

# Religious spaces in Islamic traditional Cities

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**ABSTRACT:** The present paper aims for the most part to prove the fact that religious and spiritual places and above all, mosques play major roles within Islamic urban areas. They are in fact the basis of civil infrastructures. A historical analysis focusing on where mosques stand in Islamic urban areas reveals that mosques have always been the center of development and growth and that they must be studied as a cultural and historical component of Islamic cities. The study also argues that considering mosques as works of architecture in isolation would be a far cry from reality. There are indisputable ties between mosques and historical –cultural developments in such cities.

**Keywords:** Moslem-settled city, Mosque, Religious functioning buildings, takiyeh, hosseiniye, Masjid Al-Nabi', Jamie Mosque<sup>2</sup>.

## INTRODUCTION

Where there is Islam, there is mosque and where there are Moslems, mosque is every thing. Traditionally mosques have been the center of all nation needs when it comes to Moslems. In some eras mosques had been the criterion of urban hood .i.e.; if a group of buildings lacked mosques, it could not be called a city. Thus the present study targets the relationship between mosques and cities in Islamic civilization. Generally, mosques are known as the crucial element of identification when talking about Moslem-settled cities. Being considered as the core, mosques even decided on how the city could be formed. Looking at all Islamic towns and focusing on their common aspects, mosque comes to be the unifying agent, no matter how the cities differed in terms of culture and climate. Islamic territories, mosques and civilizations have been extremely interdependent.

In the age of Islamic developments, as soon as an ancient city was occupied by Moslem soldiers, mosques erected in an effort to the look the city as Islamic as possible.

Going through the course of the history in Islam, one can get to the knowing that Islamic cities have been the center of all economical, political and commercial transactions. As Moslems developed economically, Moslem-settled states started exchanging merchandise but it did not end there. Merchants started traveling themselves and it created the

cultural phenomena. Moslems' cultural developments helped religious-political interactions and movements throughout the territory of Islam and all shared one outstanding point, the mosque. In case people needed to have a shelter or make a decision affecting all, mosque was the first choice. It was the third Hijri century when denomination, union and politics surfaced the Islamic mentality and started to flourish. Simultaneously, the number of Islamic cities experienced a sudden rise besides the present ones getting bigger and more populated .by the time the population grew in big cities more mosques constructed but they needed a center. It was when the concept of Jamie mosque created, just as cathedrals for churches in Christianity. The experience and art needed to achieve the goal was transferred from the eastern Islamic states to the western ones. It started in late Samanids era and lasted to the 20th century (Faray, 1348, 133).

The present paper is to review the works of chronicles and geographers in this period of time.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

It was decided to adopt case study approach for this paper as there is little existing research on traditional spaces ; it has been based on the descriptive Research. This descriptive type research has been carried out using the questionnaire as the research tool for gathering the required data. Data's gathering involved both reference document and a questionnaire survey.

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Sampling was simple random sampling and the data-gathering instrument was the questionnaire. Prior to the interview and fill the questionnaire, the author explained the purpose of the research and made it clear that this information would be in the public domain, so any confidentiality concerns could be noted. The interview and questionnaire, from April 2009 to December 2010, lasted ten hours per week

### How a traditional Islamic town looks

Islamic urban design is a bit different from that of others. It's in facts a combination of spirituality and materialism. Islamic cities are planned in away that unite all aspects of life." a city is a mirror reflecting the civilization behind it. It's always based on a unique ideology to form a unique location." (Bahat, 1369,97). having become stabilized as a regional power, Islamic caliphs started to develop their territory .the developments added 15 big cities to the only Islamic empire of the time .the cities were called Emsar and all rivaled the capital city, Baghdad. The newly-added civilizations were scattered from Samarqand to Qirvan and from Bokhara to Qortabeh. Just shortly after getting occupied, Islamic rulers, appointed by the caliph of the time, erected many masques to make their territory look as Islamic as possible .All the masques were referred to the Jamie mosque but individually were considered as the core of their neighborhoods. At that time, they even functioned as community centers as well. "due to such historical facts, it's not surprising when some chronicles talk about numerous mosques in Baghdad and some even believe there had been 20 to 30 thousand mosques there in that period of time." (Mazaheri, 1360,4).

The main and central mosque of the city was a pattern for entire the city and while each neighborhood had gotten its urban design from the local mosque. Compactly designed, and simply decorated, Islamic cities of the epoch we are discussing, were

all center-oriented, regardless the size. Narrow alleys linked different parts of the city to each other and all led to the Jamie mosque. Insisting on the importance of materialistic aspects of life along with thinking of Godly matters; Arg and the bazaar had been the other components of the Islamic cities, locating just next door to the main mosque ( Fig.1).

Trying to show a different structural design from that of ancient roman and Persian cities, Islamic civil engineers intended a totally Islamic identification and gave it to their towns in the best way.

