

## Al-Attas's Works and Contributions to the Islamic Architecture in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** Several studies have been conducted on al-Attas' educational philosophy and other field of knowledge such as traditional Islam, religion and spirituality, but not on his contributions to the Islamic Architecture in Malaysia. This article examines Al-Attas's contributions to the Islamic Architecture. This study involves applied deductive, inductive and comparative analyses for the most apparent architectural elements which comprise of the Malay, Roman, Greek and Moorish design. He was given a task by Ministry of Education, Malaysia to contextualize the Islamic education and implement it at higher educational level, leading towards the concept and design of International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC). This study implies that the Islamic architectural concept of the building exhibits his skill and artistic talent with a solid blend of his knowledge and experience. Further studies are required on his contribution to Sufism that influences his architectural concept.

**Key words:** Islamic architecture • Islamic arts • Islamic civilization • Malaysia • Muslim scholar

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### INTRODUCTION

Milne argues that there is no great architectural heritage in Malaya remotely equivalent to Cambodia's Angkor Wat. The only buildings catches his eyes were Kuala Lumpur's 'Moorish Victorian' railway station and Parliament Buildings in Kuala Lumpur, which the later is in the modern style. All are in Kuala Lumpur. Nonetheless, this argument can be challenged by several traditional architectural buildings all over Malaya such as the *Masjid Kampung Laut*, in Kelantan, (a state in East of Malaya) and *Minangkabau House* in Negeri Sembilan (a state in West Malaysia). Al-Attas' work of art and architecture can be seen as a response to the lack of artistic flowering in Malaysia especially in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, this article examines one of the artistic buildings in Kuala Lumpur designed by Al-Attas, namely International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Terminology of Islamic Architecture is the principal issue when we examine the contribution of al-Attas to the

field in Malaysia. There is debate on the usage of the term "Islamic Architecture", whether it should be "Muslim Architecture". Answering this question would be confusing and endless if we are not using the traditional method of early Muslim scholars. Generally they define the term according to the literal and metaphor meaning. Therefore, this study follows the same method. At the very beginning it would be helpful to study the literal meaning of "architecture". As far as this study concerns, the word "architecture" has no metaphor meaning.

The word "Architecture" is borrowed from Greek through Latin "*architectura*" [1]. Oxford English Reference Dictionary states that the word "architecture" is a noun and brings four meanings; First, the art or science of designing and constructing building. Second, the style of a building as regards design and construction. Third, buildings or other structures collectively and fourth, (computing) the conceptual structure and logical organization of a computer or computer-based system [2]. Obviously, all these meanings cover art, science, design, construction, style, building and structures.

However, the term designates more than that according to Khasawneh [3] while commenting on the Hutchinson Educational Encyclopaedia as follows:

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The term covers more comprehensive aspects i.e the selection of internal and external building materials, visual appearance, arrangement of space, natural and artificial lighting system, mechanical and electrical system, decorations and furnishings [4, 5, 6].

Therefore, the production of “architecture” shows the creativity of an architect in presenting his artistic ability and brilliant talent and perfect skills. As a result, he contributes to the history of civilization for future generations.

Bearing in mind all of these meanings of architecture, then we are discussing this word with an adjective “Islamic” and “Muslim”. Islamic is an adjective of Islam. Therefore anything relates to the religion of Islam is Islamic. Similarly, the word “Muslim” is used as an adjective in the term of Muslim Architecture which means of or relating to the Muslims or their religion (Islam) [2]. As a conclusion there is one coordination bond between the two terms i.e Islamic Architecture and Muslim Architecture which is the religion of Islam. On the other hand, the word “Muslim architecture” refers to any architecture done by Muslim by adopting the *Sunnah* and adapting the local needs.

As a result, both terms have been widely used by Muslim and non-Muslim researchers from all over the world for their own various reasons although the issue has been argued and discussed by scholars thoroughly. It seems that all arguments are valid and available as an alternative to researchers to use in their research. However, al-Attas strongly believes that the Islamization of language is crucial and urgent due to misunderstanding amongst non-Muslim towards the religion of Islam. The weakness of Muslim has been understood as weaknesses of the religion of Islam [7]. Based on his argument of Islamization of language, this study suggests that he rejects the term “Muslim Architecture” and accepts the term “Islamic Architecture” as the most valid term. This study prefers to use the word “Islamic architecture” in line with the studied figure.

Although these two words can be define rhetorically to show the difference between them, but in my opinion both are acceptable as they are intertwined in practical. Islam and Muslim are inseparable because Islam is a religion and Muslim is the believer as if there is no believer without religion and no religion without believer. They are belonged to each other. Moreover, the most important issue here is the purpose of this study is to analyse the contribution of Al-Attas, a Muslim, to the Islamic architecture in Malaysia.

