly and prominently evident in the realm of Islamic art and architecture. Thus, while theory states that God is the Light of the Heavens and Earth, light being the perfect symbol of Divine Unity, it is in the creation of forms that the artist puts into practice the belief in this doctrine. The intricate and ingenious arabesque, the perfect combination of organic and geometric forms; the slender columns placed in varying tones of light and shadow as if being lifted up and moved to a different world; the magnificent and multiple muqarnas (honeycomb cells) that capture and disperse light in varying degrees; the trelliswork etched on the walls; ornamentation, geometry and calligraphy on the inside; color of tiles, facade decoration and the interior courtyards were placed with such thought and perfection so as to explore the nature of light and transform itself in the process.

Thus in the domain of Islam, alchemy does not have merely to do with a physical action of turning base metal into gold, but it has an important symbolic connotation. The symbolic significance is that of turning body into spirit - the attainment of pure

⁶¹ During the Moslem month of fasting, no food or beverage of any kind is consumed from sunrise to sunset. The timings of the period of fasting, however, varies everyday according to the exact timings of sunrise and sunset.

knowledge. It is from this perspective that traditional Moslems viewed the process of alchemy, which then was represented in the different orders of the religion, including art and architecture. In the words of Nader Ardalan, "Alchemy has a two fold aspect. On the one hand it is the science of the transformation of the soul of man; on the other, through the traditional arts and crafts, it is a science concerned with the essences and processes of nature."⁶² While the common man participates in the act of spiritual alchemy through prayer, the traditional artist participates in it both spiritually and physically. For without the understanding and practicing of spiritual alchemy, that is without the act of prayer, the process of physical alchemy cannot occur. For first the body has to become spirit, for spirit to become body - thus first stone has to be transformed to light for light to be crystallized.

ii. Artistic Manifestation of Light

"Islamic architecture lays special emphasis upon light. The inside of a mosque is like light crystallized into material forms which forever remind the believer of the Light Verse of the Quran, "Allah is the Light of the heavens and earth."

The arabesque, the combination of organic forms or the geometry of nature and the geometry of man, is not only an art but also a science. The arabesque, inspired by the law of pure rhythm and a synthesis of natural elements such as flowers and leaves with precise geometry in an effort to combine "spiritual intoxication and spiritual sobriety" is

⁶² Ardalan and Bakthiar. *The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, p. 50.

an element that can be seen everywhere in Islamic tradition. The entire pattern with no noticeable beginning or confirmed point of culmination, reflecting itself in a melody of eternity, is the purest and most simple manifestation of the spirit of the Islamic artist - the essence of which is the Unity of God. With multiple centers, depending on which one the observer desires to choose, the arabesque is a combination of space and form in itself. Highlighting the immanent and transcendent aspect of God, the solid element of the arabesque gives it its identity and character, while the void spaces rid it of its heaviness and opacity, making it transparent for the Divine Light to enter its being. Once created, the arabesque patterns are either etched on wall surfaces, covering entire walls as seen in the Alhambra, or they are made into jalis to cover window openings. These arabesque patterned jalis, a combination of solids and voids are then subtly integrated in the wall to allow the right amount of light to infiltrate the room. The arabesque thus acts as an element which not only controls the amount of light entering the inner space of the room but also the quality of the tone and gradation of light in the room. The arabesque with no particular center and no discernible beginning or end is an infinite reflection of itself. The geometrical patterns created are such that every point becomes the center, the beginning and the end, spun together in a web of integrated and indivisible unity. Echoing the very nature and characteristics of light itself - the arabesque pattern is not only a reflection of its own self, but it is indivisible in nature. Together with the geometric constitution of its form, the arabesque undoubtedly reflects in the most sincere and profound manner the eternal spirit of Islam.

It was in another feature of Islamic ornamentation - in the element of the *muqarnas*⁶³ - the stalactites - that the Moslem artist found the perfect spatial form to fully explore the qualities of light. These honeycomb like cells, the ingenious creation of the spirit of the Moslem artist, can be widely seen in the heartland of Islam - Persia and in the countries where Islam later spread, such as Africa, Spain and India. These small cells were placed in large numbers in the niche that is formed in the space between the dome and the wall supporting it.⁶⁴ Though, this was the space in which the *muqarnas* were initially integrated, latter day artists divided entire domes into these honeycomb cells.⁶⁵ The individual cells were later joined in different ways forming a perfect combination of geometry and rhythm. The stalactite like form of these cells comes from the horizontal joining of the cells, while in the vertical order they are mounted one on top of the other.

These *muqarnas* were usually constructed of plaster, stucco or wood, although sometimes they were carved of stone. Its popularity through out the Islamic architectural circle grew from the fact that "it permits space to be articulated in both a geometrical and rhythmic manner; its conception must be ascribed to a perspective that unites time and space."⁶⁶

⁶³ The origination of the *muqarnas* is uncertain. However, it is supposed to have originated in Iran/Iraq. The oldest example is found in Syria and belongs to the 8th century AD. By the 12th century this peculiar and unique feature of Islamic architecture had spread through out the Moslem architectural world.

⁶⁴ In contrast to the *muqarnas* which was basically placed in the niche between the cupola and its supporting walls, the Roman solved the problem by employing pendentives which provided a smooth transition between the hemisphere of the dome and the right angle of the base.

⁶⁵ In Persian architecture the individual *muqarnas* cells are larger in size and occupy the entire roof of the *iwān*.

⁶⁶ Titus Burckhardt. *The Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, p.74.

Added to this is the brilliant manner in which these cells capture light and disperse it in a rich gradation of tones and shadows, transforming in the process the simple plaster or stucco work into precious stone such as onyx or jade as if a magicians wand had just been swept over it.

The other very important reason for the meticulous ornamentation of these niches is because it formed a part of one of the most classical problems not only of traditional Islamic architecture but traditional sacred architecture anywhere in the world. The physical relationship between the sphere and the cube (from a philosophical point of view this is the relationship between the heaven and earth) and their conceptual and cosmological ramifications have always fascinated the Islamic artist and philosopher. The sphere and the cube, or the dome and its base in this case, are symbolic of the celestial and the terrestrial world. Heaven in this context is characterized by the infinity of the eternally rotating circle (or the dome) and the cube represents the fixed terrestrial earth. The *muqarnas* cells which form the intermediate position between heaven and earth facilitate the moving of "divine illumination" from above to below. Similar to the manner in which light from the Ultimate Source facilitates the manifestation of the unseen and the hidden, the *muqarnas* symbolize the descent of light into the world of material forms, and therefore, symbolize life, manifestation and existence.

Chapter VII - The Alhambra

If traditional Islamic art and architecture is a symbolic text that has to be analyzed in order to be understood, the Alhambra can then best be described as an Islamic encyclopedia. The Alhambra, as a whole and individually in each of its palaces and their unique architectural elements, displays the zenith of Moslem artistry and architecture in Spain, and today stands as a virtual museum of Islamic art and architecture. This "veritable fairyland", the poignant swan-song⁶⁷ of the last Moslem dynasty of Spain, not only encapsules with unquestionable brilliance Islam's entire epoch on the Iberian peninsula, but reflects the culture and philosophy of a religion that was born many centuries earlier and many miles away. It was in this chapter of Islamic art and architecture, that the mystical and mythical Moorish ideology, art and culture combines with the Middle Eastern tradition of the Ummayyads and the Abbasids. Into this was woven the pre-existing vocabulary of Hispano-Roman and Visigothic architecture to create a structure that stands even today as an expression of the artistic glory of Islamic Spain.⁶⁸ Begun in 1238 A.D. and built over a period of more than two hundred years, the Alhambra was an heir to such illustrious architectural predecessors, as the Great Mosque of Cordoba, the palatine cities of Madinat-al-Zahra and Madinat-al-Zahira, the Mosque

⁶⁷ This expression stems from the fact that not only was the Alhambra constructed towards the near end of Islam's long presence in Spain, but also from the fact that the Nasrid dynasty in spite of the continuous military threats to its territory, built one of the finest monuments seen in the Islamic architectural world.

⁶⁸ For further details on this topic refer to the book *Al Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, ed., Jerrilynn Jones.

of Seville and many other magnificent monuments. The Alhambra reflects the courtly arts, the culture, tradition and craftsmanship of one of the most meaningful and profound periods in the history of Islamic art and architecture. It not only represents the diversity of Islamic architecture arising from the relationship of architectural influences of different lands of Islam, but it also marks the culmination of the various arts and different traditions that flourished in Moslem Spain.⁶⁹ Coming towards the end of Islam's eight hundred year presence in Spain, the Alhambra represents the glory and grandeur of both, the royalty and the citizenry, that existed in Al-Andalus.

One of the remarkable characteristics which traditional Islamic architecture has always demonstrated is its ability to adapt and blend harmoniously in different ethnic environments without compromising its fundamental beliefs - a fact that has been substantially exhibited in Islamic Spain. Wherever Islam spread, the versatility that was inherent in its art and architecture merged amicably with the local conditions and surroundings, producing an art form that enhanced both domains, but never straying from its spiritual aim and the achievement of aesthetic satisfaction. The Alhambra can undoubtedly be referred to as one of the most suitable expressions of this quality of Islamic architecture. The product of a series of artistic exchanges with the Middle East and North Africa, a relationship which the Moslem kings of Spain continuously maintained with their original homeland, the entire Alhambra complex is a manifestation of the diversity of Islamic architecture and culture. Parts of the Alhambra displays

⁶⁹ The fall of Islam's last dynasty in Spain not only marked the culmination of their political presence but also brought an end to the various forms of art that flourished there.

horseshoe arches, which were a feature of the Maghreb (North Africa), while mosaic decorations by artisans from the east and stucco decoration which are reminiscent of the Islamic heartland, Persia. The type and style of surface decoration, plans and elevations are all recognizably typical of Islamic architecture - the Alhambra is a composition of all these elements. These features, representing different ethnic backgrounds were integrated with brilliant ingenuity into the existing architectural fabric and translated into its own local idiom. "... each of these visual sources contributed to the development of ingenious and complex anionic ornament that engaged the viewer in a contemplative rather than empathetic relationship....."⁷⁰

To understand any civilization and the way of life of its people, a profound knowledge of its art and architecture is absolutely essential. In addition to the literature and other artifacts of the period, it is the art and architecture of the time that stands testimony and speaks eloquently of a bygone era. The art and culture of the period, while representing and reflecting the lifestyle of the past, provides us today with an insight into the social and economic conditions that existed. These lifeless and dormant structures, having witnessed the past and having stood the test of time, bring to "life" and recreate the "dead" past for the contemporary observer. They become an oasis in the present of what is essentially a desert of the past. They speak to those who listen, communicate with those who respond. Moreover, these edifices help in understanding the intellectual ability

⁷⁰ Refer to the introduction by Jerrilynn D Dodds and Daniel Walker to the book *Al-Andalus - the Art of Islamic Spain*, Jerrilynn D Dodds, ed. p. xx.

and ethical standards of the people and the diversity of their culture. In the history of Moslem architecture, probably, no other building reflects and manifests this fact more profoundly than the Alhambra. Planned and designed during the rule of the Nasrid dynasty (during the 13th and 14th century), the Alhambra today stands as the symbol of the culture, tradition, artistic ability, intelligence and ideology of the royal courts and the people. Though much of its legendary beauty has eroded due to time and neglect, what remains today still presents to the visitor, albeit a glimpse, of the glory and splendor of Islamic Spain. In addition to being the patrons of architecture, the Moslem kings of Spain encouraged music, poetry, the plastic and performing arts and other cultural embodiments. Therefore, viewed in respect to the whole spectrum of art and culture, the Alhambra is a text that has to be interpreted and analyzed in order to understand its underlying principles and the essence of its concepts. Keeping in view the extent of the entire complex and its various architectural elements, it would be beyond the scope of this research work to study all the elements and their symbolic meanings. The focus of this thesis being the role of light in Islamic architecture, this chapter, as a result, is directed at studying the element of light *vis a vis* the Alhambra.⁷¹ Before the analysis, based on the site visit and references, is presented, a short history of Moslem Spain will help in understanding the art and architecture of the period and its culmination in the Alhambra.

⁷¹ The Court of the Lions and its adjoining rooms will be studied in detail with specific references to other parts of the palaces.

i. Historical Perspective of Islamic Spain

The Moslems arrived in Spain in the year 711 A.D. (92 A.H.) and remained there till the year 1492 A.D. making Spain the Western frontier of Islam for more than eight centuries. They called their new conquest **Al-Andalus**, the translation of Spania, the Latin term for Spain. The unified army of Berbers and Arabs after landing on the Iberian Peninsula (from across the Mediterranean) through diplomacy and warfare brought most of the peninsula under their control. They established a Moslem rule under the aegis of the Ummayyad Caliphate of Damascus, centered in Cordoba and administered by provincial governors. This period in the history of Spain is known as the **Period of the Ummayyad Governors** and it lasted till 756 A.D. Very little of the art and architecture of this period or even knowledge of it remains today.

With the overthrow of the Ummayyad Caliphate of Damascus by the Abbasids in 750 A.D., the last surviving member of the family escaped to Spain and established himself as the Emir of Spain in 756 A.D. During this period the Emir established relations with the kingdoms of North Africa (known as the Maghreb), the Christian kings of the north and cultural contact with the Abbasids. The initial construction of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, which stands even today as testimony of the monumental expression of Moslem rule in Spain, was started during the time of the first Emir. This was the formative period of Hispano-Islamic art in Spain. As successive emirs came to the throne this period came to be known as the **Ummayyad Emirate Period** and it lasted till 929 A.D.

