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Mosques in Karachi: The Work of Four Contemporary Pakistani Architects

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Abstract: The design of mosques in Karachi has undergone a process of change. The resulting endeavors may be divided into two broad categories of creations, i.e. those designed by Architects and those designed by people themselves. Though recent designs of the latter category show a lot of variety, it is the designs produced by the architects that need to be documented and analyzed. This will assist in comprehending the trend and direction while searching for a desirable design vocabulary. To illustrate the case, works of four leading architects of Karachi, Zamir Mirza Rizki, Babar Hameed, Dadi Surti and Misbah Najmi have been documented to review the direction mosque design in Pakistan is moving towards. It is believed that the study would assist in developing a vocabulary of architectural criticism for contemporary architecture in Muslim Society that is needed urgently in the light of the current scarcity of related literature.

Introduction

During the last fifty years, the design of mosques in Karachi has undergone a process of change. Resulting endeavors may be divided into two broad categories i.e. those designed by Architects and those designed by people themselves. Though recent designs of the latter category show a lot of variety influenced by traditions and modernity, it is the design produced by architects that need to be documented and analyzed. This will assist in comprehending the trend and direction while searching for a desirable design vocabulary. In this regard, changes of constituent forms, i.e. minaret, dome and prayer hall etc. need critical examination.

To illustrate the case, works of four leading architects of Karachi, Zamir Mirza Rizki, Babar Hameed, Dadi Surti and Misbah Najmi have been documented to review the direction that mosque design is moving towards in Pakistan. The architects selected are done with a purpose. Each has a distinct attribute: the number of works done (Mr. Rizki); specific design styles (Mr. Hameed and Mr. Najmi); and reflection of a non-Muslim while designing a mosque (Mr. Surti). In addition, all the four are considered to be authentic and established architects with a lifetime achievement in the field of architecture. It is essential to mention here that the selection of architects and mosques are not necessarily representative of a wide range of mosques designed in Karachi. However, due to the nature and scale of this study, the limited selection of four distinct and different approaches to mosque design provides a chance for more comprehensive and insightful analysis. In addition, there is a general consensus among the professionals that the architects selected for the present analysis stand out with respect to their approach and achievements.

This study also seeks to discover and to evaluate the theoretical models and the methodology employed in the design process by each of these architects with the intent to understand their cultural relevance. I believe that the study would help us in developing a vocabulary of architectural criticism for contemporary architecture in Muslim Society that is needed urgently in the light of the current scarcity of related literature. It would also offer a critical focus on the problems of architectural identity with mosque as a building type in the Muslim world.

The method of analysis adopted is that four case studies, one each by every designer would be presented to highlight their approach and methodology, followed by a critical review of their treatment of the constituent form like minaret, dome, prayer hall etc. so as to draw similarities and differences in their style. We start by looking at Mr. Rizki`s work.

The Four Architects

Mr. Rizki

The strength of Mr. Rizki`s design was simplicity of approach. He started his career like most architects in Pakistan by designing custom residences. His residences stood out they were simple, neat and had very elegant proportions. This simplicity and elegance of proportions adapted very well in his designs for mosques, which related to the aspirations of the middle and upper middle class of Karachi. The majority of his mosques like Madni Masjid Taimuria are neighborhood mosques, and the characteristic feature of these mosques are that they are devoid of ornamentation. Typically, the prayer hall is rectangular in shape, with two levels to accommodate maximum number of *namazis*, and also provide a larger volume inside the hall. The hall has narrow slit windows on either side rising all the way to the ceiling. On either side of the *minbar* arch or arches are protruded outward in such a manner that a niche is created to allow slits along the curve of the arch, for ventilation. The purpose of this detail is to avoid direct sun during *Asr* prayer and at the same time let the sea breeze, which essentially blows from the west, enter the hall.