Hence, this study uses a simple definition of Islamic architecture. The “Islamic architecture” is the architecture which is characteristic of predominantly Islamic societies as well as similar architecture in Muslim countries elsewhere although it is varied but unified by climate, culture and the mobility of the Islamic ideas throughout the region. Examples can be found in the countries that are or were Islamic, ranging from Spain in Europe to Malaysia in the South-East of Asia or in majority Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan and Egypt. This definition of Islamic architecture includes schools, madrasa, mosques and palaces. The focus here is upon the sources of Islamic Architecture that generated an inspiration for al-Attas in creating the unique Islamic Architecture of ISTAC; specifically that architectural style found in Southern Spain, in Andalucia, was instrumental in the final design, as will be shown.

#### **The Early Development of Islamic Architecture:**

According to Tabari this was initiated on the suggestion of the Persian companion of the Prophet, Salman the Persian. Although *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* does not mention Salman in this instance, it informs us that the word *Khandaq* seems to have come into Arabic from Persian through Syria.

The principle source of Islamic Architecture is Qur’an. For example Muslim architects practised the verse from the Qur’an that say Allah (name of the God in Islam) is beautiful and he likes beauty. The Quranic Verse 74, Chapter 7(al-A’araf): Ye build for yourself palaces and castles in (open)...Then, constructing a building on a hill becomes a characteristic in Islamic Architecture. For example, the Ilkhanid rulers after they conquered Baghdad, constructed an observatory in their summer capital at Maragha in North Western Iran. The observatory located on a hill five hundred meters north of the town [8].

#### **Local Culture and Heritage Such as Moorish**

**Architecture:** A style of architecture common in Spain from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, characterized by horseshoe-shaped arches [9] seems to influence the style of Islamic architecture. The best surviving examples are La Mezquita in Cordoba and al-Hambra palace [10, 11]. Hillenbrand states that Cordoba in its prime has no peer in Europe for the amenities of civilized life. Its houses were bountifully supplied with hot and cold running water, its streets were lit at night, its royal library – if one may trust the chroniclers- had 400,000 volumes at a time when the major libraries in Western Europe scarcely reached a thousand [12].

**Al-Attas' Architectural Work:** The most remarkable contribution of Al-Attas to the Islamic architectural world is the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in Malaysia. The designing of the floor plan was at first a fusion process, in which Islam, Malay, Moorish-Spanish, Romano-Syrian, Greek-Arabian, North African elements combined to form a new and autonomous style, which in turn provided the stimulus for other artistic directions in Malaysia. The most striking features about Al-Attas's Islamic architecture are location, design of minaret, arch, column, landscape, statue and decorative element on the wall.

**Location:** ISTAC is situated on the crest of Damansara hill with two entrances. Its main guarded entrance is meant for group visit or drive in visitors. Upon arrival through this entrance, such visitor can therefore see the main hall and the mosque. Obviously Al-Attas has made a purposive choice by locating ISTAC on a hilly foundation at No 205A, Damansara Street. This concept is similar to the Royal City of Al-Hambra that situated on the Red hill. In this sense, it seems that ISTAC is like a "palace of scholars" situated on the hill at Persiaran Duta, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The design of the left wing is showing an influence of Malay architectural style which is very prevalent in the design of Malay palaces. The sides of left wing are angled and not square or rounded off like many buildings in Muslim countries.

**Minaret in Islam:** The minaret becomes the symbol of Islam as universally recognised landmarks for Muslim places of worship. Minaret is the tower adjacent to the mosque occupied by a muezzin when he summons the Muslim faithful to prayer. The process by which the tower came to be attached to the mosque and then to be regarded by Muslims and non Muslims alike as symbol of Islam was dated back to *cAbbasiyya* period [13]. However the nature of a call to prayer from a high place was started in the early period of Islam i.e the Prophet period in Medina.

According to the tradition (*hadith*), a Muslim community in Medina was wondered the way to summon the Muslim faithful to prayer. Umar al-khattab suggested to the Prophet to appoint a man to call for a prayer. The prophet agreed to the proposition and was immediately appointed Bilal Ibn Rabah as the first muezzin in Islam due to his loud and carrying voice. Then Bilal stood on a small hill to call for prayer [14]. Therefore the need for a high place drove the Muslim architects to plan a characteristic high building attached to the mosque in

accommodating a muezzin five times a day. The need has been developed throughout the Muslim world and has been complemented by local needs. The local needs can be explained by climate and weather, the availability and suitability of materials to the climate of the region, fund, aesthetic, technology, social background of the architect and his knowledge and experience, freedom and artistic abilities of the period [15].

#### Design of minaret in muslim world

This sub title does not intend to study the development of a design of Minaret in Muslim world since the Prophet Muhammad period until contemporary period due to the time limitation and the title of the chapter, yet leaving the complete catalogue of minarets to others. Several examples related to the shape of minarets at ISTAC will be discussed in this title. These exemplars are of paramount important in order to comprehend the historical background of the design of minaret at ISTAC that was drawn by Al-Attas.

Minaret is a tower-like structure and widely attached to mosques or other religious building. Andrew has a belief that its first appearance was during the Umayyad period where the mosques of Damascus, Fustat and Medina had towers. This phenomenon is easily found in the Arab countries or in other countries that are influenced by Arabian architecture [16].