Abd-al-Rahman III reclaimed the Ummayyad right to the caliphate and declared himself as caliph in 929 A.D. The **Period of the Ummayyad Caliphate** (929-1031 A.D) was marked by increasing activity in art and architecture and Hispano-Islamic art reached its apogee during this period. Artistic and cultural contact was maintained with the Abbasids in Baghdad and the Fatimid rulers of Tunisia and Egypt. Middle Eastern cultural impulses co-existed harmoniously with indigenous artistic components of Spain, giving rise to some of the most fascinating art and architecture seen in Islam. The construction of the palace city, Madinat-al-Zahra just outside Cordoba and the addition to the Great Mosque of Cordoba marked the high points of caliphate and religious architecture of this period.

Fostered by the civil war of 1010 - 1013 A. D. the Ummayyad Caliphate collapsed and local governors designated themselves as autonomous rulers of the provinces. These small provinces came to be known as the **Taifa Kingdoms** which lasted until 1086 A.D. The Taifa kings continued the practice of building monumental palaces and continued princely patronage saw an increase in the number of centers where art, literature, poetry and music was studied.

In the year 1085 A.D., the **Almoravids**, a Moslem power from North Africa entered Spain to help the Taifa kings repel Christian armies. In due course the Almoravids assumed control of Spain and in 1090 A.D. established their rule with Marrakesh in North Africa as the seat of power. They sponsored austere programs of architectural decoration

in the earlier part of their rule and later integrated with the existing culture of Al-Andalus. In the twelfth century, the Almoravids were replaced by another Moslem dynasty from North Africa. The **Almohads** took control of Spain and made Seville their capital, while Marrakesh remained the center of power. In 1212 A.D., the Almohads were defeated by Christian armies of Aragon and Castile and Moslem Spain once again disintegrated into small kingdoms. The smaller principalities were eventually taken over by Christian monarchs, except for the province of Granada which was ruled by the Nasrid dynasty. Under the Almohads, architecture became more austere than it was under the Almoravids and ornamentation became geometrical and abstract. The Great Mosque of Seville and the famous minaret, La Giralada, were the high points of this period.

The **Nasrid Kingdom** of Spain was founded by Muhammad I of Arjona in 1238 A.D. and consisted of the province of Granada in southern Spain. The province of Granada included the city of Granada and other prominent towns such as Jaen, Almeria, Malaga and Gibraltar. Granada was the only province under Moslem rule at this time, the rest of Spain having been conquered by the Christians. In spite of the constant military threats from the north, the Nasrid dynasty paid considerable attention to various arts. The arts of the period grew from the Almohad traditions, but displayed far more variety and richness than their precursors. The Nasrid rulers paid great attention to the decoration of their palaces as is evident from their magnum opus - the Alhambra. The creation of successive Nasrid rulers, it was under the reign of Ismail I,

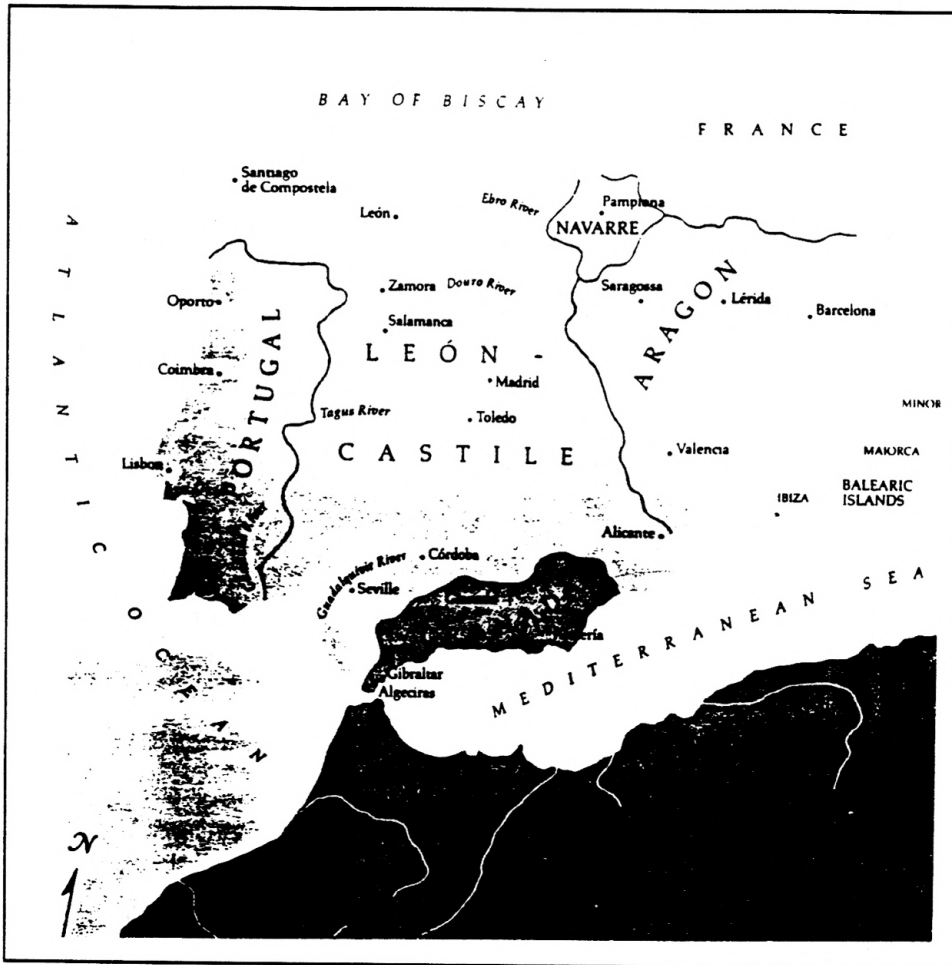


Fig. 1. Map shows the province of Granada in southern Spain during the period of the Nasrid dynasty from 1238 to 1492 A.D.

Yusuf I and Mohammed V that the most notable parts of the complex were built. The union of powerful Christian kingdoms proved to be the downfall of the Moslems in Spain. The last Nasrid king, Muhammad XII (Boabdil in Spanish) surrendered to the combined armies of Ferdinand and Isabelle on January 2, 1492. Though this ended Islam's political presence in Spain, the Alhambra and many other monuments today stand as testimony to the eight hundred year long legacy established by the Moslems in Spain.

ii. The Alhambra - a chronological introduction

The Alhambra, the last bastion of Islam's long presence in the Iberian peninsula, is considered as the finest example of Hispano-Islamic architectural style that evolved there. The name "Alhambra" or the "Red Citadel" comes from the color of its walls, which is due to the red brick that was used in its construction. The city of Granada, where the Alhambra is located, is the dominant city of southern Spain. Located at the foot hills of the Sierra Nevada mountains and close to the Mediterranean coast, Granada was the destination of Moslem immigrants from North Africa. It is in the city of Granada, whose scattered villas were compared by an Arab poet to be the "oriental pearls in an emerald setting", on a thirty five acre raised plateau, that Islam built its last royal palace in Spain - the Alhambra.

The Nasrid dynasty that built this magnificent edifice was founded by Muhammad I of Arjona in 1232 A.D. He conquered the cities of Jaen, Guadix, Baza and Cordoba and entered Granada in 1238 A.D. and founded the Nasrid kingdom. In the same year the foundation for the construction of a new fortress-palace, on the lines of the palace cities of Madinat-al-Zahra and Madinat-al-Zahira of the Ummayyad caliphs was laid. However, at the time of the death of Muhammad I in 1273 A.D., the Alhambra complex was still under construction and the residential quarters were yet to be started.

It was during the reign of Muhammad II (1273-1302 A.D) and Muhammad III (1302-1309 A.D.) that the Alhambra was changed from a fortress to a palatine city. Other

Nasrid kings, namely, Ismail I, Yusuf I and Muhammad V, made substantial additions and renovations and changed the previous structure to its present glory. The Palace of the Myrtles (also called the Palace of the Comares) was started by Ismail I, continued by Yusuf I and finally completed by Muhammad V. This palace houses the magnificent Hall of Ambassadors. The Palace of the Lions, undoubtedly the most celebrated part of the entire Alhambra complex, was built during the reign of Muhammad V (1362-1391 A.D.) to commemorate his victory in Algeciras. The palace gets its name from the fountain in the center of the courtyard, the basin of which is supported by twelve lions. The final form, as we see it today, was completed around 1369 or 1370 A.D.⁷² With increasing pressure from the Christian kings, internal strife in the Nasrid kingdom and constant danger on the frontiers, building activity suffered after the reign of Muhammad V. The only notable achievement can be credited to Muhammad VII, during whose reign a tower was added to the complex, which unfortunately displays a decline of Nasrid architecture and pales in comparison to the earlier construction. When the Christian armies finally attacked Granada, the fortified palace which the last Moslem dynasty in Spain had built over so many years never had to be defended, since it was never attacked directly. The last Nasrid king, Muhammad XII (Boabdil in Spanish) surrendered Granada and the Alhambra without a fight to the armies of Ferdinand and Isabelle on Jan 2, 1492 A.D. and departed to North Africa.

⁷² Due to the long period over which the Alhambra was built historians have found it difficult to establish an accurate chronology of the construction of different parts by the successive Nasrid kings.

Under the Christian kings the Alhambra was well preserved since it became part of the royal patrimony. The Catholic sovereigns took it upon themselves to preserve the fragile and delicate structure as an eternal testimony of their conquest. Different Christian monarchs allocated funds for the maintenance of the complex. Emperor Charles V arrived in Granada in 1526 A.D. and constructed a palace within the Alhambra complex. A part of the Palace of Myrtles at the southern end had to be removed to accommodate the new palace which stands even today.

When Napoleon's troops occupied Granada they set up their barracks in the Alhambra. Although they made certain changes and improvements, they dynamited all the towers when they were forced to flee the city. The total destruction was prevented by a daring Spanish soldier who severed the fuse and thus saved the palaces from total destruction. The complex fell into disrepair and neglect for a long time until Washington Irving set up residence there and rediscovered the Alhambra and directed world attention to it. Consequently preservation and restoration work was undertaken and today the Alhambra is under the supervision of the Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife and overlooked by the autonomous province of Al-Andalus.

iii. The Alhambra - a palatine city (an overall description)

The royal city - Alhambra (*Madinat al Hamra*) for all practical purposes was a complete city within the larger city of Granada. The walled city of Alhambra contains three principal areas within its boundaries: The Alcazaba, which was reserved exclusively for military use; The royal palaces and its surroundings (up to seven different palaces can be traced) and the *medina* itself, a residential and artisans city or a *qasba* in which administrative and commercial activities were carried out. "The Alhambra was in fact a town, a full fledged city of 740 by 220 meters, surrounded by walls and by gardens to the east and probably to the south."⁷³ The areas that were outside the walls of the Alhambra also formed an integral part of the whole. Of particular interest is the area called the Generalife, which was a semi-urban, semi-rural residence with its exquisite palace and four terrace gardens which served the royal palace. The entire complex has been constructed on a hill surrounded by steep valleys which provides it with natural defense against enemy attacks. Located on the northern side of the Alhambra is an edifice called the Castillo de Santa Elena which protected the rear of the Alhambra. The other buildings around the hill include the Palacio de la Desposada (Palace of the Bride), the Torre de las Damas (Ladie's Tower) and its system of conduits and pools, particularly the Albercones (reservoirs) which were vital to the creation and existence of the Alhambra. These buildings and others, such as, the Torres Bermejas (Vermillion Towers) to the southeast, the El Campo de los Martires (Field of Martyrs) near the Alhambra walls functioned as a

⁷³ Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*. p. 38.

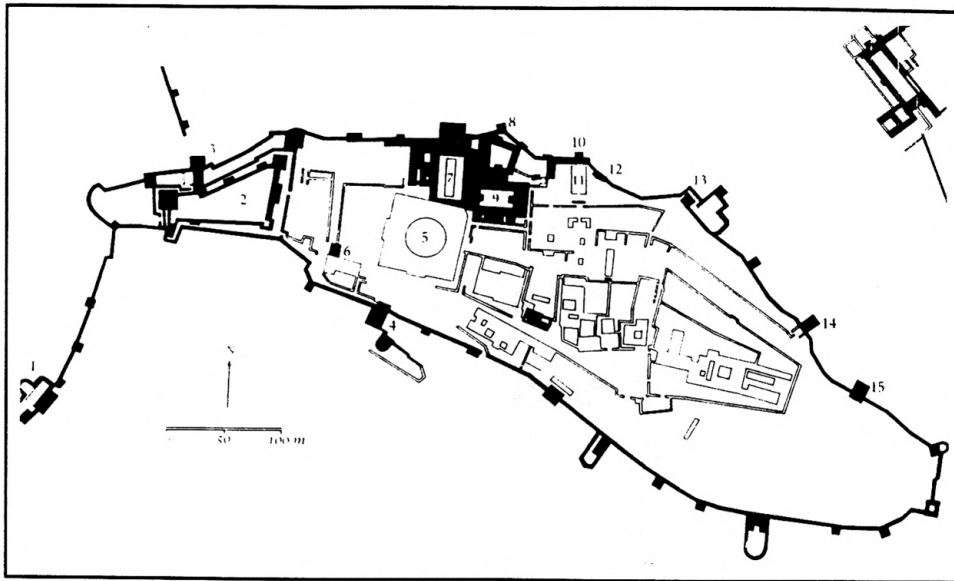


Fig. 2. Plan of the city of Alhambra.