### Townscape and landmarks of Islamic cities

Having been chiefly located in hot and dry climate, Islamic cities are a colony of dwellings with minarets and city walls as skyline.

Going through Islamic way of life, one finds water a sacred element of being and soil as the finest sign of modesty. This holy figure of water doubles when talking about desert. Not only the body of water but the color, considered blue due to the reflection of sky, is considered holy reflecting on the domes of mosques nearly as the only color ever applied. Islamic thoughts promote looking at water as the way of getting calm which can be the reason of Islamic civil engineers' interest in decorating the main squares, towns and the yards of mosques with fountains and water ways. Playing a centric role, Jamie mosque and it's surrounding, the bazaar neighborhood, are always located in the middle of the town, since God is believed as the core of Islamic thoughts ,the Jamie mosque is the way the city confesses there is just one God and that the settlers do believe in the other world. This is why the cities expand from where the main mosque is just located. Gathering around the main mosque, all the alleys and what they have inside seem to be bowing to the center. As a sign of being humble before God, every single part of the town is in absolute harmony with the vital element.

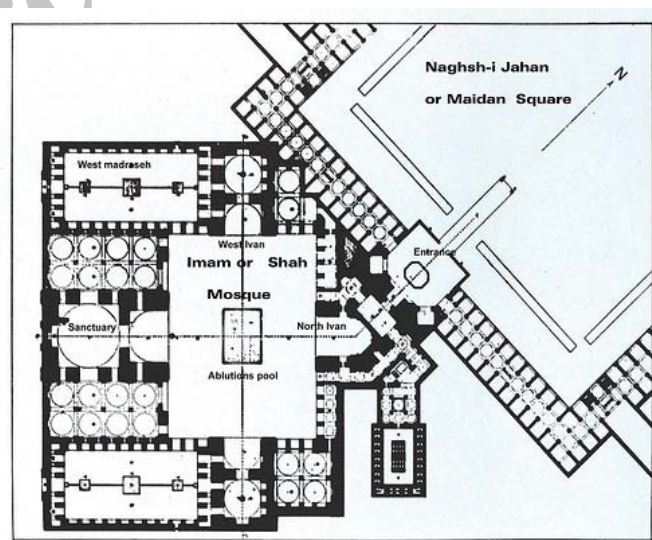


Fig. 1: Isfahan, imam mosque (Source: Haji-Qassemi, 1996)

## A history of Islamic cities

### Medina, the first Muslim-settled city of the history

Medina Al –Nabi, literary translated as the city of the prophet, was primarily called Yathreb but renamed after Muhammad entered it following the residents' invitation. Shortly after the great entrance, the messenger ordered to build the first mosque of the history, known as Masjid Al- Nabi, the mosque of the prophet. This mosque later played a crucial role. It is where the prophet and the first three Ideal Caliphs ruled the Islamic community. It also had the application of a court and at times of disagreements or conflicts; the case would be tried there. In other words, it was the source of civilization.

### The conquered cities

Along with conquering and occupying neighboring states, new cities founded upon various needs. Water, as predicted, was the first factor considered in locating the cities. The road came second to water sourcing, and then came the ease of access to other towns. Putting religious and Godly matters at premium, the civil engineers first would find the precise direction of Kiblah in order to erect the city core, the Jamie mosque. Built in the same direction as the mosque, bazaar was next. Keeping harmony with the mosque, all the dwellings would be built just round the mosque in a circular way, forming many rings in the sky view. Regarding all aspects of life, Islam never neglects the necessities of human beings. A magnificent prove to such claim is the city of Mecca, the center of true God worshipping folks and the center of commercial affairs in the early life of Islam. (Burkhart, 1365, 191). Sharing similar patterns, the new city of Anjar in modern Lebanon, characterizes mosques around the main squares and junctions. Then come the governmental buildings and trade center. Baghdad, the capital of modern Iraq, was primarily a big circle of 2.5 km diameter, comprising of two huge city walls. The walls surrounded the residential parts of the town having the Dar Al-Caliph in heart. The palace of the ruler and the main mosque formed the core linking to the other parts via 4 gates and streets. No matter how much the rulers thought of their own safety and security, the pattern would never experience any changes whatsoever. Locating the Jamie mosque in conquered cities was the first phase of giving on Islamic character. The conquering soldiers were first placed in camps in the out skirts of the cities but at Qatibeh era, they were ordered to construct a mosque close to the residence of the commander. The first action of this type happened in Muslim soldier camp in Bukhara. Due to security matters, the residence of the commander changed to the office of the governor. It then renamed to Darol-Khilafa<sup>3</sup> or Arg. Getting more and more important, people gradually immigrated into these new centers of civilization. As there were now more people, new needs surfaced and new components added to the towns, bigger and more equipped. Damascus, the oldest settled city of the world, experienced the same procedure. After being defeated