Outside the prayer hall is a verandah with a low ceiling. This adds to the feel of the space while entering the hall, and also allows larger space at the mezzanine level. The courtyard again has a rectangular form with entrances on three sides. To provide a better feeling of space the courtyard is bordered with a colonnade. The minaret is located at the right side of the prayer hall, and like the rest of the mosque does not have any decoration or ornamentation. In Mr. Rizki`s design, one finds basic constituent forms of the mosque, but the expression is quite geometric and contemporary. (Figure 1)

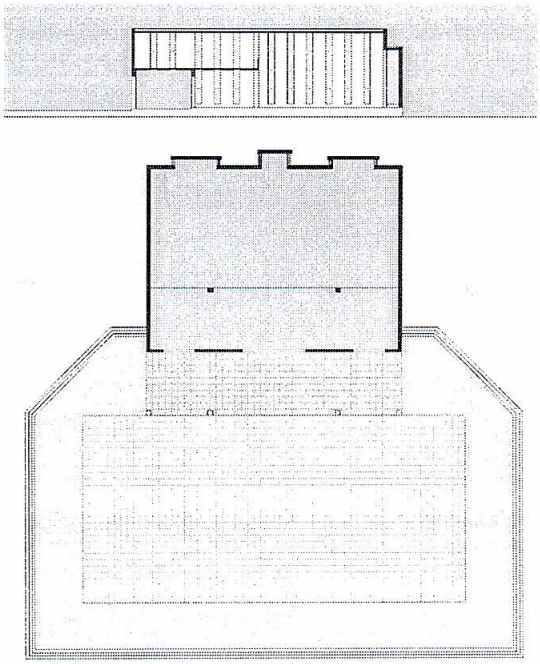


Fig. 1: Plan and section of Madni Masjid.

Mr. Babar Hameed

Mr. Babar Hameed's basic training was as a sculptor, so his architecture has a very strong sculptural effect in its innovative landmark. The time he started his practice, Pakistan was also geared towards innovation in all sorts making his style relevant for the time. His most prestigious project happens to be a mosque designed in the Defense Society in Karachi. This mosque satisfied both aspects in terms of size and architectural value. The designer has attempted to revolutionize and challenge the way the mosques have been traditionally presented.

Masjid-e-Tooba is located in Phase II, D.H.A. just adjacent to the Defense Market. Although it is located just opposite the main road but does not present any proper vista. There is a petrol pump in front of the main entrance; the road on its left leads to the Defense Market area surrounded by two and three story high buildings. The road on its right leads to a Naval colony comprising of apartments. Due to these reasons the beautiful structure is hardly visible to the passerby.

According to Mr. Babar Hameed, the best way to pray is in a circular space. The reasons, which he gives, are that less space is wasted on either side of the *minbar,* as is the case in a rectangular mosque. The existence of vertical columns and slabs were disturbing to him and therefore he preferred a low-pitched dome. The dome, he conceived, is at a critical angle i.e. the height and span ratio seems to sprout from the landscape, and appears to be a part of the landscape itself. The *jali* encircling the dome has non-static and vibrant character which evokes movement. Hanging curves over the ablution area and *madrassah* are a symbolic design of sea waves as the site is in a coastal area. Different curved planes are used between the doors and the *jali* to provoke curiosity as to what lies beyond. The height and span ratio of dome is designed so as to create a feeling of openness within the mosque. The small mirrors provided on the ceiling gives the impression of stars or skylights.

The overall architectural style, the designer claims, is unique and does not relate to either east or the west. Its form is a simple shell dome. Its architecture addresses *space, form and function*, indigenous in all aspects.

There is one main entrance to the mosque from the eastern side. Two subsidiary entrances are provided, in addition to the main entrance, for special prayer congregations. The main entrance is wide enough to allow 25,000 people within 20 minutes. It has a cubical form in order to provide relief from the rest of the spherical forms. Vertical use of stone is done on the main entrance wall.

Special Features: Foam concrete tiles are used on the ceiling in order to absorb sound. Mirrors in the foam concrete tiles are used to give a feeling of porosity. The *jali* is textured in such a way that it catches wind from the west and makes it roll around towards the east direction making the atmosphere airy all around the dome. Stone is used in a vertical fashion on the exterior entrance wall in order to break the horizontality of the dome. On both sides of the entrance, the wall is clad with a *jali.*

The Minaret is wider at the bottom and tapers up to form a conical shape. It is clad with a *jali* and has two balconies at the heights of 50 and 80 feet respectively. The placement of the minaret is such that when one enters the mosque the cone is visible from the back of the dome at its exact center like its own pinnacle. When the dome is illuminated at night, on special occasions, the fountain pools at the center from the main entrance reflect light to create a magical image (Figurers 2, 3 & 4).