1. Torres Bermejas (Vermillion Towers); 2. Alcazaba; 3. Puerta de las Armas (Gate of Arms); 4. Puerta de la Justicia (Gate of Justice); 5. Palace of Carlos V; 6. Puerta del Vino; 7. Palace of the Myrtles (Comares); 8. Tower of Abdul Hajjaj; 9. Palace of the Lions (Leones); 10. Torre de las Damas (Ladies Tower); 11. Patal; 12. Oratory; 13. Torre de los Picos; 14. Torre de las Cautiva; 15. Torre de las Infantas

physical belt that provided protection to the Alhambra from assault.

The Sultan's elite guards were quartered in the Alcazaba, which occupied the highest part of the hill for obvious purposes. This part, in addition to watch towers and other military structures, consisted of individual houses for the guards and their families and is laid out in a typical Islamic urban pattern. Internal courtyards, water bodies, barracks and open plazas formed an integral part of the Alcazaba.

The most important and attractive part of a city like the Alhambra is its palaces which serve as a residence for the king and his family. Lasting over a period of more than 250 years, twenty three different kings of the Nasrid dynasty occupied the Alhambra palaces.

Seven discrete palaces can be identified in the complex. However, owing to the fact that some of them were altered and others rebuilt, it is difficult to date them.

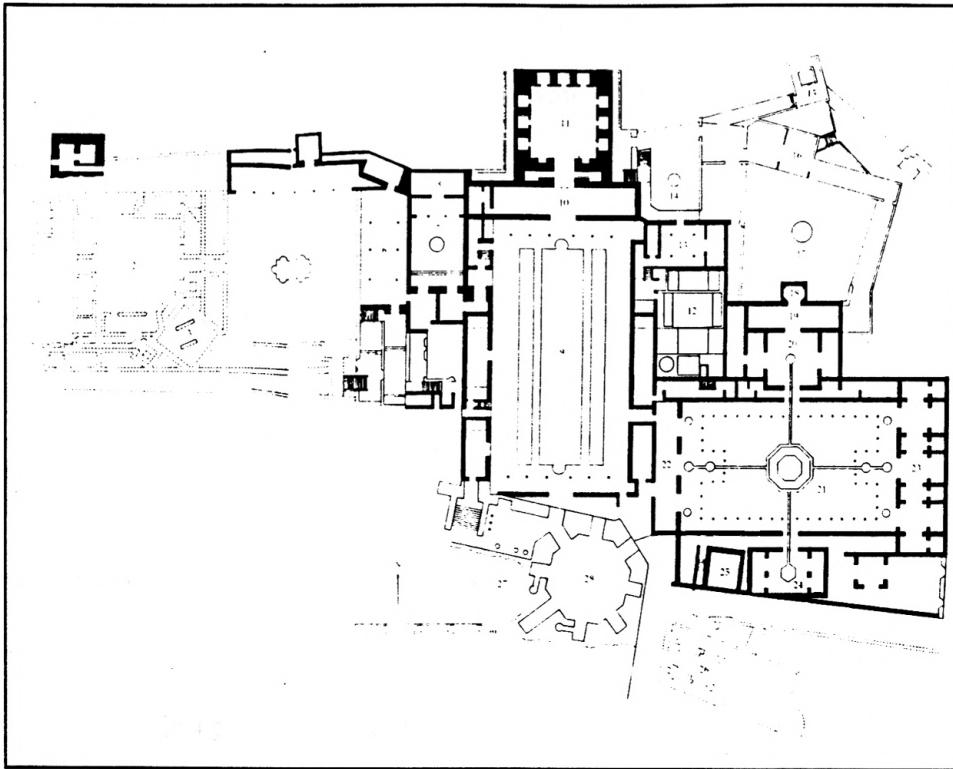


Fig. 3. A complete ground plan of the Alhambra showing the different palaces including the palace built by Charles (Carlos) V during the Christian occupation of Granada in the post 1492 A.D. period.

Thus we have the Palace of Ismail, the Palace of Comares (Palace of Myrtles), Palace of Lions, the Partal, Palace of Yusuf III, Palace of the Convent of San Francisco and the Palace of the Abencerajjes.

The gardens of the Alhambra which form the third part of the city, mark the culmination of a long tradition of garden estates that started in eighth century Cordoba. The

Alhambra gardens, therefore, exhibit a complex layering of Zirid, Nasrid, baroque, neo-classical and modern conceptions of landscaping. While most of the palaces had their own exclusive gardens, the Generalife palace which occupied a distinct area consists of terrace gardens on the slopes of the ravine. Planned along a longitudinal axis, the Generalife gardens get their constant supply of water from the Sierra Nevada mountains through a complex network of aqueducts.

iv. The Alhambra and the Aspect of Light

"While water dominates the whole architecture and landscaping of the Alhambra, it is light that defines its spaces and forms. The forms of the Alhambra are light congealed, transmuted by an alchemy which turns material forms into so many crystallizations of light."⁷⁴

Islam has always refused to distinguish between the sacred and the profane by believing that everything belongs to the realm of the sacred. By integrating religion into all facets of life and determining life on the basis of religious tenets (the concept of unity in particular), everything in Islam becomes sacred, a fact that is substantially reflected in its architecture. Whether it is the house, palace, the *madrasah* (religious educational institution), the traditional bazaar or any other building, the aim of traditional Islamic architecture has always been to constantly invoke the presence of the divine through various architectural techniques and elements. It is from this view point that all of traditional Islamic architecture has to be understood - on the basis that everything built is a work of sacred art, irrespective of its form and function. Moreover, the unitary

⁷⁴ S H Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 48.

aspect in Islam is such that it embraces architecture both in its totality and its individual elements. Architectural elements such as, form, space, light, color, shape are all means of applying metaphysical principles in the built form. If the traditional Islamic architect paid great attention to the designing and building of mosques, so that it always reminded man of his Creator, the same concept of space and form was extended to other buildings irrespective of the primary function they had to perform. If the mosque is the sacred structure par excellence in Islam because prayer is performed in it, every other space becomes equally sacred due to the fact that prayer can be performed in any place. " Between the architecture of the mosque and that of a private house, there is a difference in plan, but not in style, for every Moslem dwelling is a place of prayer: the same rites are performed there as in a mosque."⁷⁵ Through the polarization of space and form, by orienting mosques in the direction of the *Kaba'a*; through pure geometry and application of mathematics in surface decoration, these being symbolic of the cosmos; the play of light and shade, light being the perfect symbol of divine unity; through domes, arches, arabesque patterns; calligraphy, the art of Quranic inscriptions; internal open courtyards which are the reflection of paradise - traditional Islamic architecture created and employed all these means not merely to fulfill an architectural function but to remind man of the symbolic significance that they represent. In traditional Islamic architecture material form is not divorced from meaning and meaning is never separate from what is spiritual: this is demonstrated by Arabic vocabulary, where the word *man'a* indicates both 'meaning'

⁷⁵ Refer to the essay "Perennial Values in Islamic Art" by Titus Burckhardt in his book, *Mirror of the Intellect*, p. 225.

and `spiritual'.⁷⁶

The Alhambra, though built to fulfill the function of a royal residence, is replete with connotations of the sacred, in a manner that was common in traditional Islamic architecture. The overall composition of its individual palaces, its intricate ornamentation, the pure geometry of its arabesques, the *muqarnas* filled dome ceilings, the constant flow of water, its open courtyards and the manner in which light has been used in the entire complex - though very formal concepts at first sight are paradigms of a highly abstract art form. It is perhaps in these esoteric and exoteric aspects of the Alhambra, the various elements of its formal beauty and their symbolic significance, that has made it the destination of people from all over the world. Thus while its formal legendary beauty holds the common visitor spellbound; philosophers, romanticists, artists and architects have sought to investigate the inner beauty of the Alhambra. The form and spaces of this edifice are such that, they evoke a response, both from one's intellect and soul - which in Moslem religious belief are vehicles to attain gnosis or true knowledge. "... the whole building of the Alhambra is permeated with a deep Moslem sense of a permanent presence of the divine, not as an agent in human affairs, nor as a witness requiring certain marks of respect or certain modes of behavior, but simply as the unavoidable possessor of all creation of all time."⁷⁷ The permanent presence of the divine is represented through the repetitive litany of a variety of elements that were created by the Moslem artist to

⁷⁶ Paraphrasing the words of S H Nasr in the foreword to the book, *The Sense of Unity* by Ardalan and Bakhtiar.

⁷⁷ Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*, p. 135.

evoke in the observer a feeling of the divine. However, if individual elements are to be mentioned, the Alhambra does not display any new or original architectural element(s) created by the artist to represent Islam's fundamental principle. What one sees in the Alhambra is the perception of the artists exhibited through the manner in which these traditional elements have been used in the overall composition of the complex. Of particular importance is the surface decoration, the calligraphy, the jali covered wall openings and the honeycomb (*muqarnas*) cells. The Alhambra artists have merely taken these existing architectural elements which are typical of traditional Islamic architecture and exploited them to the maximum. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the Islamic artist has three means at his disposal to represent Unity -geometry, rhythm and light. Of the three, light in view of its Quranic significance is the most perfect symbol of Divine Unity.⁷⁸ It is in the Palace of Lions where all three means have been profoundly explored and presented in the built form. To understand clearly the manner in which light has been explored, a brief description of the palace is essential.

⁷⁸ In this context it should be mentioned that the selection of light as a symbol of Unity does not intend to demean the other elements that the Moslem artist has created to represent Unity. The selection is based on the significance of light in Islam and is explained in detail in Chapter V of the thesis.

The Palace of Lions - a brief description of the layout.

Legend proclaims that the Alhambra was an earthly paradise. If this is true, then there is no doubt that the Palace of Lions must have been instrumental in the formation of this view. Considered by historians as the most celebrated part of the entire complex, the palace was built by Muhammad V between 1362 and 1391 A.D. As characteristic

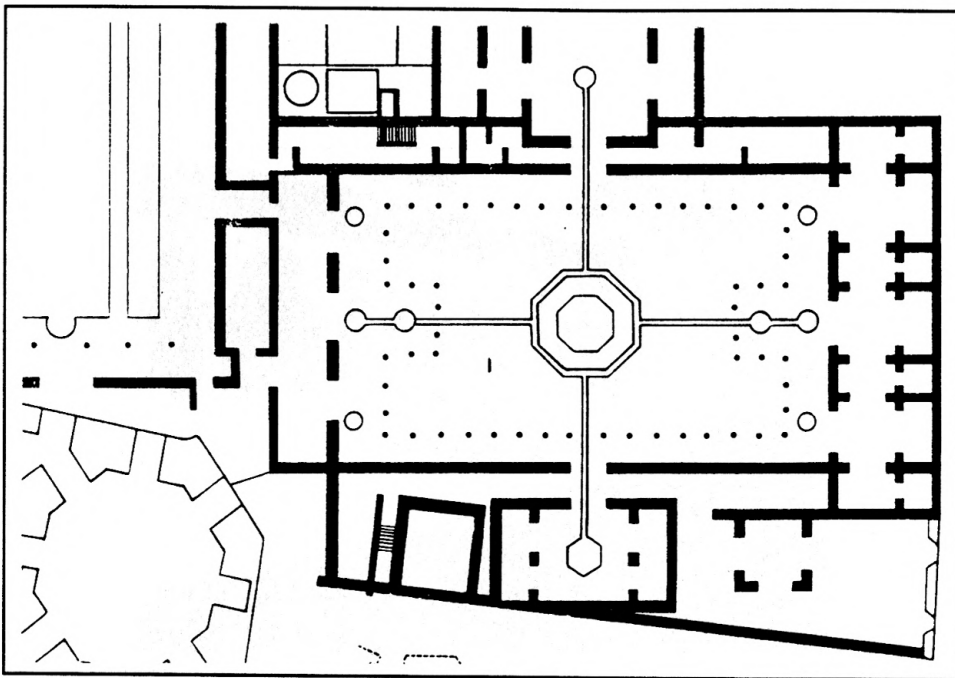


Fig. 4. A detailed plan of the Palace of the Lions including the courtyard with the fountain in the center.

1. Courtyard; 2. Hall of the Mocarbes; 3. Hall of the Abencerajjes; 4. Hall of the Kings; 5. Hall of the Two Sisters; 6. and 7. Covered square shaped projections.

of the other palaces of the Alhambra, the overall dominant architectural feature of the palace is the open courtyard which includes the famous "lions fountain" in the center. The colonnaded courtyard is 28.5m by 15.70m (approximately 95' by 52') in dimension. The significant halls of the palace are located on each side of the courtyard. Though, at first sight the courtyard seems simple and formal, both in

layout and appearance, it is a complex composition of proportions between its length, width and height. In conjunction with this is the relation between the interior and exterior that gives the courtyard its remarkable characteristics. Furthermore, the monotony of the covered corridor and the overall quality of space in the courtyard is further enhanced by the square shaped projection of the corridor into the open court on both the shorter sides. These projected areas have a dome shaped ceiling of wood on the inside which is covered by a pyramidal tiled roof. Water channels running from the center culminate in a pool



Fig. 5. A view of the colonnaded Courtyard of the Lions with the lions fountain in the center. Water channels running from the four cardinal directions culminate at the center.

of water under the dome ceiling of the projected areas at both ends of the shorter sides. On the longer sides, the channels end as pools of water that reflect the magnificent dome ceilings inside the adjoining rooms.