by Muslim army, a mosque was built in the sacred part of the town and then Omayyids selected it their capital, Dar Al-Caliph. There had been occasions at which the invaded city resisted and major destructions took place throughout the city. In such cases, a new city would start in the outskirts, enjoying the same patterns. An instance of this type is the old city of Balkh. Neishabor ,Bukhara and Samarghand un like Balkh ,never experienced any major damages while Muslims development, thus just barracks erected around them. Calling the dwelling of the former residents of the cities the houses of Satan and evil, Arabs would avoid settling inside the conquered cities thus they stayed in their own camps and tried to develop them in order to be cities in the future. in an effort to eliminate all satanic signs of the newly conquered cities, the Arabs would demolish all temples, churches and cynagogue and would build their mosque right where they stood .unlike temples where complicated rituals and religious ceremonies took place by some special people and ordinary people were never allowed to attend, mosques were open round the clock to all walks of life. However churches were less restricted, there were still rituals for special groups of people. Mosques were of more public functions besides their normal religious functions .e.g. court. "Mosque is a roofed space for the friends but is never close to masses". Far and large, mosques functioned as tension removal in the social life of Muslims.

### The role of mosques in development of Islamic traditional cities

There might have been questions around the uniqueness of Jamie mosques in cities .The philosophy of such place rises from the Friday prayers that must be held in just one mosque in each town or city. (Mazaheri, 1388). Getting more and more populated, cities felt the need of more spacious Jamie mosques in major cities like Damascus and Neishaboar, they went under renovations. Neishaboar mosque had been capable of placing thousands of praying people and Damascus's had some 500 staff. (Mazaheri, 1388). The bigger the cities, the larger the number of mosques. Al- Qahira or Qairo owned 830 mosque but for ages, Baghdad held the record of having the highest number of mosques, 27000 mosques and plus 2 Jamie mosques, one at each side of the river Dijleh (Mazaheri, 1388). Feeling urban development a bare necessity, the pattern kept running i.e.; each new neighborhood would have the same components as core, a mosque, a governmental building<sup>4</sup> and a trade center<sup>5</sup>.

Having thought of mosque as a Godly place, Islamic architects did their best building the most magnificent and glorious mosques especially at Ottomans' era (10-12 Hijri centuries). In those centuries, a new tradition was founded in Islamic thoughts known as Vaqf. Literary vaqf means to let a private place go public or build a brand-new place for public uses e.g. a library. Based on this thought, public baths, libraries, hospitals etc. were built around mosques making them cultural or social complex. Such event happened throughout the territory of

Muslims and Iran was no exception. One can still observe remains of these complexes in desert cities of Iran.

### The role of Jame mosques in cities

Jame mosque had been considered the distinctive point of cities i.e. a city would be called so when it possessed such a mosque. Jame mosques would bring a complex with them comprising of a bazaar and a governmental building called Arg (Bahat, 1369, 98). This complex would bring flourishing factors to the cities and would give them the real face of a city. The face of buildings would certainly differ from that of villages as they owned a civil center now. Centered to a complex of mosque, governor's office and bazaar, the core itself had been always centered to the mosque. The way decisions were made in the main mosque was different from that of the ancient Greece and Rome, where there had been Agoraforum for such aims ( Fig.2).

### Some other religious functioning buildings in Islamic cities

Regarding Shiites approach towards the presence of all walks of life within all types of religious, political and social events, Safavids saw it necessary to make changes in public buildings. Due to Shiites' belief in the event of Asura when Imam

Hussein, the third Imam of Shiites, was dramatically murdered by the caliph of the time, a special place for mourners called Husseinia invented and was added to the mosques. It was in fact a complementary component for mosques additionally, in an effort to pay homage to those who helped Islam grow by their blood, numerous tombs were built.

### Hosseiniye

As the title is revealing enough, Hosseiniye is a place for respecting and remembering the way Imam Hussein sacrificed his soul and his fiddle fellows to protect the philosophy of Islam from distortion. There are some restrictions set by the religion for those entering mosques e.g.; women on their menstrual period are not allowed to enter the building of mosques. Unlike mosques having such restrictions, Hosseiniye is open to every one to mourn (Fig. 3).

Functioning only 2 months of the year, depending on where and how it's built, it even plays the role of play grounds for children in some areas of Iran or is used a place for people to gather for various occasions. The architecture of Husseinia , despite that of mosque , has no special patterns and has always been in affected by the local tastes . Central Iran exhibits some gloriously designed Husseinias enticing the observers.