Mr. Misbah Najmi:

Mr. Misbah Najmi is considered to be one of the leading architects in Pakistan, famous for his elegant and innovative residences in Karachi. Other than residences, he has designed office buildings, commercial interiors and mosques.

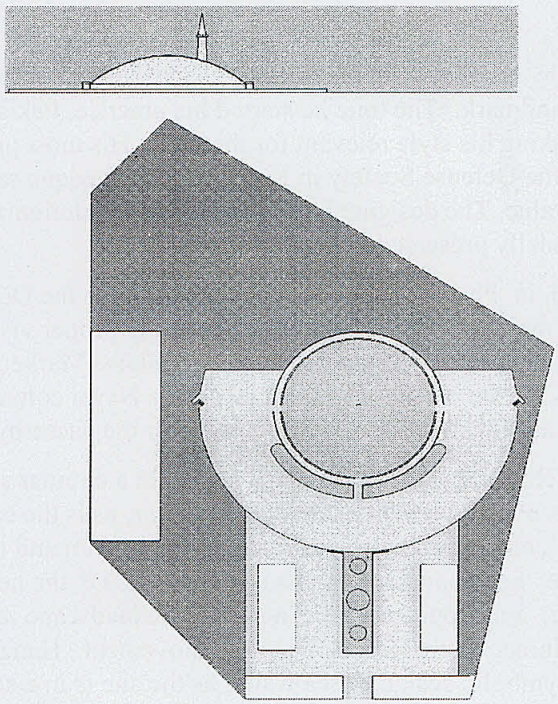


Fig. 2: Section and plan, Masjid –E-Tooba, Karachi.