"The complex of the Lions is not a simple juxtaposition of separate units.... It is in fact

a very intricate complex in which the whole and its parts are unusually related to each other."⁷⁹ To understand its overall composition the courtyard should be viewed from the top rather than viewing at eye level . This view displays a complex hierarchy of parts starting with the courtyard which is a composition of nearly square units surrounded by a covered corridor on all four sides.

On the western side of the court is a rectangular room called the Hall of the Mocarbes (Sala de los Mocarabes). The notable feature of this hall is a Renaissance ceiling, partly damaged due to past neglect. Directly opposite at the eastern end of the court is the Hall of the Kings (Sala de los Reyes) which is again a rectangular hall divided into three square units alternating with smaller spaces. The square units have arched doorways leading into the room from



Fig. 6. An interior view of the Hall of Kings. The interplay of light and shade is created by alternate openings which is further accentuated by the light coming from the jali covered windows at the roof level.

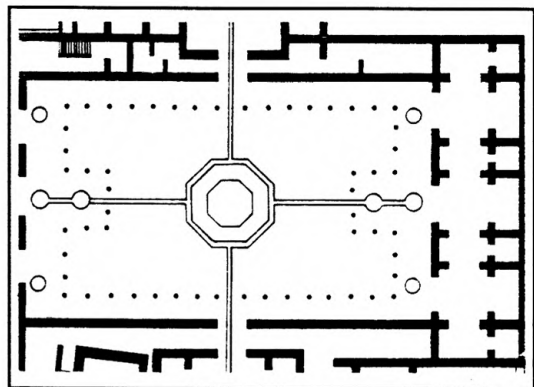


Fig. 7. Ground plan of the Hall of Kings. Alternate openings leading to and from the corridor gives the room its characteristic features.

⁷⁹ Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*, p. 164.

the covered portico, while the smaller rectangular parts are walled on the side facing the courtyard. Each of these square parts not only afford a direct view of the entire courtyard, but the light entering from the openings creates a succession of light and dark spaces, enhancing the details of the room and defining its spaces. With the change in the source of illumination during the day, the intensity of the light and dark spaces vary, presenting a different ambience every time one enters the room. Added to this interplay of light and shade is the effect of the light reflected by the dome shaped ceiling. Light entering from the windows placed at the base of the dome, illuminates the inner surface of the dome which is filled with *muqarnas* or honeycomb cells.

On the longer sides of the courtyard, exactly opposite each other, are situated the two most impressive and awe-inspiring rooms of the entire Alhambra complex and probably the very *raison d'etre* of its legendary beauty. On the south side lies the Hall of Abencerajjes, a square hall with two rectangular appendages on either side. The wall surfaces are tiled to a height of about four feet and above it the wall is completely decorated with geometrical and arabesque patterns and calligraphic inscriptions in stucco. A water channel leading from the courtyard culminates in a pool of water in the center of the room. The high point of the room is the dome shaped ceiling filled with layers of *muqarnas* ascending with the dome to the top. The dome itself is set on an octagonal base the walls of which protrude out in a star shaped (sixteen sided) formation. The *muqarnas*, which form a part of the decoration below the star shaped wall, are suspended in space in a downward motion and resemble the stalactites which one sees in nature.

Across the court on the opposite side (the northern end) is the Hall of Two Sisters (Sala de las Hermanas), a square room which again displays a *muqarnas* filled dome ceiling set on an octagonal base. The hall is flanked by rooms on three sides, two of which are unlit side rooms; the third room at the northern end is a square pavilion, exquisitely decorated, with a *mirador* (look out windows) placed just above floor level.

In the Palace of the Lions, ceramic tiles, abstract geometrical patterns, arabesques and calligraphic inscriptions constitute the main elements of wall decoration, while the ceilings are dome shaped and filled with honeycomb cells (*muqarnas*). The open courtyard has stucco decoration, arcaded colonnades and water channels as the main features. Thus,

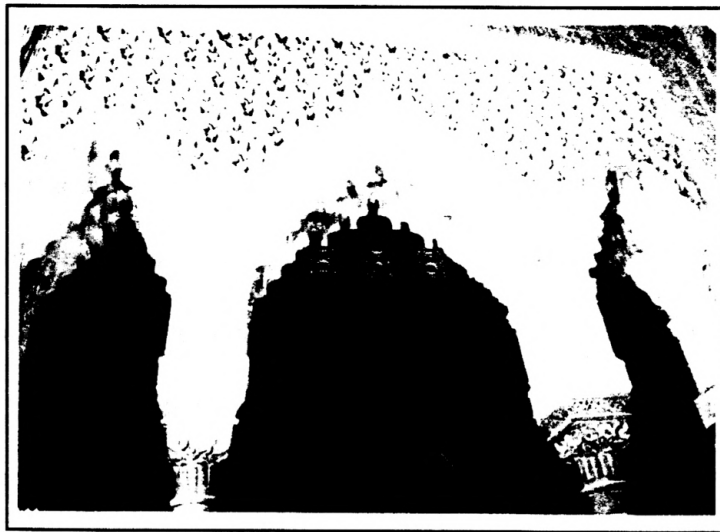


Fig. 8. The picture shows the surface decoration consisting of intricate arabesque and geometrical patterns above the columns. The *muqarnas* or honeycomb cells, the other characteristic feature of decoration is used to decorate the soffit of arches.

while the arches and the intricate decoration of the walls above them are the elements of admiration in the courtyard, it is the columns which not only fulfill a structural function, but contribute to the creation of an ambivalent atmosphere and a notion of weightlessness. As analogous of earlier Cordoban

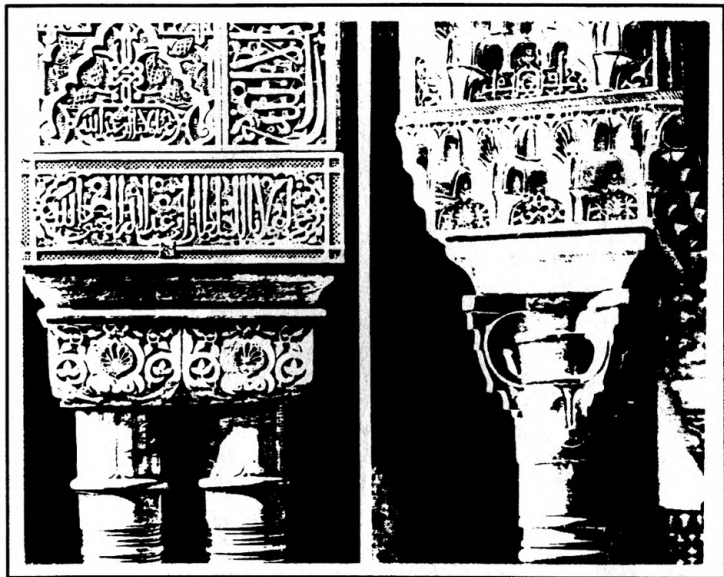


Fig. 9. Two typical columns seen in the palaces of the Alhambra. The one on the left is belongs to the Palace of the Lions. The one on the right is seen in the Court of Cuarto Dorado and belongs to an earlier period. However, the overall theme - slender cylindrical column, decorated capital and impost block above - of the structural member and the type of material used remains the same.

architecture, the Alhambra displays short cylindrical marble columns, which constitutes an integral part of the aesthetical aspect of the Courtyard of the Lions. These slender columns have foliated decoration on their capitals, above which is the impost block with calligraphic inscriptions, the point from which the arch springs. The soffit of the arches is decorated with foliated or geometrical patterns or with *muqarnas* cells, while the walls above are exquisitely decorated with stucco. This entire composition (of column, capital, impost block, arch and the wall above), is repeated continuously and creates the main visual impact that grasps the immediate attention of the visitor. However, upon continuous observation one begins to realize that it is the column which forms the key element in the entire theme. Though the courtyard displays a large number of columns,

spaced at regular intervals at certain places and at other places grouped together, at no time do these large number of columns overwhelm the courtyard and dominate its aesthetic and physical composition. The slenderness of their shape and the brilliance of the white marble make the columns seem as translucent elements, engaged in the act of defying the laws of nature and creating the illusion of an upward movement. Whether it is the direct light falling on these columns, the light reflected off the decorated walls



Fig. 10. Slender white marble columns appear to diffuse in the brilliance of direct and reflected light, in the process, giving an illusion of weightlessness to the entire courtyard.

above, or the sheer delicateness of the columns themselves which create this illusion is hard to tell - but the illusion that the artist intended to create in this case is visibly clear. Under this illusion, mass loses its material significance, gravity seems to lose its grip on the structure and the entire courtyard seems to disappear into sparkling light while the entire structure rising above appears to be completely weightless.⁸⁰ Physical/phenomenal light, therefore, becomes the primary element used by the artists to explore and exploit the forms of the structure and the various elements, both in the inner Hall of Kings and the outer courtyard domains.

⁸⁰ Paraphrasing the words of Titus Burckhardt in his book *Moorish Culture in Spain*, p. 205.

According to a saying of the Prophet:

"God hides Himself behind seventy thousand curtains of light and darkness, if they were taken away, all that His sight reaches would be consumed by the lightnings of His Countenance."⁸¹

In reference to the Prophetic saying, which states that man is separated from God by veils of light (and darkness), the artists believed that light, the perfect symbol of Divine Unity, had to be viewed and received by the human being through an intermediary. Moslems believe that it is the knowledge acquired through the learning and understanding of the Quran that enables the believer to transcend the various veils of light and view the Divine Light directly; thus by symbolic transfer, even the physical/phenomenal light (the light of the sun) cannot be viewed directly but only after it has been filtered. As a result, the artists transferred this abstract concept into concrete architectural paradigms and used certain forms, elements and materials, such that they would act as intermediaries between the human being (who sees and experiences the form and space) and the sun. Ceramic tiles on walls and domes, perforated surface decoration, geometrical and arabesque patterns, jali covered wall openings, the *muqarnas* or honeycomb cells, color and other elements were invented and used as "veils" to soften and filter the brightness of light.

This theory, which the artists effectively employed as concepts to create the built environment, gains greater significance when viewed in relation to Al-Ghazzali's treatise on the Light Verse of the Quran which has been discussed in detail in Chapter V. The

⁸¹ This saying has been analyzed in detail in Chapter V of this thesis. It is being mentioned at this point to put it in perspective of the description and discussion of the Alhambra in relation to its aspect of light.

architectural elements which constitute the built form perform the function of 'filtering' the light so as to diffuse its brightness and thus, metaphorically speaking, to act as veils preceding the Divine Light. Moreover, in Islamic philosophy and theosophy, the 'Word of God' is not separate from His Being. The Quran thus becomes a symbol of Divine Light, in the sense that it is illuminated and illuminates the intellect which Islam believes is the direct link to Divinity.⁸² The artist sought to recreate this metaphysical realm in the physical order of architecture, by establishing a relationship between the built form and the human being, by evoking a feeling of Divine presence using the aspect of light. To elucidate this further, the verses of the Quran (which Al-Ghazzali in his treatise, the *Mishkat-al-Anwar*, calls 'light') are synonymous to the various architectural elements created and used by the Moslem artist. A Moslem believes that by reading and understanding the Quran, the intellect transcends the 'veils of light' in a process of *tawil* or spiritual hermeneutics and attains spiritual gnosis; the artist translates this belief into an architectural expression by creating elements that help the observer tread the path of *tawil*. "The walls of certain mosques, covered with glazed earthenware mosaic or a tissue of delicate arabesques in stucco, recall the symbolism of the curtain (*hijab*). The curtains are made of light in that they hide the Divine "obscurity", and of darkness in that they veil the Divine Light."⁸³ The Light Verse of the Quran which states that, "God is the Light of the Heavens and Earth", refers to both physical light and celestial light. Thus while the light of the sun is the physical or phenomenal light which is perceived through

⁸² This concept has been dealt in detail in Chapter V of the thesis. Also refer *Mishkat-al-Anwar* by Al-Ghazzali.

⁸³ Titus Burckhardt. *Sacred Art in the East and West*. p. 111.

one's sight, the celestial light is perceived through one's insight or intellect. It is in this respect that the Moslem artist works with light and seeks to transform his creation into a vibration of light (paraphrasing the words of Titus Burckhardt). The above stated concepts, both physical and metaphysical, can best be understood by a passage from classical Persian literature which is an apt summation to the above discussion:

"The difficulty of knowing God is therefore due to brightness; He is so bright that mens hearts have not the strength to perceive it. There is nothing brighter than the sun, for through it all things become manifest, yet if the sun did not go down at night, or if it were not veiled by reason of the shade, no one would realize that there is such a thing as light on the face of the earth. Seeing nothing but white and green and other colors, they would say that nothing more exists. However, they have realized that light is a thing outside colors, the colors becoming manifest through it.... they have apprehended light through its opposite, He is hidden by His very brightness."⁸⁴

The physical representation of the veils theory occurs at different levels in the built order of the Alhambra. At one level it manifests itself in the manner in which the different palaces have been located in relation to each other and the individual rooms within the palace. This constitutes the broader level. On a more precise level, inside the rooms, it occurs in the theme of the wall surface decoration and the manner in which light sources have been located. What follows immediately is a discussion of the theory at the broader level. The manner in which the theory has been manifested at the specific level will be outlined after all the elements of surface decoration have been discussed.

⁸⁴ Quoted from the book, *The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* by Ardalan and Bakthiar, p. 47. For original source refer to the book, *Classical Persian Literature*, translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 78.