Fig. 2: Yazd, Jame mosques, (Source: Haji-Qassemi, 1996)

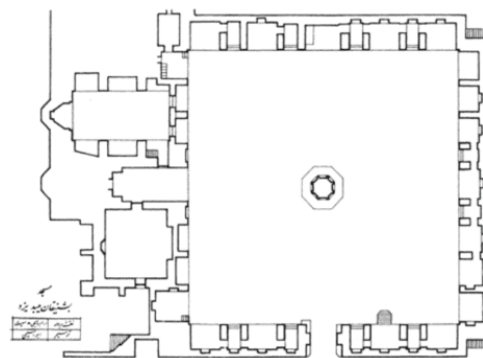


Fig. 3: Yazd, Hoseinia seid roknedin (Source: Haji-Qassemi, 1996)



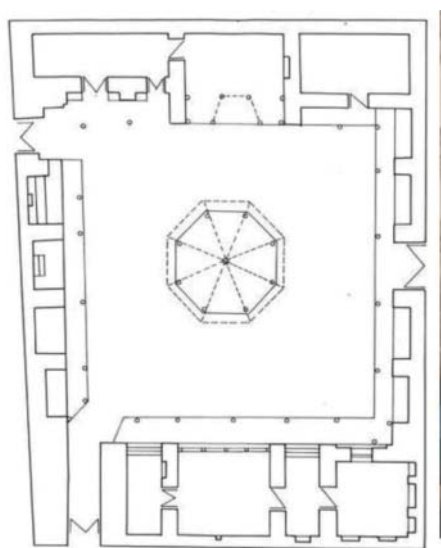


Fig. 4: Mazandaran, Tekiyeh taker  
(Source: Haji-Qassemi, 1996)

### Takiyeh

Not being able to afford building a Husseinia, some neighborhoods allocated a part of the pavement for a temporary Husseinia and called Takiyeh. Since there has been no certain set of rules for Takiyehs and the way they could be built, it can even be the lounge of any houses. Takiyehs are still being held, displaying black and sad decoration to much the occasion best. At the time of Qajars, Naser-Al din shah ordered to erect a Takiyeh and named it Takiyeh Dowlat. (Fig. 4) Neighboring one of the palaces of the king, Takiyeh Dowlat is considered the most known Takiyeh ever erected. Locating next door to shams Al-Imara, Takiyeh Dowlat totally differed from that of ordinary people as it was based on governmental functions. This famous and luxurious Takiyeh lasted as long as the dynasty founding it and was abolished by King Reza, the first Pahlavi dynasty king.

### RESULTS

As mentioned previously, at the time of safavieds. The culture of Vaqf scattered throughout Iran and generous people build places for the public. Basically built in order to cater social or medical services primarily for the poor and providing lost or poor travelers with free food and accommodation, such places did exist in previous centuries but at Safavieds era they flourished in the following forms;  
Seminaries where religious lessons were thought and clergymen were educated to scatter words on Islam.

Zaviyeh where people studied freely and there were rooms for saying special types of prayers.

Karavansaray, where travelers stopped to rest or to get guidelines on their directions when lost.

Dar Al-Shifa<sup>6</sup> where people received treatments for their

diseases.

Beit Al-Kotob<sup>7</sup> where books were kept and rented for free. There was also a big study for students to read books.

Garmabeh<sup>8</sup> where people took bath.

Inn where travelers temporarily stayed.

Soffeh<sup>9</sup> where the homeless settled.

Khasteh Khaneh<sup>10</sup>: this public place played 2 major roles. It was a place both to keep the elderly who were unable of taking care of themselves and for the orphaned children. In fact it was an orphanage and at there same time, the house for the elderly.

Dar Al-Imareh<sup>11</sup>: where people played in holy places.

Dar Al-Aytam<sup>12</sup>: where orphaned children were looked after.

Dar Al-masakin<sup>13</sup>: where the blind and the miserable were kept. Saghanfar which was a kind of Husseinia and would be found only in the north of Iran, in the province of Mazandaran.

A part from the mentioned, depending on the situation, other types of building would go under construction to cater the up coming needs.

### CONCLUSION

As studies reveal, doing religious stuff is a crucial part of the Moslems, making religious functioning places a bare necessity for them. Trying to cover all aspects of life and to cater all sorts of needs, mosques in Islamic traditional cities are considered a sign of ties between materialistic and Godly aspects of human beings. it's the core of the city giving birth to all signs of civilization and capable of initiating any type of revolution In addition to the role played by mosque in forming the cities, the also owned the leading role in terms of economical, social and political development of Moslem-settled towns.

To sum up, paying attention to the relationship of religious places and their organic role in cities can be a step forward in resolving a number of social issues in Islamic territories.

### ENDNOTES

1. The mosque of the prophet
2. The main mosque of the city
3. The house of the government
4. Arg
5. Bazaar
6. The house of treatments or clinic
7. Library
8. Public bath
9. Platform
10. The house of the tired
11. The house of the government
12. The house of the orphaned
13. The house of the homeless

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