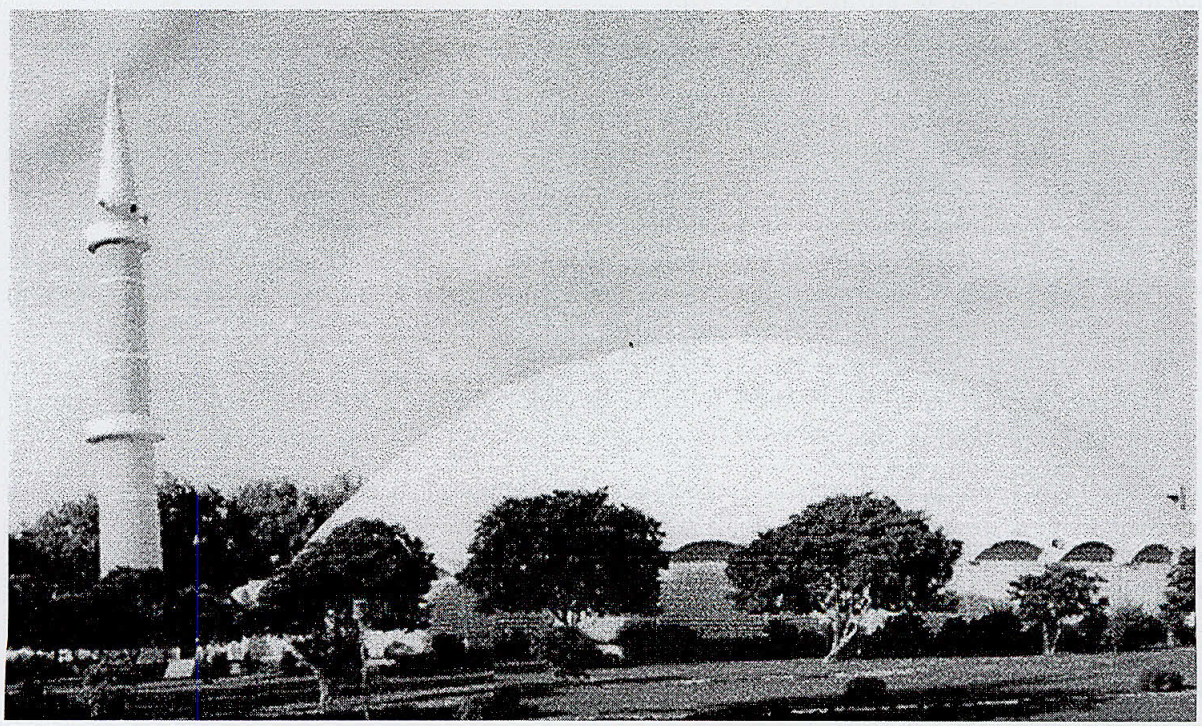


Fig. 3: General view, Masjid-E-Tooba, Karachi.

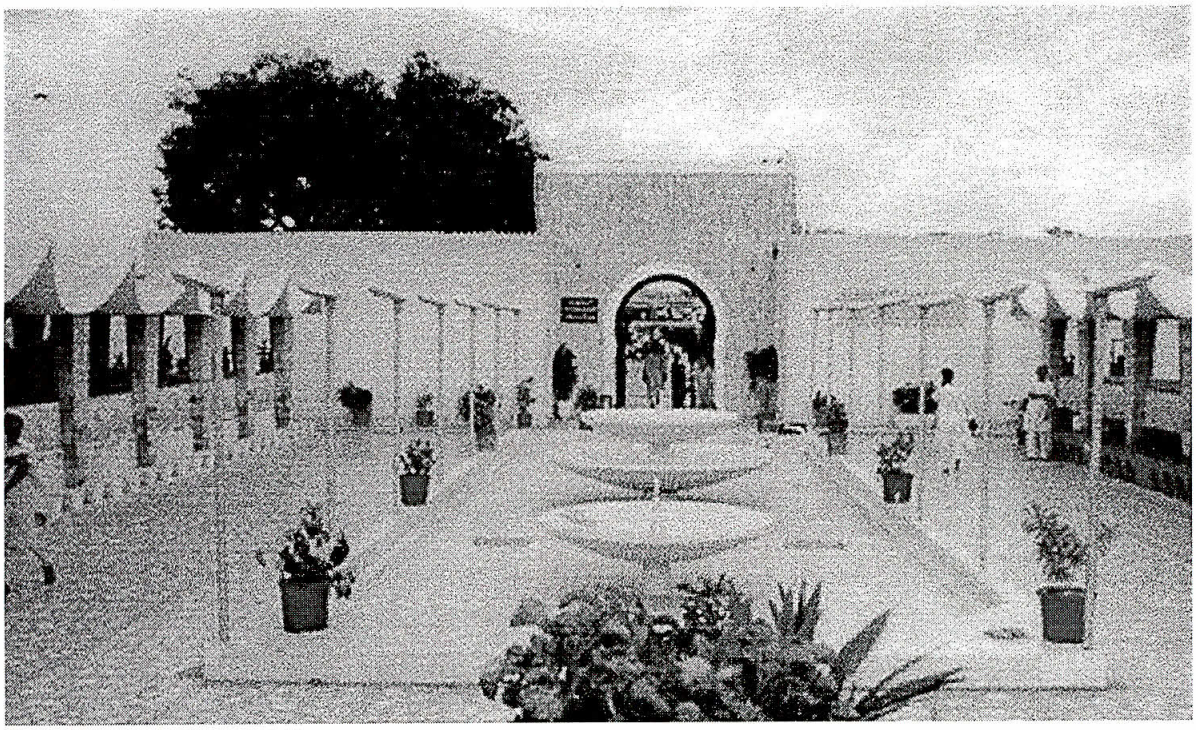


Fig. 4: Main entrance, Masjid-E-Tooba, Karachi.

He has designed two mosques: Masjid-e-Rahmania for the Coast Guard in Lines Area and Masjid-e-Faran at Shahrah-e-Faisal, Karachi. It is the second mosque that is presented here as a case study. Masjid-e-Faran is located at one of the most prominent locations in Karachi, at the intersection of Shahrah-e-Faisal and Korangi Road right next to the Finance and Trade Center, which is the largest office complex in the city. Since the original mosque was located on unauthorized land, there were talks of its demolition at the time when the FTC was close to completion, but due to resistance offered by the *Imam* of the mosque, Karachi Cantonment Board, the owners of the land decided to go for its design and build a proper Mosque at the site. Misbah Najmi was commissioned for the design.

