

The New Uhud Mosque in Madinah

The full name of this mosque is *Jami' Sayyid al-Shuhada'*. It was built at Uhud where Hamzah b. 'Abd al-Mutallib, the Prophet's uncle, and the rest of Uhud martyrs had been buried. The mosque, in fact, carries Hamzah's epithet, *sayyid al-shuhada'* (the Master of martyrs). It was completed and officiated in 2017.

Since Uhud is the site of the second major battle between the earliest followers of truth and the followers of falsehood, containing the graves of about 70 martyrs, and since the place is on the list of sites recommended by the Prophet (pbuh) to be visited in Madinah, the mosque was built to cater to the needs of flocking pilgrims and visitors. It was also built, albeit not as much and as directly, for the sake of satisfying the needs of the neighbouring local populace.

The mosque's impressive form and striking conceptual as well as physical presence and operation also serve as an antidote to any even remotest idea, initiative or plan by anybody to architecturally commemorate and glorify to any extent the reputations of the martyrs and their graves. In truth, the mosque and how its adjacent historical areas are currently managed, denote the successful embodiment of ample lessons pertaining to the menace of funerary architecture or "the architecture of death", which have been accrued throughout history.

The mosque is a hypostyle hall without an open courtyard. There are five rows of columns parallel to the *qiblah* wall: three in men's prayer area and two in women's. There are six columns in each row. That means that there are four arcades in men's prayer area and three in women's.

Each arcade can accommodate six lines (*sufuf*) of worshippers, with each line having more than a hundred persons. That translates itself into 42 lines: 24 for men and 18 for women, which means that the total

capacity of the mosque can easily near the figure of 5,000 worshippers.

The mosque has only one floor. The women's area in the northern part is partitioned off by a thick wall. The wall contains glass windows and doors. At the lower part, there are shelves that contain copies of the Holy Qur'an. Both windows and doors are decorated with geometric decorative designs that resemble those in the *mihrab* area and on the windows that perforate the mosque's main walls. Unlike the wooden screens in most other mosques, which separate men's and women's prayer zones, the wall in this mosque is reasonably transparent. One can easily look through and see much of the area's content.

The mosque's ceiling is flat and is intermittently recessed. The exception is the *mihrab* bay above which there is a dome. The dome rests neither on classical pendentives, squinches, nor muqarnas. It does on four horizontal triangular-like wedges placed in the four corners. The sides of the wedges which meet the dome are curved so as to match the shape of the dome. The dome's base is pierced with a series of good-sized windows. Their number is twenty. The windows feature neither dense coloured designs, nor jaalis. As a result, they allow a considerable amount of light to filter into the interior directly above the *mihrab*. The interior of the dome is whitewashed. Its exterior, however, is yellowish.

The exterior of the dome is overlaid with two streams of ribs. The ribs issue from the bottom to the top in a winding pattern. They do so in two virtually perpendicular to each other directions, forming thereby an asymmetrical grid. The lines eventually converge at the spot where the dome's pinnacle, made of brass and featuring a crescent, is affixed.

There are two minarets, flanking the mosque from the western and eastern sides. Their bases are square, shafts octagonal and tops cylindrical. There is only one balcony for each minaret. The balconies are placed near the top. They, too, are octagonal. They are not supported by muqarnas. Rather, they rest on cornices whose contour

is used to emphasize the prominence of the vertical lines of the octagonal shafts.

The minarets are also whitewashed, except their highest sections just above the balconies, which are rendered yellowish - like the dome. That could be seen as a gradual transition towards the minarets' pinnacles which are made of yellow or gold brass. Like the brass pinnacle of the dome, the minarets' pinnacles, too, feature a pair of crescents. In passing, the white, yellow, red, cream and grey colours dominate the mosque, both inside and outside.

There are 30 cylindrical columns supporting the mosque's predominantly flat roof. They are big and almost one meter in diameter. They have smooth shafts and simple both bases and capitals, bearing a resemblance to the Tuscan and Doric orders. Their capitals are significantly enlarged and extended in order to provide a desired height and to buttress the support needed for the converging massive reinforced concrete beams and the arches. These superstructural enlargements and extensions are covered with fine muqarnas. Around the bases of the columns, there are rectangular wooden shelves on each side. They contain copies of the Holy Qur'an.