One of the exceptional features of the entire Alhambra complex, more so about its palaces, is the absolute simplicity of its exterior wall elevations in comparison to the exquisite and complex assemblage of decoration on the interior surfaces. The exterior brick walls are mere profiles, silhouettes of the structural masses of stark blank walls, while the interior is an agglomeration of enigmatic architectural archetypes. One might even conclude that the bare appearance of the outside is misleading and provides absolutely no indication whatsoever of the breathtaking beauty which exists inside. The entire effort of the artists have been directed at the embellishment of the interior areas leaving the beauty of the hills and the natural landscape of Granada to adorn the outer walls.

In addition to this unique feature of contrast between the inner and outer domains, is the interrelationship and the juxtaposition of the different rooms and spaces of the various palaces. From the moment one enters the palace complex, through the Alcazaba (military quarters) or from the open area where the oratory is located (refer fig. 2) and exits near the royal gardens, the entire journey is a series of surprise revelations of the different aspects of the Alhambra. On leaving one room and entering another or merely turning a bend or walking around a corner, one is introduced to a new realm, an altogether different domain. Each step, each turn, each arrival and departure discloses another secret and better defines the mood and character of the monument. The palace unfolds itself to the visitor, exposing each time a different dimension of its beauty. Moving from the Mexuar (the first room through which one enters the palace complex) to the Court of

Cuarto Dorado and then to the Palace of the Myrtles and finally the Palace of the Lions, one can perceive and feel the structure unveiling its beauty in different stages and finally reaching its pinnacle. Leaving one room and entering another is not merely a physical exercise but an emotional and even spiritual one too. It seems that each beautiful realm leads to something even more beautiful and divine. The intricately decorated walls act as veils, which open and lead the visitor to witness a different aspect of its intricacy and splendor. Although designed and built over a long period of time by different architects and craftsmen, there seems to be a conscious attempt by the designers to maintain a continuity in the type of decoration, the use of architectural elements and the type of materials used. In fact, the entire planning and designing concept of the Alhambra (the palace complex as a whole and the theme of surface decoration) seems to be based on the "veils theory".⁸⁵ Wherein, this demonstrates not only a profound relationship based on a sense of coherence between the parts and the individual elements, but helps the visitor to transcend one realm (a veil) and guides to another aspect of its brilliance, in the process opening the various veils till the visitor has reached the final destination.

⁸⁵ The veils theory has been elucidated in detail in Chapter V of this document. An analysis of the veils theory and its relationship to the physical structure of the Alhambra follows in the latter part of this chapter.

Four types of wall surface patterns are predominant in the decoration theme of the Alhambra:

- (i) repetitive geometrical and organic patterns (arabesques),
- (ii) multicolored mosaic tile work,
- (iii) calligraphic inscriptions and
- (iv) Honeycomb cells. Wood is almost exclusively used for ceilings in certain parts, while stucco is the main decorative material.

The tile work, mostly restricted to a height of four to five feet, consists of plain colored tiles on some walls and on others complex geometrical patterns have been formed. In the Palace of the Lions, for example, the

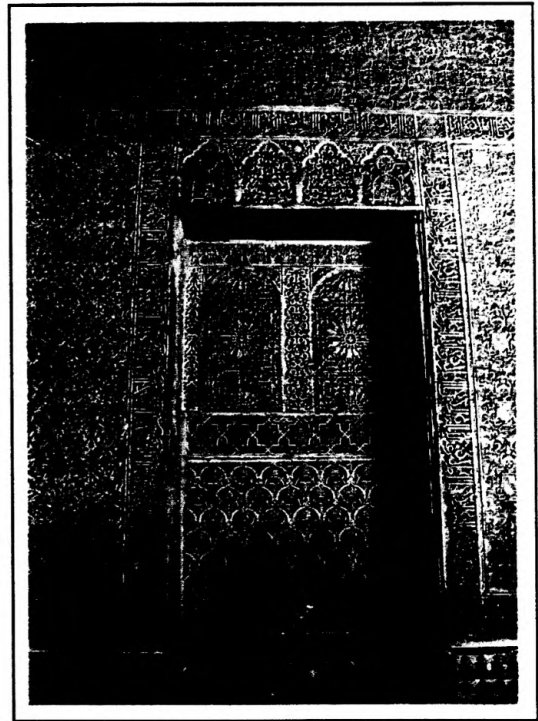


Fig. 11. The picture presents a typical surface decoration theme seen in the different palaces of the Alhambra. Abstract geometrical and arabesque patterns combined with intricate calligraphy, starting usually three-four feet above ground level and continuing upto the ceiling. Tilework is exclusively limited to below that (three-four feet from ground level) inside the room and the corridors. Muqarnas, forming part of wall surface decoration, usually form a broad band just below the ceiling.

tilework is integrated with the stucco decoration through the use of abstract geometrical patterns in the interior, while the corridors exhibit plain patterns. While color, which is a significant aspect of Islamic architecture, will be discussed in detail in a later part, the limiting of the tilework to the lower part of the walls is not without particular significance.⁸⁶ Titus Burckhardt, the noted Swiss philosopher and art historian, attributes

⁸⁶ In contrast to other Islamic monuments, particularly those of Persia (Isfahan) or even the mosques of Samarkhand in Uzbekistan where ceramic tile patterns dominate surface decoration, the Alhambra craftsmen have limited the use of tiles to only the lower part of the wall and in rare cases on the jambs of doors.

this aspect of decoration in the Alhambra to the fact that glazed tiles reflect light and thus aid in diminishing the perceived heaviness of the structure. Similar to the slender marble columns, the tiled walls react with light and create an illusion of merging and dissolving in the radiance of the light. To quote the words of Titus Burckhardt, "... the Moslem artist seeks to transform matter into a crystallization of light. It is to this effect that he covers interior surfaces of a mosque or palace and occasionally the outer ones with mosaics in ceramic tiles. This lining is often confined to the lower parts of the walls as if to dispel their heaviness."⁸⁷

It is not only the glaze of the tiles that creates this "dispelling-the-heaviness" effect, but it is also due to the choice of colors and the patterns created by using these colors. Among the various elements used by the artist in traditional architecture, color is definitely of great significance. "In the Islamic tradition, color is considered primarily from a metaphysical point of view, one which sees the duality of light and darkness as permanent possibilities latent in the celestial archetypes."⁸⁸ While light has been used to define and order space in traditional Islamic architecture, color, which has its own symbolic significance, results from the polarization of light. Between the extremes light and darkness, signified by white and black respectively, lies the entire spectrum of colors. White in Islam symbolizes the realm of the pure and the unity of all colors, an

⁸⁷ Titus Burckhardt. *The Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, p. 123.

⁸⁸ Ardalan and Bakhtiar. *The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*. p. 47.

aspect which can best be described by the phrase, "unity in diversity", while colors individually symbolize the "manifestation of the One in the many." If in Islamic metaphysics, light is symbolic of Divine Being, on the physical plane white fulfills this function. "White is the integration of all colors, pure and unstained. In its manifested state it is the color of Pure Light before individualization, before the One became the many. Light, symbolically viewed as white descends from the sun and symbolizes Unity."⁸⁹

Black, blue, green, ocher and white are the predominant colors of tiles in the Palace of the Lions which remain to date. Colors were also used to embellish the honeycomb cells (*muqarnas*) of the domes and wall surface decoration. Though most of the original color which adorned the stucco decoration has faded (having completely worn off due to past neglect), from the faint traces of color on the domes and wall surfaces and a completely restored (room refer fig. 13), it can be

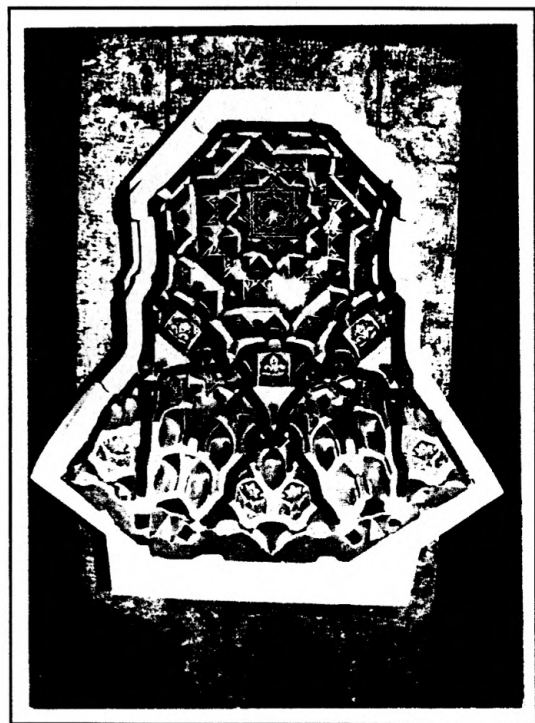


Fig. 12. A restored part of a ceiling with muqarnas cells, now in the Alhambra museum, displays the different colors which were used for surface decoration.

⁸⁹ *ibid.* p. 48. Ardalan and Bakhtiar have dealt with the symbolism of color in detail in their book, *The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, in a separate chapter.

observed that gold, red, blue, green and white were the predominantly used colors.⁹⁰ The use of colors can also be observed in the wooden ceilings of the corridors in the Palace of Lions and the dome shaped ceiling in the Hall of Ambassadors in the Palace of the Myrtles.



Fig. 13. The picture of a royal bath (Sala Camas) with a small open courtyard represents a completely restored part of the Alhambra, wherein, the colors have also been restored. Though, presently, not wholly accessible to the general public, this part provides a glimpse of the past grandeur and original beauty of the palaces.

Gold, dark blue and traces of red have been used with different shades of wood. In ceilings where miniature cupolas have been created with honeycomb cells they are painted in red, blue, gold and green. The choice of these four colors (red, blue, gold

⁹⁰ During the site visit to the Alhambra the researcher noticed these colors in what was a partially preserved room which has now been completely restored to its original beauty. The use of mainly five colors (gold, red, blue, green and white) was observed on patterned wall surfaces, decorated column capitals, calligraphic inscriptions and *muqarnas* cells.

(yellow) and green) is a conscious decision and not without certain symbolic significance. These four colors are not only in vision the primary colors, but they correspond to the four fundamental characteristics of nature which are the four elements of matter - fire(red), air(yellow), earth (blue) and water (green). This goes to demonstrate that the various details of form and shape are the result of a conscious creation with their attached symbolic values and meanings.

Among the various architectonic elements that the Alhambra artists and craftsmen created to manifest Unity in the built form, it is undoubtedly the magnificent *muqarnas* (honeycomb cells) that provide the greatest visual impact. While the abstract geometrical pattern is a two dimensional rhythmic repetition, the *muqarnas* are a three dimensional spatial form of decoration. A development of early Islamic architecture, the *muqarnas* were used all over the traditional Islamic world, but it is in the Alhambra that its potential has been explored to the maximum. On the soffit of arches, on the inner surface of vaults, domes and cupolas, at the edge of the wall just below the roof, on column capitals - this unique Islamic form has

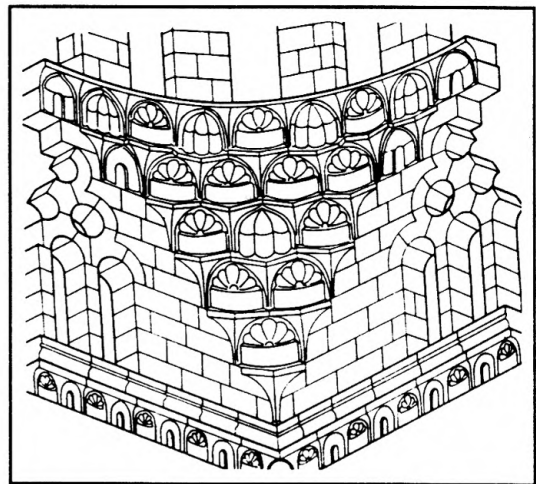


Fig. 14. *Muqarnas* forming a passage from square (usually the walls of a room) to a circle (dome). The cells fill the space between the dome and the walls below and create a relationship between the two elements, that which is above and that which is below.

been represented in its entire diversity in the Alhambra. Its ingenious use as an element

of decoration makes it the single most widely used three dimensional element in the Alhambra palaces. "... it is impossible to understand the Alhambra without understanding its (*muqarnas*) purpose and range of possibilities."⁹¹ Stucco which is the primary material used in the surface and ceiling decoration of the Alhambra has played an important part in the creation of what seems an infinite number of *muqarnas*, particularly in the Palace of the Lions.

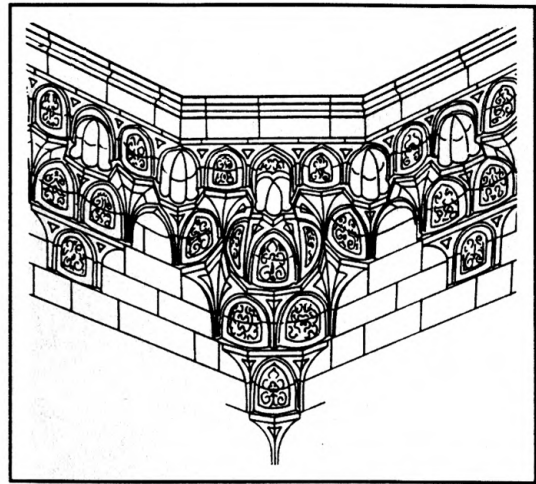


Fig. 15. Muqarnas forming a passage from a square (the walls of a room) to an octagon, which is usually the structural shape from on which the dome rests. The construction of the dome in the Hall of the Abencerajjes in the Palace of the Lions is based on this structural pattern.