Misbah's response to the problem has been very innovative. Instead of designing a structure which would compete with the FTC, he opted for a low key foreground kind of a design, which appears more like a landscape treatment at the corner of the two of the most busy roads in Karachi. The idea originated because of a specific problem at the site. Since there is heavy traffic on both roads, there is a lot of noise pollution at the site. During peak hours, it is impossible to have a normal conversation between two people sitting together. This was the basic reason behind the back fill, and the result has been very successful. Inside the prayer hall, it is very tranquil and one does not feel that the structure is located right at the Karachi's busiest intersections.

To Misbah the design of mosques should be simple, because essentially it is a space where man endeavors to be close to the Creator. To him there are three essentials in a mosque *Saiya* (Shade), *Safai* (cleanliness) and the *Qibla* direction. All other features are secondary. In both his mosques he has taken a perfect square (65 feet in case of Masjid-e-Faran) as the shape for his prayer hall. He has provided a verandah/courtyard at the front and there are overflow spaces on either side of the prayer hall. The hall contains, at the center, a 50 feet dia dome constructed with steel frame and fiberglass with blue color to match the color of

the sky. He has also used a lot of bioclimatic architectural features like wind catchers supported by large exhaust fans which keep the temperature inside the prayer hall cool and comfortable.

Hall would not have any suspended ceiling fans. Traditional elements like prayer hall, courtyard and minarets all are there but they have a slightly innovative expression. The stone that has been used for exterior cladding is very close to the Gizri stone which were used by the British in the 19th century, so the structure presents a very familiar feel to it. Minaret of the mosque is also square in plan and contains carved calligraphy of God's names.

Another significant contribution that the designer made in this project has been with respect to the provision for car parking facility. Typically mosques in Karachi contain shops which are there to generate funds for the upkeep of the mosque. The clients in this case, the Cantonment Board also wanted to do the same here. To avoid such commercial activities, the architect has planned a car park for 80 to 90 cars. The parking fee, it is estimated, would cover upto 80 percent of the total cost of the upkeep.

There are four distinct features that one can identify in the design of this mosque, the idea of blending the landscape and architecture, using simple shapes and forms, innovation with respect to the upkeep of the mosque, and finally the architect's attempt to connect internal space to sky. (Figures 5, 6, & 7).