The ceiling is divided into two segments. One segment is higher than the other by about two meters. The higher segment of the ceiling occupies the area of three central bays in each of the first (*qiblah*), second and third arcade (each arcade has seven bays). It encompasses the dome above the *mihrab* as well. Since it starts with the *qiblah* wall and its *mihrab* compartment, extending by two arcades towards the centre, this rectangular area is the most pivotal in the mosque's configuration. Raising it above the level of the rest of the mosque's flat roof seems to be deliberate, with the purpose of highlighting it and setting it apart.

The lower segment of the flat ceiling rests directly on the columns and their superstructures, with the intermediary of massive reinforced concrete beams. The beams are huge and about thirteen meters long. Their ends congregate above the columns, forming

clusters. That is the reason why the columns needed to be large and toughened.

The higher segment of the ceiling, on the other hand, is supported by a series of pointed segmental arches. Their ends also congregate above the columns, forming clusters. The same arches have been uninterruptedly employed in the *mihrab* bay as well, providing support for the dome. There, both corbels and cornices, in addition to horizontal triangular-like wedges, were likewise used for supporting the dome.

The mosque uses a central air-conditioning system. The ducts (conduits or passages) are supplied through, and registers placed on, the reinforced concrete beams in the lower segment of the ceiling. In the higher segment, they are featured on the slightly suspended parts of the ceiling just above the arches.

There are three main entrances: at the northern, eastern and western sides. The first is for women and the latter two are shared by both men and women. The form of entrances is imposing and is a combination of arched tetrastyle porticos and iwans.

From the middle of the eastern and western entrances rise the two minarets. At a first glance, their presence is awkward. However, on second thought, their presence has both sense and purpose. Firstly, the minarets enhance the structure's symmetry, organically integrating itself with the rest of it; and secondly, since they are shared by men and women, the minarets efficiently separate the two streams of visitors: men to one side and women to the other. The minarets thus function as dividers, essentially dividing the entrances into two parts.

The entrances are further divided into three arched bays. The middle bays are occupied by the minarets' square bases. The two bays on the fringing sides lead to the two, male and female, separate entranceways.

The pointed arches of the three entrances, some arched windows and the lower section of the entire exterior façade of the building use the *ablaq* technique, which is an architectural style and construction technique that involve alternating or fluctuating rows primarily of stone - and also of brick and some other improvised and unoriginal building materials - of two different colours. The *voussoirs* of the arches of the entrances and the arches that externally frame the windows of the northern side and some windows of the eastern and western sides, are made of alternate components yellow and cream in colour. The lower section of the exterior façade use alternate horizontal bands of yellow and cream panels that suggest rows of stone. There are three cream and two yellow such bands.

Virtually the complete section of the *qiblah* wall, as part of the *qiblah* bay, is of dark red wood. As expected, predominant in the section are the *mihrab* and *minbar*. The former is a semi-domed niche the front of which gives the impression of an arched doorway. Its front side is flanked by two smooth columns, supporting a semi-circular arch. The columns are simple and have neither bases nor capitals, except some rather decorative rings around their tops and bottoms. They match well with the rest of the columns in the mosque. On the outside, the *mihrab* protrudes from the *qiblah* wall and its semi-dome is overlaid with the same asymmetrical grid as the one that overlays the dome.

The *minbar*, which stands next to the *mihrab*, is a simple wooden platform. It is raised off the ground by less than a meter. It is enclosed by a wooden screen that features elaborate and extravagant latticework or *jaalis*. Entrance to the *minbar* is from behind, through a small door.

Behind this huge wooden *qiblah* section, there is a chamber, in all likelihood for the imam. Its elevation is of the same size as the wooden section itself. Outwardly, the chamber protrudes from the *qiblah* wall. The *mihrab*, as a matter of fact, protrudes from it.

Entrance to the imam's chamber from inside the mosque is on the opposite side of the *minbar*. There is a small door that facilitates the

purpose. This door and the *minbar's* door are of equal size and design. Since they stand on the two opposite sides, and look alike, they provide the wooden section, and the whole neighbouring space, with an additional sense of equilibrium and proportion. The wooden section is topped by a segmental arch.