Similar to the other elements discussed earlier, the *muqarnas* are not without their own symbolic significance. The significance of these cells is attributed to the fact that they not only form an integral part and a distinctive feature of Islamic ornamentation with their unique three dimensional form, but also to the remarkable ease and ability with which they trap and diffuse light, enhancing the overall quality of space. Moreover, the versatile and flexible manner in which these cells could be shaped provided greater potential for their use throughout the Islamic architectural world. The three dimensional form of the cells provided volume, while giving complete freedom to the craftsmen to decide its different dimensions.

⁹¹ Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*, p. 175.

In the Hall of the Abencerajjes as well as the Hall of the Two Sisters, the entire surface of the dome is filled with these honeycomb cells.⁹² The dome in the Hall of the Abencerajjes rests on an octagonal base, the walls of which protrude outward in a star shaped form. Above the base of the walls are jali covered openings corresponding to each side of the star shaped wall. The *muqarnas* filled dome starts from just above these covered openings, while *muqarnas* are also placed immediately below the protruding

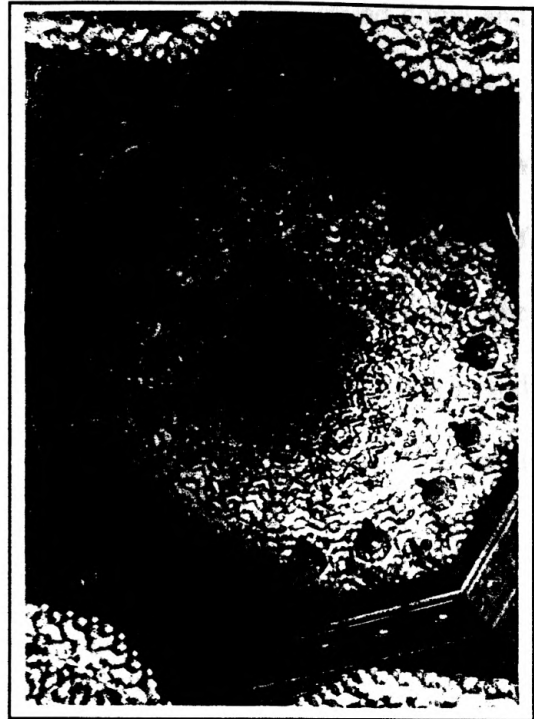


Fig. 16. The dome in the Hall of the Abencerajjes filled with *muqarnas* cells. The dome springs from an octagonal base as seen in the picture.

walls of the octagonal base. The ceiling of the Hall of the two Sisters is similar to the one described above, but the base walls are not star shaped. The symbolic significance of the *muqarnas*, its constant use as dominant feature of decoration in the Alhambra and its relationship as an architectural element with respect to light can be better understood in association to the significance of the dome itself in Islamic architecture. In Islamic cosmology the dome represents the eternally rotating sky, while the octagonal base on which it rests represents the angelic world and the square below belongs to the terrestrial world. Though in the Alhambra the surface of the dome consists of *muqarnas* cells, they

⁹² According to Goury and Jones in their book *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra*, nearly five thousand cells fill the dome of the Hall of the Two Sisters.

were initially used in Islamic architecture to fill the niche between the round dome and its square support (this can also be seen in the dome shaped ceilings of the Alhambra). In allegorical terms, these stalactite shaped cells occupied the intermediate realm between the cosmos and the earth. By virtue of this position they fulfilled the formidable task of creating a relationship, a continuity, a transition between the dome and its support, in the architectural order, while in the sacred order they bring together the cosmological and terrestrial domains of nature. Elucidating the significance of these cells, Titus Burckhardt remarks:

"The *muqarnas* have a both static and mythical character, as is brought out most clearly by transposing the relationship of dome to base, or sphere to cube, back to its cosmic model, which is none other than that of heaven and earth.... The honeycomb of *muqarnas* linking the cupola to its quadrangular base is therefore an echo of the motion of heaven in the terrestrial order."⁹³

The *muqarnas* of the Alhambra clearly display the manner in which light reacts with it in comparison to other surfaces - absorbing and diffusing it in subtle gradations. Whether it is early in the morning, at high noon or close to dusk - the change in the source of light creates a serene and calm setting in the domed halls of the Alhambra. In spite of light entering from different openings at different places in a hall, at no time is one struck by blinding glare or by total darkness. This is the effect the *muqarnas* create, speaking in a formal sense, while symbolically they 'filter' the 'blinding light' and act as veils to reduce its intensity. The openings in the halls of the Court of Lions are placed in such a manner that at the roof level, light enters through the jali covered openings at the base

⁹³ Titus Burckhardt. *The Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, p. 78.

of the dome, just below the point from where the *muqarnas* ascend; while at the lower level light enters from the door openings. Due to its placing around the circumference of the dome, the jali covered openings not only allow light to fall directly on the *muqarnas*, but create different gradations and intensities of light to occur at different times of the day. The shadows which the jali openings throw on the opposite side coupled with the variation in the intensity of light on the dome(which changes during the day), gives

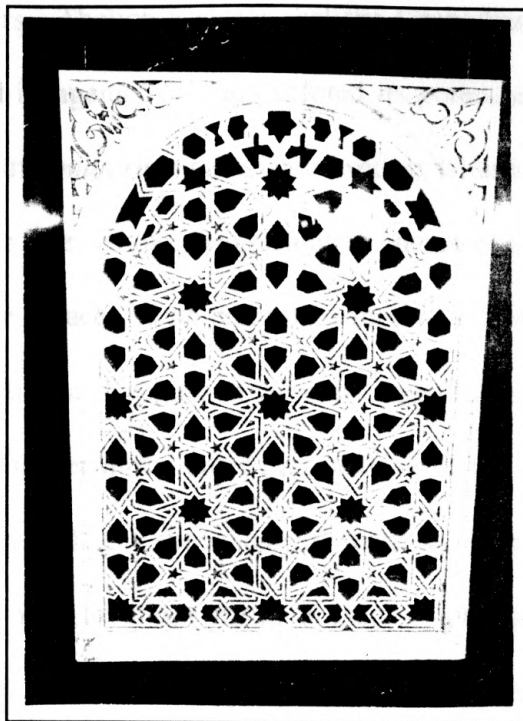


Fig. 17. A typical jali used to cover window openings usual at the base of the dome. This restored original artifact is now kept in the Alhambra museum.

the visual illusion of a rotating cupola. At the same time the *muqarnas* on the surface of the dome, reacting to the variation in the gradation of light, seem to ascend to the top, while the *muqarnas* on the base of the dome direct light in a downward direction. "The stalactites from the Court of the Lions in the Alhambra do not only serve the practical function of supporting the roof, but also symbolize the descent of light into the world of material forms. They are like rays of light cast from the world of the supernal Sun toward the abode of earthly opacity."⁹⁴

Probably no other Islamic monument displays the size of the individual cells as seen in

⁹⁴ S H Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 53.

the Alhambra, nor its use in such large numbers. Though it seems that the Granadian craftsmen were obsessed with it, they employed it ingeniously and explored its potential brilliantly. Though it is not the first time that the *muqarnas* have been used in Islamic architecture, their harmonious integration into the whole ornamentation process is remarkable. In spite of its constant use in all the palaces, at no point does the visitor get overwhelmed by its presence or tired of its repetition. Keeping in view the significance of the dome in Islamic architecture (discussed further in the latter part of this chapter), which is symbolic of the cosmos and thus of Divine Light, the *muqarnas* seem to be the most appropriate and perfect element with which to adorn them, a fact which the Alhambra designers understood and represented in their creation. Moreover, the form, shape and spatial qualities of these cells, which are a combination of solids and voids, reacts with light in a manner unlike any other element. They not only accentuate the quality of space on which they reflect light, but also transform the very material from which they have been made - a fact which can be physically viewed in the halls of the Alhambra. "The Granadian craftsmen divided up entire domes into *muqarnas* cells, into a honeycomb whose honey consists of light itself. The magical effect of these formations consists not least in the way in which they catch the light and filter it in an exceptionally rich and satisfactory gradation of shadows, making the simple stucco more precious than onyx or jade."⁹⁵

The intrinsic beauty of the Alhambra lies both, in its mystical and mythical aura and its

⁹⁵ Titus Burckhardt. *Moorish Culture in Spain*, p. 207.

architectural themes. Some of these themes are primarily formal, in the sense that, they are the result of visual impressions created by certain structural elements. Others, though formal in appearance, have profound underlying concepts behind their creative processes. This text has continuously endeavored to discuss and analyze these elements, first by understanding their broader framework and then by studying them in detail. As a result, architectural elements, such as, columns, ceramic tilework, the abstract arabesque patterns, color and the *muqarnas* have been discussed in relation to the Alhambra. The forms themselves are easy to perceive and understand if their practical functions and their symbolic intention(s) have been investigated and documented. Any visitor to the Alhambra can easily decipher most of its forms and individual elements and understand their formal functional aspects. Artists, art historians, writers, philosophers, poets and architects have studied the Alhambra and its characteristic features in order to understand not only its formal design principles but to unravel the mystique and aura that surrounds it even today. The underlying meaning of its forms and their symbolic concepts presented in this thesis has largely been based on the following factors:

- (i) the knowledge available through documentation which in turn is based on each writer's (including the author of this text) understanding of Islamic architecture.
- (ii) the knowledge acquired in reference to other monuments of Islam
- (iii) the characteristic features of Islamic architecture in relation to the religion of Islam
- (iv) the knowledge acquired through a visit to the Alhambra (by the author of this text) and by analyzing its own characteristic features.

On a direct one to one basis there does not exist any written document, whatsoever, that

explains to the contemporary researcher, the reason why a certain form was created and used by the artist, the intention behind it and its symbolic significance.

The Alhambra, however, presents to the contemporary researcher an altogether different means of explaining the significance of its forms and different elements. The only form of "document" available from the period of the Alhambra's creation is the calligraphic inscriptions on its walls which constitutes an integral part of the surface decoration. These calligraphic inscriptions form the only (direct) means by which we can understand the reason for the use of a particular element and the intention behind it. However, prior to analyzing the inscriptions of the Alhambra, a brief explanation of the significance of the art of calligraphy in Islam, will help explain its importance with respect to this thesis.

If the various elements in the architectural order were used to act as veils in order to diffuse the intensity of the physical light to make it suitable for human viewing, by analogy, in the spiritual order, the knowledge and understanding derived from reading the verses of the Quran help man transcend the veils that "hide" the Divine Light. While in the most simple terms, calligraphy can be described as the art of inscribing the words of the Quran its inherent symbolism arrives from the fact that it is the visual body of the divine revelation. "Islamic calligraphy is the visual embodiment of the crystallization of the spiritual realities contained in the Islamic revelation."⁹⁶ Composed basically (in its structural form) of horizontal and vertical strokes, it achieves a sense of cohesiveness and

⁹⁶ S H Nasr. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 18.

unity through the harmonious weaving of these elements. While its overall composition is based on pure geometrical proportions, the letters themselves are a combination of organic (naturalistic) and geometric forms. This characteristic feature of calligraphy, therefore, allows it to be integrated into every type of surface decoration, a feature that is substantially seen in the surface adornment of the Alhambra. An art form that originated during the time of the Prophet, due to its inherent sacredness which stems from the fact that it expresses words of the Quran, calligraphy has been developed to an extent that it has no parallel in Islam. "Appearing as the Word, its presence breathes life into compositions, highlights particular concepts through Quranic allusions and, through the practice of being placed at the zone of transition between the dome and its square base, fosters their transformation through its transcendent forms."⁹⁷ Rhythm, balance, geometry and proportions are all characteristic features of different styles of calligraphy. Many art historians are of the view that the concepts of space and form, geometry and proportion, qualities present in traditional Islamic architecture, are directly adopted from those present in calligraphy.

The Alhambra displays a very high quality of Islamic calligraphy, its beauty even more enhanced by its perfect blending with the surface decoration of tiles, arabesques, abstract geometrical patterns and the honeycomb cells. The calligraphic inscriptions of the Alhambra can be divided into three categories:

(i) inscriptions consisting of verses from the Quran.

⁹⁷ Ardalan and Bakhtiar. *The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, p. 45.

(ii) inscriptions consisting of poetry

(iii) repetitive inscriptions of certain expressions.⁹⁸

Inscriptions belonging to the first two categories are iconographic and provide the only direct source of knowledge from the period in which the palaces were built and indicate their symbolic forms. The inscriptions consisting of poems and Quranic verses are predominantly placed at eye level, above the tile work and at the base of the dome. The poems are topical and refer to the building and the activities performed in it. They are iconographic and also carry symbolic meanings, the analysis of which provides a clear explanation of the intention of the artist behind the creation of certain forms.

The Hall of the Ambassadors in the Palace of the Myrtles⁹⁹, the throne room during the reign of Yusuf I and Muhammad V, displays a Quranic inscription at its entrance which states, "Say: I take refuge in the Lord of Dawn." (Chapter XCI) At the base of the dome, just above the jali covered windows of the same room, chapter LXVII of the Quran (called the *Surah* of the Kingdom), which is of relevance to this thesis is inscribed:

"Blessed is He in whose hand is the kingdom.....He is the Almighty, the All Forgiving, who created the seven heavens one upon another. Thou seest not in the creation of the All-Merciful any imperfection.... and we

⁹⁸ In this category are inscriptions which are pious expressions or which may even be the slogan of a particular king or even the Nasrid dynasty. Examples of this category are: "Power to our lord.", "There is no victorious One except God", "Power is to God".