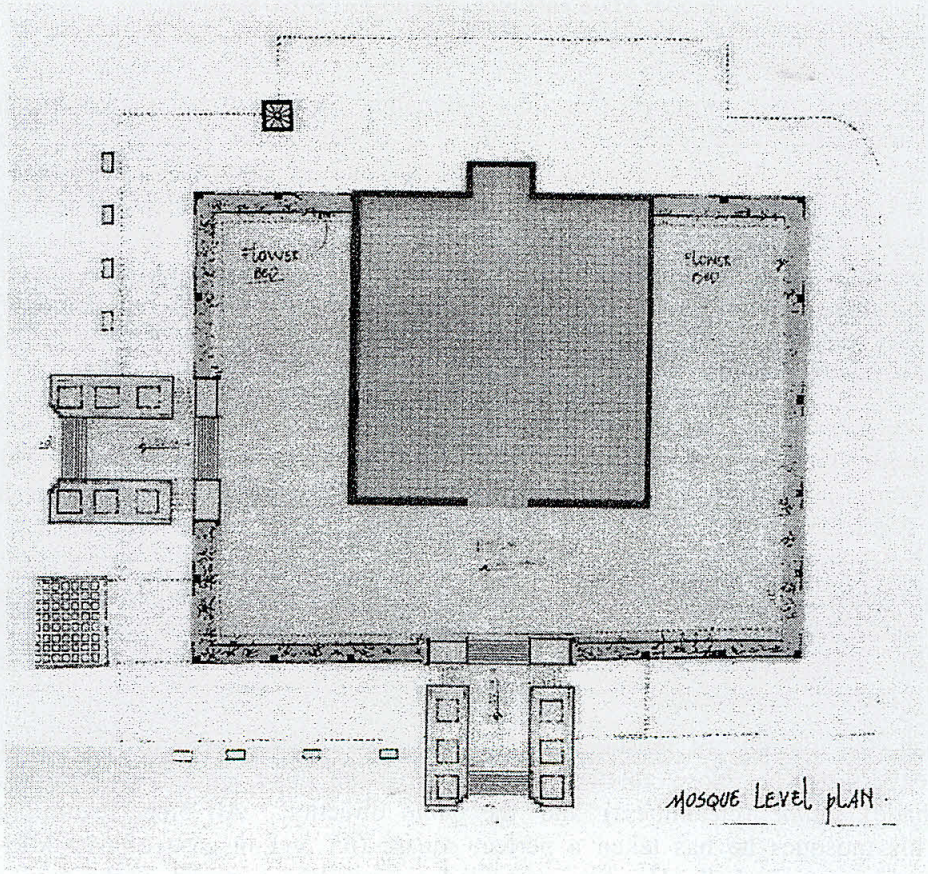


Fig. 5: Plan of Masjid-E-Faran, Shahrah-E-Faisal, Karachi.

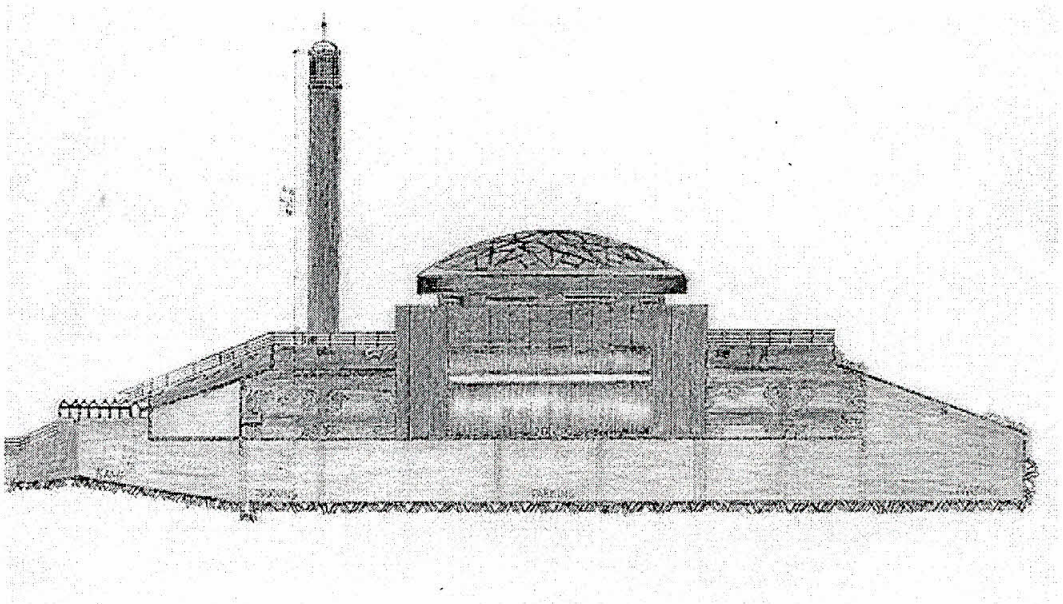


Fig. 6: Section of Masjid-E-Faran.