There are also some big TV flat screens installed on the strategic places, like on the *qiblah* wall, in order to facilitate a better and more effective communication of sermons. This is because in effective communication, listening without seeing is not equal in impact to listening with seeing.

The mosque lets in an abundance of natural light. This is done primarily by a series of long vertical windows, besides the twenty clerestory windows at the dome's base. There are 38 windows. Each window is about five meters high and one meter wide. They are all arched and contain jaalis, featuring various geometric designs and shapes. Each window constitutes an arabesque. There are six windows on the *qiblah* side, three on each side of the *mihrab* area; 12 on each eastern and western sides, half of it in men's prayer area and another half in women's; and eight on the northern side.

Decoration in the mosque is not as abundant as it is ingenious and effective. Geometric and floral patterns and designs, as well as their combinations, are most widely used. Calligraphy is reduced to a minimum. The places and constituents of the mosque used for decoration are: the entire wooden section in the *qiblah* wall with the *minbar* and *mihrab*, the interior of the dome, the spandrels of the arches, the windows, and the chandeliers.

However, the mosque's best adornment revolves around subtly integrating the mentioned decorative means and media with the clever use and manipulation of both natural and artificial light, colours, the horizontal and vertical lines and panels, choice of materials, and the overall symmetry and proportion of the building, both internally and externally. The best adornment of the mosque is its physical and spiritual equipoise, serenity, lustre, freshness, elegance, and the

sensible configuration of spaces and their proper functioning. Such a decorative strategy is not only sensory, but also psychological, intellectual and spiritual. It involves the entire being, and leaves a longer impression.

The mosque is not crenelated. But its roof's parapet is repeatedly recessed from the outside, thus suggesting embrasures and merlons. In this way, the mosque's main body appears from outside as though a castle or a fortress. Its corners have also been rendered larger and taller, bearing, as a consequence, a resemblance to corner towers or lookout posts in castles and fortresses.

Here, some parallels could be drawn between the contour of the mosque and the historical battle of Uhud and some of the events that were associated with it. On the eve of the battle, the Prophet (pbuh) suggested that the fortresses of the city of Madinah, its lofty houses, and the scarcity of vast open spaces in a number of areas - especially within the ambit of the populated ones - be optimally utilized for defensive purposes. He proposed that the enemy be confronted inside the city and the women and children be stationed in the fortresses. The women and children thus could enhance the strength of the city defence by troubling the enemy from the roofs of the houses by whatever means they could get hold of.

Remarkably, before putting forth his suggestion, the Prophet (pbuh) saw in a dream that he was wearing an impregnable coat of mail, which he later interpreted as the existing defence potential enjoyed by the city of Madinah. However, due to more than a few causes, the battle eventually took place outside the city proper, near the Uhud mountain to the city's north. It stands to reason, therefore, that the outline of the mosque is intended to evoke the notions of battle, defence, fortification, vigilance and sacrifice.

Modern mosque architecture in Madinah

As a small digression, following the Saudi expansions of the Prophet's Mosque, the Mosque became modern, in the sense that it is

characterised by the usage of some of the most up-to-date architectural and building technologies as well as engineering ideas, solutions and techniques. This was most evident in the Mosque's new sections that lay beyond its core, that is, the old Ottoman section, and beyond its sub-core, that is, the scope of the King 'Abd al-'Aziz's expansion that encompassed the two open courtyards.

The Mosque was relatable to the present and recent times. It was conceived and rendered for the needs and mentality of the people who live here and now, and who could identify themselves and their progressive and forward-thinking aspirations and goals with the perpetual character and objectives of the Mosque.

This, however, does not mean that this modern dimension of the Prophet's Mosque was undisposed towards tradition and traditional architecture, much less against it. Traditional ideas, solutions, forms, details and shapes were still used, but they were articulated and displayed differently. Traditional architecture was not followed indiscriminately and impulsively. Rather, it was used as a source of wit, novelty and ingenuity. Much of the Mosque was still traditional, but in non-traditional ways, just as it was modern, but in traditional ways. In it, tradition was modernized, and modernity traditionalized.