⁹⁹ Though this chapter is mainly directed at studying the Palace of the Lions, two reasons demand that the Hall of the Ambassadors be included in this analysis. Firstly, the hall is provided with significant inscriptions which are vital to this study and secondly, this hall was remodelled during the reign of Muhammad V, the builder of the Palace of Lions and thus its importance.

have adorned the lower heaven with lamps....."

This chapter of the Quran called the "*Surah* of the Kingdom" has been appropriately inscribed keeping in mind that this hall served as the throne room. Of particular importance is the line of the verse which speaks about the seven heavens. It is precisely this concept that is reflected in the structural form of the ceiling. The dome shaped ceiling is made of wood and consists of *muqarnas* on its surface and is superimposed with reliefs of cedar and colors.¹⁰⁰ The seven heavens mentioned in the Quranic verse are directly represented in the manner in which the domed shape ceiling has been decorated. The ceiling has been formed in six layers which are filled with *muqarnas* cells and ascend along with the dome towards the central small cupola, which forms the seventh row. It was only as recently as 1936 that A.R. Nykl made this discovery (refer 'Inscripciones arabes de la Alhambra', Al-Andalus, vol. IV, 1936) which was later confirmed by Bargebhur. According to *Ibn Abbas*, a commentator on the Quran and the Hadith, the seventh heaven is made of bright light. This fact has several Quranic references and is also mentioned in the Prophetic sayings.¹⁰¹

Inscriptions on the arch around the central alcove at the northern end of the room further displays references to the cosmic imagery of the hall. While a verse of the Quran adorns

¹⁰⁰ Recently inscribed wooden panels providing information about the colors and shapes have been discovered and are still in the process of being analyzed. According to a plaque found, the following colors were applied to the ceiling - red, white, walnut-white, light green, red, green and this continued in the same order. For further details refer *The Alhambra* by Oleg Grabar, p. 142.

¹⁰¹ For further details refer to the book, "The Ascent of Muhammad" by Ibnul Arabi, the famous philosopher of Moslem Spain.

the arch on the outside, inside the alcove, at eye level is a poem:

*.... this is the high dome and we (presumably the alcoves) are its daughters; yet I have distinction....
.... my companions may be the sign of the zodiac in its (the cupola's) heaven, but to me only and not among them is the Sun of nobility; for my lord, the favorite (of God), Yusuf, has decorated me with the clothes of splendor and of glory without vestments; and he has chosen me as the throne of his rule; may his eminence be helped by the Lord of light....*¹⁰²

The central alcove and the two alcoves on either side (including the alcoves on the eastern and western side of the hall), are open and admit light. As indicated the dome above has its own symbolism and is the replication of "as above, so below." The verses of the Quran and the poems present substantial reason to conclude that these forms were not without meaning and were created as a conscious manifestation of religious beliefs.. The poetical inscription describing built forms also indicate a close relationship that seems to have existed between different faculties of art.

The complex of the Lions, built during the reign of Muhammad V, contains numerous poetical inscriptions which are replete with symbolic connotations. The Hall of the Two Sisters and the Hall of the Abencerajjes, the two most fascinating rooms with magnificent cupolas, contain significant inscriptions which reveal the underlying principles behind its design. The Hall of the Two Sisters displays a poem by *Ibn Zamarak* which is repeated in the opposite hall. The poem describes the room and speaks about the beauty of its walls, the heavenly cupolas, the interplay of light and shade, the marble columns and

¹⁰² Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*, p. 143.

other related themes. Selected verses of the poem, which are of significance to this part of the study, are quoted below:

*.... In here is a cupola which by its height becomes lost from sight;
beauty in it appears both concealed and visible.
The constellation of Gemini extends a ready hand (to help it) and the full
moon of the heavens draw near to whisper secretly to it.
....With how many a decoration have you clothed it in order to embellish
it....
And how many arches rise up in its vault supported by columns which at
night are embellished by light !
You would think that they are the heavenly spheres whose orbits revolve....
The capitals (of the columns) contain all sorts of rare wonders....
In it there is burnished marble whose light has shone and thus illuminated
the darkest shadow remaining in the
gloom.
When they are illuminated by
the rays of the sun you would
think that they are made of
pearls....¹⁰³*

Though only a small part of the entire poem is quoted in this text, it provides us with substantial knowledge of the design philosophy and the intention of the artist/architect. On further analysis of Ibn Zamark's poem it can be understood that the cosmic imagery which he is speaking about, is not merely a literary image or an exercise in poetry writing. The entire poem is replete with symbolic connotations presented through



Fig. 18. The dome in the Hall of the Two Sisters, the symbolism of its cosmic imagery has been elucidated in the poems etched on the walls of the room. Of particular significance is the small cupolas within the dome which are intended by the artist to create an illusion of rotation by using different intensities of light.

¹⁰³ *ibid.* p. 145.

beautiful poetic vocabulary. In Islamic cosmogony the dome represents the eternally rotating sky, the symbolic significance of which is one of the primary reasons for the invention and use of domes in Islamic architecture. The cosmic metaphors in the poem refer to the decoration on the surface of the dome as celestial bodies that move in their orbits. The reference is to the small cupolas (two on each corresponding face of the octagonal base, totally sixteen in number) on the inner surface of the dome which are also filled with honeycomb cells. These small cupolas try to project an illusion of rotation which is enhanced by the interplay of light and shade as the hall changes in appearance with the change in the direction of light. "It is as though the cupola was understood as a rotating one, reflecting the daily cycle of light and darkness and the changing positions of constellations."¹⁰⁴

This cosmic relation can actually be witnessed in the Hall of Two Sisters and the Hall of Abencerajjes. As described earlier, the dome, in both these rooms, are filled with *muqarnas* cells which ascend upwards and gather light from the window openings set below the rim of the dome. Light enters through these windows (which are placed at different angles and equidistant from each other) and creates gradations of light and dark places depending on the position of the source of light. Thus, as the position of the source of light changes, different parts of the dome gain light in different intensities. Added to this is the manner in which the cells interact with this phenomenon and enhance the quality of space. It is this play of light which gives the illusion of a rotating dome -

¹⁰⁴ Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*. p. 147.

echoing its transcendent archetype. The Western historian of Islamic architecture, Oleg Grabar states: "To interpret the Alhambra dome as heavenly rotating cupola is historically justifiable",¹⁰⁵ highlighting the fact that the dome always signifies movement in Islam. A poem by Ibn Gabirol, describes a palace, the setting of which is strikingly similar to the Alhambra. A part of the poem, which is self explanatory, is quoted below:

*The buildings (of the palaces) are built and decorated with
openwork, intaglios and filigrees,
paved with marble slabs and alabaster - I cannot count its
many gates.
The doors are like those of the ivory mansions reddened by
palatial algum woods.
And there are windows, transparent above them, skylights
where dwell the luminous planets.
The dome is like the Palanquin of Solomon hung above the
glories of the chambers,
that rotates in its gyre, shining like opals and sapphire and
pearls;
this is in the daytime, while at dusk it looks like the sky
whose stars form constellations.¹⁰⁶*

In an earlier part of this chapter, the veils theory was elucidated and its relationship to the planning and layout of the palace complex and the individual rooms was discussed. That discussion dealt with the theory at the broader or more general level of architecture. Since the analysis of the wall surface decoration, outlined in the above pages, has provided an understanding of the symbolic significance of the various elements, a brief discussion of the veils theory, with respect to the theme of surface decoration, will further highlight and help explain the relationship between Islamic art and spirituality.

¹⁰⁵ Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁶ Fredrick Bargebuhr, *The Alhambra*, p. 98.

Throughout the Alhambra a consistent theme of surface decoration has been consciously maintained. On a vertical plane, starting from the bottom and moving up, the lower parts of the wall, to a height of four to five feet are adorned with ceramic glazed tiles. Arabesques and geometrical patterns in stucco start above the tiles, followed by calligraphic inscriptions and finally muqarnas (also made of stucco) at the roof level (refer fig. 10). Thus, the wall surfaces are decorated with a smooth reflective material at the bottom, followed by intricate arabesques carved on the walls, which is a rough surface and finally at the very top by dense conglomeration of *muqarnas* cells. The theme, therefore, basically consists of a movement from the smooth to the dense, from highly reflective surfaces to those which are less reflective.

This composition is not without its own rationale and symbolic significance. The light of the sun, as we know, is most brilliant as one moves higher in the vertical plane, diminishing in its intensity and brightness as it reaches closer to the ground. The artists of the Alhambra, as a result, chose to use a reflective material to adorn the wall at the lower level, followed by the less reflective stucco decoration and followed by the dense muqarnas at the top. What we see here is an inverse order of things. While the light becomes brighter as we move up, the surface decoration becomes less reflective and denser and vice versa. Since the light is more intense at the upper level, the dense collection of muqarnas would not reduce its intensity, while on the other hand, the brightness is diluted at the lower level and only a reflective surface can increase its illumination. Transferring this phenomenon to the spiritual order and relating it to the

veils theory, we can understand that, the veils nearest to us are the thickest and those away from us are brighter since they are more closer to the primary source of illumination. From a symbolic view point it would not be wrong to conclude that, the glazed surface acts like a verse of the Quran. By reading the Quran, the Moslem believes is means of illumination and spiritual knowledge, wherein the celestial light becomes clearer. Similarly, by using reflective surfaces the artists endeavored to increase the brightness and intensity of the physical/phenomenal light. The whole exercise is a process of *tawil*, wherein, one moves from the outer (dense) to the inner (bright), till *marifa'h* or true knowledge is achieved and all veils are transcended.

Taking the various elements of the Alhambra and discussing them from a formal point of view may not reveal the underlying nature of the monument and its essential principles. Though none of the forms of the Alhambra are absolutely unique or particularly original, their magnificence comes from their brilliant proportions and overall composition and the intricacy of their ornamentation. Displaying unbelievable ingenuity, the Alhambra craftsmen seem to have taken stucco, a mixture of simple ingredients and woven from it forms that reflect cosmic images and display luminous vibrations. The moment one enters the Alhambra and keeps moving from one room to another, one thing comes to the forefront quite clearly - the objective of the artist in creating forms to provide certain effects and impressions or even illusions. Starting with the dramatic difference between the absolutely blank exterior walls to the minutely and intricately decorated interior surfaces, once inside the palace the effect continues. From simple forms, shapes and

spaces to complex compositions and architectural proportions. From the simple but brilliantly decorated Court of Cuarto Dorado to the complex composition of the Court of the Lions, the effect is similar to a musical tune, starting on a low key and reaching a crescendo, but never losing its artistic elegance and aesthetic splendor. Thus if the surface decoration and its intricacy create an awe-inspiring effect on the visitor, the *muqarnas* filled domes leaves the observer enchanted and in total adoration. In the Palace of the Lion, whether one is in the Hall of Abencerajjes or the Hall of Two Sisters, as one's vision moves from the lower part of the wall in an upward direction, in constant bewildered admiration, the moment the *muqarnas* filled dome comes into sight, admiration turns into high esteem and bewilderment turns to respect for the artist and his creation. It is at this point that one begins to comprehend why Moslem history considers the Alhambra as the apogee of Islamic architecture. The slenderness of the marble columns, the lining of tilework, the surface decoration, the honeycomb cells, the calligraphy - are not there so much for their own purpose, but to recognize and represent Unity which is ever existent. They are like crystallizations of light and reveal their innermost substance which is not stone but the Divine Light, the spark of which resides mysteriously in all things, for Islam believes all things have their origin in the Creator. As has been demonstrated in the preceding pages, the Alhambra through its aspects of space, form, water, light, ornamentation, is a demonstration of Unity on the plane of multiplicity. The inscriptions which adorn its walls manifests its cosmic relation and thus demonstrates that though the Alhambra is a royal palace its association with the sacred has in no way been compromised in the built form.