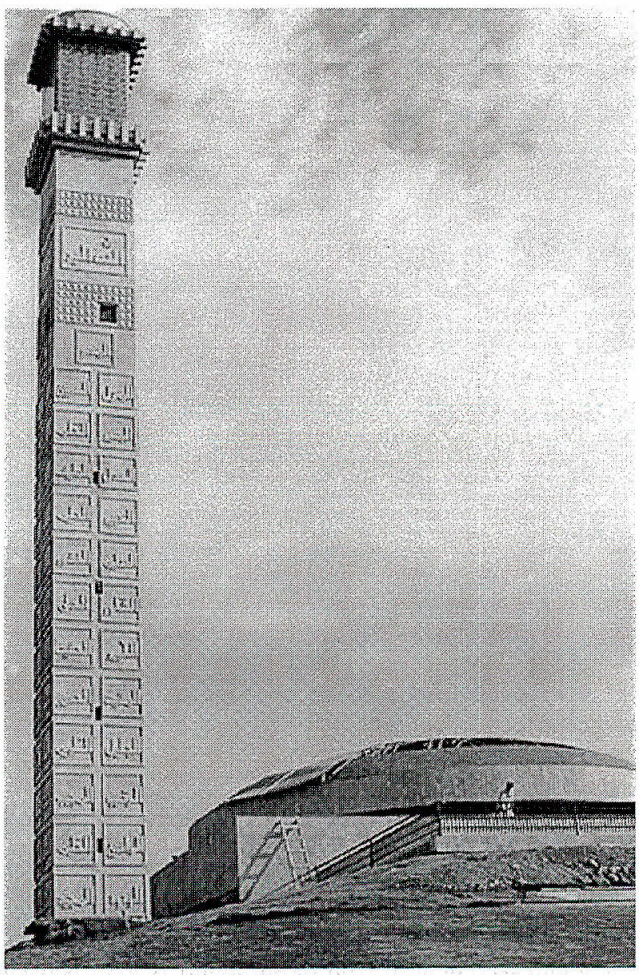


Fig. 7: Minaret of Masjid-E-Faran.

Mr. Dadi Surti

Like Mr. Rizki, Mr. Surti has been fortunate enough to design a number of mosques in and outside Karachi. His mosques include Masjid-e-Bab-ul Bahar, the KPT Head Office mosques, Masjid-e-Rahmatul-lil-Aalmin, Masjid-e-Alnoor, Masjid Babul Islam, Mosque for Pakistan Security Printing Corporation. Mr. Surti is a graduate from Sir J.J. School of Architecture Bombay (1955), he also studied at Regent Street Polytechnic and Middle Temple Inn, London. He practiced for about 10 years in London, then came to Karachi in 1967 and since then he is in practice here. He has designed a number of prestigious buildings in Karachi and other parts of Pakistan but for us his passion for mosque design is of relevance here.

His approach in design is quite simple and direct. His design range from very traditional, like the Security Printing Corporation Mosque, (where he has used traditional vernacular features) to very complex geometric juxtaposition of squares (as in the Neighborhood mosque in Gulistan-e-Jauhar), to arrangement of curve lines as in Masjid-e-Bab ul Bahar, where the prayer hall is circular, with two huge arches or half arches on either side of the hall to cover glazing and give mosque a sculptural look. In fact, the other way of looking at these arches is that there is a deliberate attempt on the part of the designer to create a form which resembles a seagull in flight. (Figure 8)

