
The Merging of Two Parallels: Museum of Islamic Art by Ieoh Ming Pei

An ongoing debate in Architecture: functionality or aesthetics... which comes first?

In the 1st Century before Christ, Roman architect, Vitruvius, believed there were three main aspects of design: Strength, utility (functionality) and grace (beauty). Although he wasn't of any major relevance, the architect's philosophy continued to flourish into the twentieth century where American architect Louis Sullivan, the 'father of modernism' established the architectural principle 'form follows function'.

'All things in nature have a shape, that is to say, a form, an outward semblance, that tells us what they are, that distinguishes them from ourselves and from each other. Unfailing in nature these shapes express the inner life, the native quality of the animal, tree, bird, fish... It seems ever as though the life and the form were absolutely one and inseparable... Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight or the open apple blossom the toiling work horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, form ever follows function, and this is the law.' (Louis Sullivan)

The quote meaning that the aesthetics of something is decided by its purpose, and in context of designing a building, it means that an architect should base the design on the requirements of the client and what the building is used for as a space. Architects such as Le Corbusier, Van Der Rohe, Louis Kahn and Walter Gropius also believed in this theory, with Adolf Loos' (1908) 'ornament is crime' which both came to create Modernism in Architecture. Le Corbusier, being one of the first to apply and use this philosophy effectively such as in his Villa Savoye (1929-1931) in which his idea of the building as a promenade, a 'sequence of roots' and so focuses on creating that idea to be functional followed by its form.

As time passes, this theory is being held by a thread in this era, however the architect Ieoh Ming Pei has continued to build upon this theory, as a student of Le Corbusier, he too is more concerned with function than theory.

In the world of Islamic architecture where modernism and Islamic traditions are paralleled, IM Pei seems to have gotten the perfect balance to where they both coincide with one another harmonically in his Museum of Art in Qatar – An attempt of a contemporary expression of Islamic architecture which incorporates the beautiful Islamic architecture in the building but still grasps upon modernism and his beliefs within the lively urban style of the city of Doha. However, Pei's approach to the museum seems to have been influenced heavily by by late Le Corbusier; Brutalism, the powerful, heavy, rough style but within brutalism he aspired to refine the style, making the building mighty and solid yet elegant and smooth, eliminating all the roughness.

'Modernism that was actively geometrical, yet solidly monumental' – Due to Pei's style of architecture, the building is unique yet exudes formality and assertiveness. The Museum of

Islamic Art is representative of Islamic architecture in an abstract vision and has come to symbolize art and its accessibility, it consists 2 buildings; a main five storey building and a two-storey education building that are connected by a fountain courtyard and surrounded by muscular trusses.

'A geometric matrix [that] transforms the dome's descent from circle to octagon, to square, and finally to four triangular flaps that angle back at different heights to become the atrium's column supports' (IM Pei)

Both composed of simple geometric shapes of modern limestone (inspired by Islamic architecture) and stacked on top of one another and is placed on a man made island isolated from other buildings and from the city centre. From some angles we're reminded of the Santa Maria Della salute (baroque church in Venice) as it expresses the same effect of looking as if its floating on water. The diagonal entrance to the building strongly declares its connection to modernism in a soft and subtle way, thus making the geometric forms seem more sharp and highlighting the distinction between light and shadow. Within the building, a central atrium in a domed tower connects all the granite galleries with a stainless steel domed ceiling, representing the Islamic art and playing with the game of light and shadows where patterned light shines through the centre of the dome, above a Michael Angelo like staircase acting as the centre piece of the interior and transforms the architectural quality. The dome however, is covered from the outside so the true shape of the interior is hidden – creating an exterior that is whole and which is a reaction to the interior, in my opinion. On the north side of the building a 5 storey glass curtain wall (an Ieoh Ming Pei touch) provides panoramic views of the west bay area of Doha.

'My father's vision was to build a cross-cultural institution' (Sheikha al Mayassa)

'It is to reconnect the historical threads that have been broken, and finding peaceful ways to resolve conflict.' (Sheikha al Mayassa)

'Form follows function' has proven that it can be depended on, as of years of successful buildings and architects whom follow the principle. In the case of this museum, as a building inspired by Islamic architecture in which ornamentation is key, while not being important in modernism, Pei was said to be hesitant on embracing Islamic architectural precedent, and in which Islamic architecture doesn't idolise or celebrate interior space, as in Pei's own work, does. Nevertheless, this issue is well executed where IM Pei's minimalistic approach to ornamentation as learned by his influencers (ornament is crime) while harmonizing the different cultures.

The artefacts within are a replication of the building, where the concept that Modernism and Islamic culture do not have to be paralleled, but can be celebrated together as if taken out of the same historical book. The museum of Islamic art inevitably reflects the culture of Qatar and the purpose of the building in priding the Muslim society of their artefacts and achievements, just from the exterior of it, and as of playing an important role in reshaping Qatar's cultural identity, the ideals it embodies of the country's past, present and future.

'A building that brings the modern world to Islamic culture, and brings Islamic culture to the modern world.'