This was a new approach whereby on the basis of tradition, mosque architecture was looked at and practiced differently. It was something out of the box, the box signifying tradition and its parameters. The new approach did not rigidly conform to a set standard of design principles. It was free, fluid and open-ended, always using traditional codes and values as guidance and a point of reference. It was allowed to evolve with the evolution of modernity and modern ideas, techniques and styles. The approach represented a dynamic and modernized tradition, so to speak. As such, it was always open to experimentation and new ideas, turning away from stereotyping, inflexibility, monotonousness and one-dimensionality.

This approach and experience of the Prophet's Mosque led to the emergence of a new trend in the realm of Madinah's mosque

architecture. The trend aims to make mosques multidimensional, diversified and pleasing to the eye of a beholder, and to use first-class materials. It also seeks to make mosques dynamic, sustainable and fully functional and serviceable.

Mosques are thus to be rendered more meaningful and expressive, directing a user's focus and thoughts not only to the past, but also the present and the future. They are to adopt and facilitate at once multifaceted identities and characters, and multidirectional proclivity and movement, forging in the like manner their relationships and interactions with the outside world.

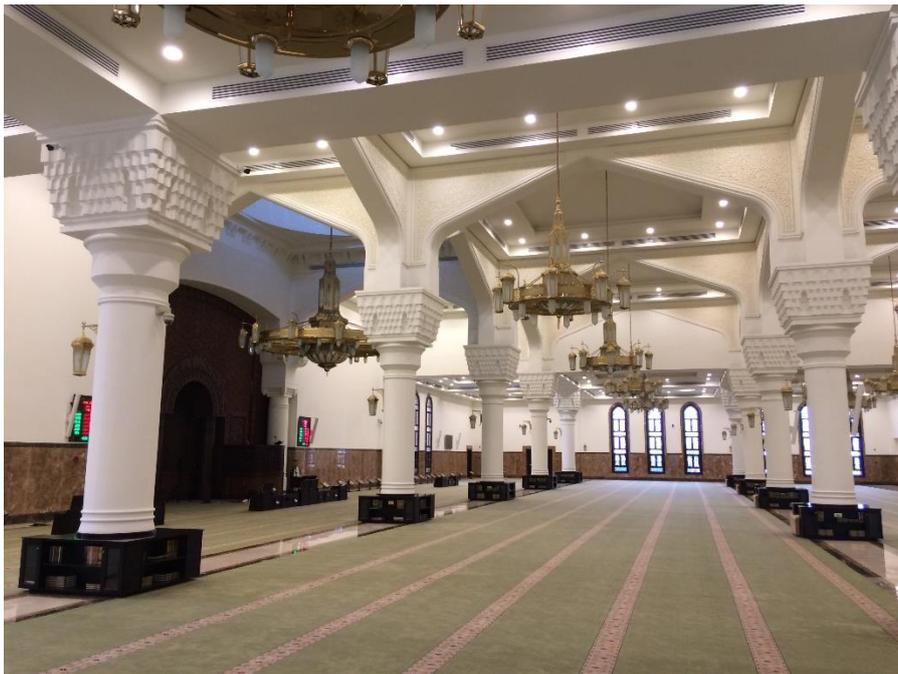
Such mosques are set to serve as a visual and operational treat. They are vibrant; they delight and even surprise their users and visitors; and they always have something to say and communicate. Colour and light are important elements in those mosques, to give the facades and spaces variety and personality. Bright colours and diverse sources of light, and their clever combinations, are extensively used.

The relationship between this modern genre of mosque architecture with tradition and its mosque architecture is, to some extent, tantamount to the relationship between postmodernism and modernism and their respective architectural styles. The differences between modern and postmodern architecture focus on issues of function, form, inventiveness, and the struggle between local and international values. Similarly, the differences between traditional and modern mosques revolve around issues of purpose, functionality, ingenuity, scope, directness and architectural liberalism.

The new Uhud mosque (*Jami' Sayyid al-Shuhada*) and the new Khandaq mosque are the best examples of this new trend in the mosque architecture of Madinah.



The new Uhud mosque or *Jami' Sayyid al-Shuhada'*



The interior of the mosque



The wooden *mihrab* section



The eastern main entrance and minaret