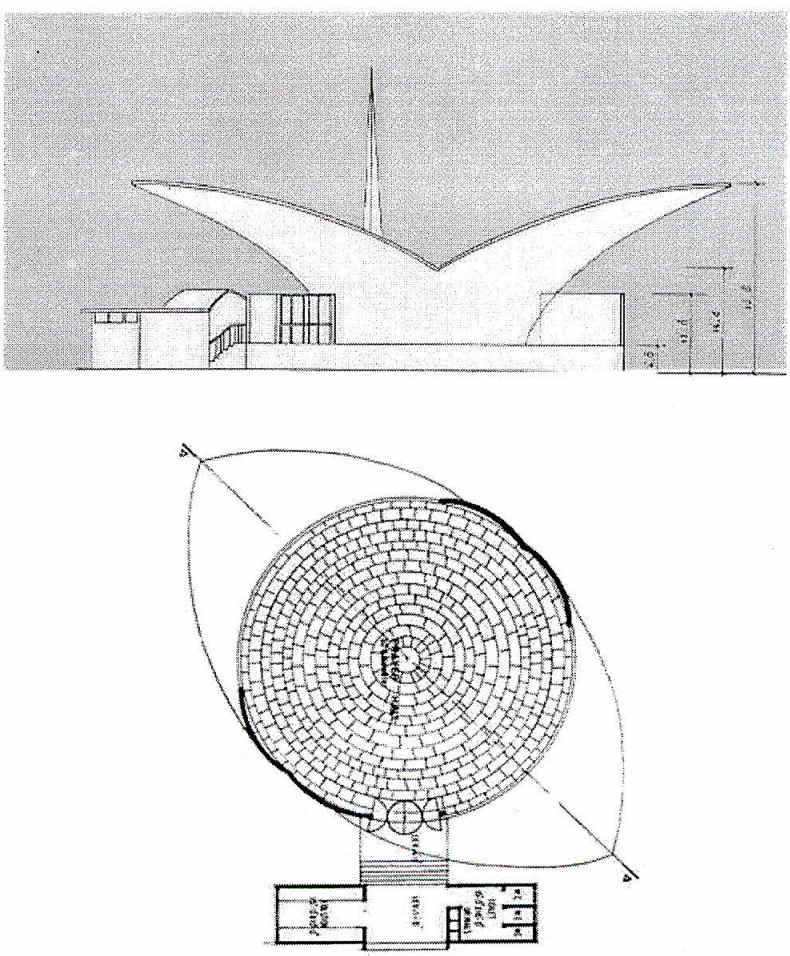


Fig. 8: Plan and section of Masjid Babul Behar K.P.T., Karachi.,

To date, this is considered to be his single most important mosque. The circular shape of the prayer hall signifies purity and simplicity. To him, the most important thing for a mosque is sincerity. While he considers that everyone designing a mosque should study traditions and history behind mosque design, but he does not consider it important to follow traditional feature and idioms in every mosque. Other significant design determinant in case of Masid Bab-ul-Bahar is the site. The second reason for selecting a circular shape was the fact that the site was in way circular so that is where the inspiration to use a circle also came from. In fact, in the final analysis, his approach can be summed up as simple, sincere based on site considerations, and form based on the seagull.

Conclusions

We learn from our analysis that all four architects have some common attributes; they all believe that mosque design should be simple. To achieve this simplicity they have selected various shapes and forms like a rectangle in Rizki`s case, a circle in Hameed and Surti`s case, and a square in Misbah`s case. They all have avoided ornamentation and decoration, which if used at all, had a very abstract and geometric flavor. There is no clear-cut theoretical model that one can identify in the work of these architects other than their commitment to simplicity and sincerity. With respect to constituent forms, we observe that Rizki, while adopting prayer hall, courtyard and minaret, opted for an abstract treatment and contemporary expression. He did not use a dome in his design, which traditionally is an essential part of the vocabulary of mosque architecture. Hameed, in his endeavor, adopted a dome as the form for prayer hall, which created some functional problems and presented a totally new vocabulary. Misbah has been able to both innovate and also retain the significance of the constituent form. Though his courtyards are not as formal. Surti again has not been able to quite retain all the elements of the mosque in its actual spirit. One also feels uncomfortable with the analogy of seagull with respect to the overall form, but as he himself agreed, he never attempted to revive the basic constituent forms.

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المساجد في كرا تشي: أعمال أربعة معماريين باكستانيين معاصرين

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ملخص البحث: مر تصميم المساجد في كرا تشي بمسار من التغيير. ويمكن تقسيم تلك التجارب إلى فئتين واسعتين، هما المساجد التي تم تصميمها من قبل معماريين والمساجد التي قام بتصميمها السكان. وبينما تعبر المساجد التي قام بتصميمها السكان عن تنوع كبير في التصميم، إلا أن التصاميم التي قام بتصميمها المعماريون هي التي ينبغي توثيقها وتحليلها. ويساعد ذلك في إستيعاب التوجهات وفي نفس الوقت، الحث عن لغة تصميم مفيدة. ولتوضيح ذلك، تم توثيق أعمال أربعة من المعماريين المتميزين في مدينة كرا تشي، وهم كل من زامير مرزا رزقي، بابار حميد، دادي سرتي، ومصباح نجمي أملا في التعرف على الاتجاه الذي يسير نحوه تصميم المساجد في باكستان. والاعتقاد من وراء ذلك أن الدراسة ستساعد في تطوير لغة للنقد المعماري للعمارة المعاصرة في المجتمع المسلم والتي تبرز الحاجة الماسة إليها في ظل ندرة البحث في هذا المجال.