It is not only the intricate ornamentation, the play of light and shade, the eloquence of its inscriptions and the echo of its mystic aura, though integral aspects, constitute the Alhambra. Added to this are the elements of illusions and surprises and the contrast between its interior and exterior. The search to understand and define the various architectural features of the Alhambra leads us from highly concrete forms to totally abstract concepts. While most of the features and their symbolic undertones discussed in this text are based on certain assumed truths, they

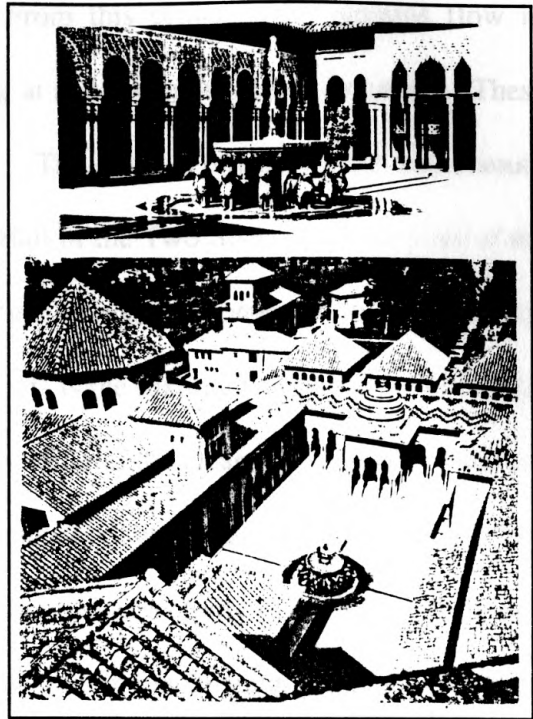


Fig. 19. The Courtyard of the Lions is the direct application of the Quranic description of paradise. With a fountain in the center of the open court and water running to and fro in four directions and culminating at the center signifies a sense of unity.

have been authenticated by the Quranic and poetical inscriptions. If the Quran states that 'paradise is made of divine light', it can be stated that the Courtyard of the Lions is a replication of this statement. Paradise is described as a garden with a spring in its center and four rivers running in the direction of the four cardinal points. To this description is added the dome of the heavens which is made of white pearls. Compare this description with the overall structure of the Court of the Lions. In the center of the courtyard is the fountain of the lions, the basin of water is supported by twelve lions with water flowing from their mouths. "... the lion is none other than the sun, from which life gushes forth, the twelve lions are the twelve suns of the zodiac, the twelve months which

are all present concurrently in eternity."¹⁰⁷ From this center water streams flow in channels in the four primary directions, meeting at and dispersing from the center. These water channels culminate in pools of water. The pool of water in the north-south direction reflects the 'heavenly cupolas' of the Hall of the Two Sisters and the Hall of the Abencerajjes, while those in the east-west direction reflects the domes of the square courts that project into the main courtyard. Added to this is the luxuriant vegetation which once adorned the courtyard, the scent of flowers in the air and the clear skies above complete - all together they complete the replication of paradise. This entire setting ascertains that traditional Islamic architecture is independent from the subjectivity of individual traits and is always based on unity. Titus Burckhardt sums up this fundamental principle of Islamic architecture with reference to the Alhambra when he states:

"For the forms of Moorish architecture, the frieze of arabesques, the trelliswork etched into the walls, the sparkling stalactites of arches are all used not so much for their own sakes, but to display the nature of light. The innermost secret of the art is an alchemy of light, for just as alchemy aims at "transforming the body into spirit and the spirit into body," so does the art of Granada dissolve the solid bodies of the structure into a mass of shimmering light by transforming the light into immobilized crystal."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Titus Burckhardt. *Moorish Culture in Spain*, p. 209.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.* p. 211.

Chapter VIII - Conclusion

Contemplation of the Divine: The Primary Objective of Islamic Art.

A conclusion to this text or as a matter of fact to any similar text is perhaps inappropriate. How does one write a conclusion on concepts and beliefs that are themselves eternal, infinite and inconclusive ? This text is but a minute part of a greater continuum which includes the Concept of Unity, the Quranic Revelation and the Prophetic Hadith, and the manner in which they were crystallized through artistic manifestations. Art to the traditional Moslem was not merely the transformation of shapeless material to useful objects - it was a means of spiritual contemplation and spiritual realization. This penchant developed from the fact that the concept of unity always formed the basis on which any faculty of art was modelled and represented. Moreover, when the artist sought inspiration to shape material in order to create forms, there appeared only one source - God - the concept of Oneness - the knowledge of which was acquired from the Quran and Prophetic sayings. In addition to this, traditional schools of arts and crafts, which had originated during the time of the Prophet, combined the imparting of artistic skills with religious concepts. Thus the imagination of the artist was always stimulated by the belief he possessed of his Creator which he endeavored to translate into his own creation. Thus Islamic art always invoked in its forms a feeling of the presence of the divine.

Unity in Islam as such exists *a priori*, everywhere and at all times and encompassing everything within its domain -and man's effort was only to explicate this Unity in all

things. It is for this reason that Islamic architecture in its diverse ethnic surroundings is proto-typical in many ways, an aspect which stems from its spiritual allegiance and its knowledge of transcendent archetypes. The preceding pages sought to explicate, understand and present some of the elements that make traditional Islamic architecture a manifestation of transcendent concepts in essence and contemplative in nature. To understand the contemplative nature of architecture it was necessary to outline the "object" of contemplation and the source of its knowledge. As a result the 'Concept of Unity', which is essentially the aspect of contemplation and the 'Quranic revelation' and the 'Prophetic Sayings', the twin sources of knowledge were outlined. These primary concepts were then specifically linked to architectural ideologies to demonstrate the relationship between Islamic art and Islamic spirituality. From the knowledge and understanding of this relationship emanated the symbolic importance of light as the perfect symbol of Divine Unity - a fact that the Quran, Hadith and Islamic philosophy and theology zealously proclaim. This facet was then transferred to the realm of architecture - light became the archetypal element, the reflection of the divine, the transcendent paradigm. As a result conscious effort was made by the artist, craftsmen and the architect to create forms and elements that explored light and manifested its characteristics.

"Art and contemplation: the object of art is beauty of form, whereas the object of contemplation is beauty beyond form" (Titus Burckhardt). At one level, as an endeavor of architecture, the Alhambra is incomparable in its beauty and elegance, in its complex proportions and overall composition; at another level, it could only be a desire to evoke

the eternal presence of the divine that inspired the minute decoration of entire rooms with remarkable precision in composition and proportion. Though at first sight of the Alhambra interior one is awe struck and spell bound - an effect that lasts for a long time and never wears off completely - later when one attempts to comprehend its intrinsic beauty and aesthetic ingenuity one realizes that its ornamentation of infinite patterns, the cosmic imagery of its rooms, its 'paradisal' courtyards, its heavenly cupolas, its ever-flowing streams are all created as a form of worship, a type of prayer, a constant invocation, a complete offering of self and soul by the artist to his Creator. The calligraphic inscriptions that speak the heart of the artist and reveal the depths of his soul tell us that for the traditional Moslem the objective art lies in the remembrance of God. Through this 'remembrance and contemplation' are born forms that crystallize in the world of matter the essence of the religion, culture, tradition and beliefs. Art to the Moslem is the expression of the Truth, Reality and Divinity in all its aspects. Whether it is a simple house in the desert or a royal palace in a lush green valley, the fundamental principles are always adhered to - and in this regard, no diversions are allowed, no compromises are made. How else can one understand the fact that a constantly threatened dynasty at the ebb of its glorious era could put together a monument, the beauty of which is such that the presence of the Divine reverberates from every inch of its ornamentation, every recess of its honeycomb cells and from every arch, column and dome of its structure. While the blank walls of its exterior reflect the beauty of the hills and the valleys that surround it, every wall of its interior echoes the verse of the Quran, "For wherever you turn there is the face of God". to which a Prophetic saying can be added,

"God loves beauty" or if we were to quote from the Alhambra itself:

"The fountain in my midst is like the soul of a believer
immersed in the remembrance of God."

Epilogue

Giving Form to a Religion

If one were to ask the question - what is Islam ? - the reply could be given by pointing out to the arches of the Mosque of Cordoba, the minarets of the Taj Mahal, the *iwans* of the Shah Mosques of Isfahan or even the *muqarnas* filled domes of the Alhambra. Though all these examples belong to different places and were built at different times, they are all profoundly Islamic in character and reflect the essence of the religion. From a simple belief that proclaimed "God is One" grew the most complex forms and intricate patterns which are manifest in monuments throughout the Islamic world. These words of the Quran, from which are interwoven forms of prayer, worldly guidance, spiritual invocation and one's whole life itself, also became reflected in its art forms. But if one is seeking to find a formal correlation between the spiritual message and an architectural form - one cannot find it. What one can find is the essence of the revelation that has been manifested. Thus the vital link between the 'word' and the art form must be sought, not at a level which includes only a formal expression, but at the level of formless truth. For it is only at this level can one see that Islamic art is one that has given form to the essence of a religion.

Glossary

<i>al-aql</i>	The intellect, in the traditional sense it means being illuminated by revelation.
<i>batin</i>	The hidden, that which is not apparent; the esoteric aspect of things.
<i>baraka'h</i>	Grace, blessing.
<i>Hadith</i>	Recorded sayings of the Prophet.
<i>haqiqah</i>	The absolute truth.
<i>hijab</i>	Veil, curtain.
<i>ilm</i>	Knowledge
<i>ishraq</i>	Light, illumination.
<i>Islam</i>	Literally means surrender; it comes from the word <i>salama</i> , which means both surrender and peace.
<i>Kaab'a</i>	Literally means 'cube'; the place of pilgrimage and the earthly center for the Moslem. The direction to which all Moslems turn while praying.
<i>khanaqa'h</i>	Place of learning; a spiritual node where the qualified receive knowledge of the esoteric aspects of the faith.
<i>man'a</i>	The word is used in the vernacular to indicate both 'meaning' and 'spiritual'.
<i>madrasa'h</i>	School/college where religious and secular education is imparted.
<i>marifa'h</i>	spiritual gnosis, the attainment of which is believed to be the final destination of mankind.
<i>mihrab</i>	A niche in the qiblah wall indicating the direction of prayer.
<i>muqarnas</i>	Honeycomb like cells; an architectural element developed by the Moslem artists which is used in surface decoration.
<i>qiblah</i>	The direction of prayer; the <i>qiblah</i> wall of a mosque faces the direction of the <i>Kaab'a</i> towards which Moslems turn while praying.
<i>Quran</i>	The holy book of Islam, considered as the direct 'Word' of God;

literally means `recitation'.

Ramadhan The Moslem holy month; during this month all Moslems are required to fast from sunrise to sunset.

shahda'h The attestation of faith which reads as, `There is no divinity but God'.

sharia'h Worldly tenets.

Sufi A Moslem sect; Sufis are considered as the mystics or spirituals of Islam.

Sunna'h The actions of the Prophet, for example, the manner in which one should pray.

tariqa'h The path of righteousness; the path which leads to the attainment of *marifa'h* or true knowledge.

tawil Spiritual hermeneutics; the passage from the outer (exoteric) to the inner (esoteric) aspect of things.

zahir The manifest, that which can be seen.

Bibliography (General)

Ardalan, Nader and

Bakhtiar, Laleh. The Sense of Unity: A Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture, University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 1973.

Burckhardt, Titus. Studies in Comparative Religion, Perennial Books, London.

The Art of Islam: Language and Meaning, World of Islam Festival Publishing Co., Westerham Press Ltd., Westerham, Kent. 1976.

Sacred Art in the East and West, Perennial Books, London, 1967.

Cappadona, Diane Apostolos. ed., Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and the Arts, Crossroads Publishing Co., New York, 1984.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda. Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1956.

Colloquium in Memory

of Richard Ettinghausen. Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1988.

Eliade, Mircea. Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts, Crossroads Publishing Co., New York, 1985.

Sacred and the Profane, Harper and Row, New York, 1961.

Cosmos and History, Harper and Row, New York, 1959.

- Grabar, Oleg. Formation of Islamic Art, Yale University Press, New Havens, 1973.
- Grube, Ernst. The World of Islam, McGraw Hill Book Co., New York, 1966.
- Lings, Martin. The Quran, World of Islam Publishing Co., London, 1979.
- Michell, George. Architecture of the Islamic World, Thames and Hudson, London, 1978.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. Islamic Art and Spirituality, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, 1987.
Knowledge and the Sacred, Crossroads Publishing Co., New York, 1981.
Sacred Art in Persian Culture, Golgonooza Press, Ipswich, 1976.
Ideals and Realities of Islam, Fredrick A Praeger, Publishers, New York, 1967.
Science and Civilization in Islam, New American Library Inc., New York, 1970.
An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1964.
ed., Islamic Spirituality: Foundations, Crossroads Publishing Co., New York, 1987.
ed., Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations, Crossroads Publishing Co., New York, 1991.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. Calligraphy and Islamic Culture, New York University Press, New York, 1984.
Mystical Dimensions of Islam, University of North

Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1975.

Sharif, M M. ed., History of Muslim Philosophy, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, vol. I & II, 1963 & 1966.

Schuon, Frithjof. Understanding Islam, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1967.

The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon, Amity House, Amity, New York, 1986.

Dimensions of Islam, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1969.

Snodgrass, Adrian. Symbolism of the Stupa, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1985.

Architecture, Time and Eternity, vol. I & II, New Delhi, 1990.

Bibliography (Dealing with the Aspect of Light - Philosophical and Architectural)

Al Ghazzali. Mishkat al Anwar, translated by W H T Gairdner, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1924.

Burckhardt, Titus. Mirror of the Intellect, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1987.

Alchemy, Element Books, 1986.

Corbin, Henry. History of Islamic Philosophy, Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 1993.

Jurji, E J. Illumination in Islamic Mysticism, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1938.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. The Three Sages, Harvard University Press.

Plummer, Henry. Poetics of Light, A + U Publishing Co., Tokyo, 1987.

Walbridge, John. The Science of Mystic Lights, Harvard University Press, 1992.

Ziai, Hossein. Knowledge and Illumination, Brown University, 1990.

Bibliography (On the Alhambra)

- Bargebuhr, Frederick. The Alhambra: A Cycle of Studies on the Eleventh Century in Moorish Spain, Berlin, 1968.
- Burckhardt, Titus. Moorish Culture in Spain, McGraw Hill Book Company, Toronto, 1970.
- Calvert, Albert Fredrick. The Alhambra, G Philip, London, 1904.
- Goury, Jules. Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra, O. Jones, London, 1842-45.
- Grabar, Oleg. The Alhambra, Allen Lane, London, 1978.
- Irving, Washington. The Alhambra, McMillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1921, 1927.
The Alhambra, Darf, London, 1986.
The Alhambra, AMS Press, New York, 1973.
- Jones, Jerrilynn. ed., Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1992.
- Stewart, Desmond. The Alhambra, Newsweek Books Inc., New York, 1974.