Islam and minaret are synonym. However if we go to Far Eastern such as China, we hardly found the minaret that usually found in the Middle East. They are not influenced by a traditional feature of Middle Eastern minaret. For example, in Western China, minarets usually take the form of squat pagoda-like structures. Also in parts of Iran, East Africa, South Asia and South East Asia, many mosques were built without minarets. Therefore the call for prayer has been done from the courtyard, roof or next to the minbar. This is due to the sound system that the modern mosques have [16]. As a result, the minaret is no longer used according to the original purpose for call to prayer but a symbol of Islam.

The form of minarets differs throughout the Muslim World although originally single minaret was accepted as an omnipresent symbol of Islam. Then it has been flourished accordingly from the creativity of the architect to the political reasons [16]. Six mosques dated to the early ninth century have a single tower attached to the wall opposite the mihrab. Then, minaret has been appeared in pair and double minarets paired around a

portal widespread gradually as a common architectural combination. A number of thirteenth century Anatolian buildings such as the Cifte Minare, madrasas in Erzerum are amongst the earliest in existence exemplars. Yet the arrangement has been standardised on Il-Khanid buildings in Iran and most likely originated in Iranian Seljuq architecture [13].

In the era of Fatimid Egypt, the mosque did not have minaret opposed to the purpose of minarets in the mosque as Abbasid's symbol of religious authority. Although later, after the twelfth century CE, in Egypt, minarets were developed into a complex and distinctive form where each tower is composed of three different sectors; a square section at the bottom, an octagonal at the middle section and a dome at the top [16].

During 11<sup>th</sup> century, minarets were spiral in shape. However in emulation of the spiral shape, these towers were given a square ground plan and crowned with a domed finial for example, Ibn Tulun mosque. Later, further developments move to tripartite design, the slender of the Ottoman rulers and the octagonal shafts of the Mamluks [17].

Square tower form is popular in North Africa, Syria and Spain [16]. The earliest minaret in North Africa is that of the Great Mosque of Qayrawan built in 836. The most impressive early minaret survive in Spain is that of Abd al-Rahman of Cordoba which completed in 968. The minaret is 8.5 metre square at the base, 47 metre in height and has two independent staircases. Similar to that are those of the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fez, Morocco built in 955.

In conclusion, ISTAC have 3 square minarets which are similar to Cordoba mosque.

**Landscape:** There is a spacious courtyard facing the two wings of the library. The courtyard enriched with a decorative pastel edging, its arabesque design of a medieval like soft hue achieved by mixing dye with cement into the spaces of the design driven into the concrete layer on the ground. The spring and fountain in the courtyard offers serenity and harmony in the heat of debate amongst postgraduate and scholars during seminars or conferences.

**The Lion Statue:** The other stunning characteristic of the Islamic architecture at ISTAC is a statue of lion. The statue of lion is not only an unusual feature in Islamic architecture as figurative motifs on a carved wall in Malaysia, but also controversial amongst traditionalist

Muslim scholars. They restricted art to abstract and flora but not fauna. On the other hand, this kind of symbolism is more common in Muslims Architecture around the Muslim world. A brief background of the animal imagery art in ancient near east occupied the discussion before the exemplars for the usage of lion statue as a decorative character of architecture explored in the next future.

The analysis of the Qur'anic verses, we found that name of six of 114 chapters are dedicated to several kind of animals and insects which are chapter two: *al-Baqara* (the cow), chapter six: *al-Ancam* (livestock [18]), sixteen: *al-Nahl* (the Bee), twenty seven: *al-Naml* (the ant), twenty nine: *al-cAnkabut* (the spiders) and, hundred and five: *al-Fil* (the elephant). In these particular chapters and passim, Allah explicitly brings up more than twenty times several kind of animals and insects such as cow, bird, elephant, ant, bee, spiders and implicitly, such as camel, sheep, goat, cattle, horse, donkey and mule. On the other, the word camel is explicitly mentioned in Chapter 16: verse 5 and passim. Lion also mentioned in Chapter 74: verse 51. On the other hand, the word '*asad*' (lion) is commonly used as a metaphor of a brave man in Arab poetry or proverbs.

There are several religious building in the Middle East consume a lion figure for example *Ibrahim Pasha* Mosque in Cairo, Egypt has lion statues before its entrance (see picture in appendix)

John [19] argues that lion images can be traced back to the religious imagery of the earliest civilizations of Mesopotamia. For example the 'sacred tree' motif formed from a stylized plant with symmetrically confronted animals on both sides was worshipped in Assyria for its fertility and later, in Persian religion, for its healing power and was usually guarded by lions or griffins. It was a common motif on Sassanian textiles which John believes were copied by Arab weavers for the sake of their decoration not for the religious purpose [19].

John suggests that lion image was transmitted from East to West through manuscript illumination, to reappear in medieval sculpture [19]. West has shown a great interest in this statute. The British Museum had made a huge effort by presenting the original statue of a recumbent lion that used to set up as a guardian figure before the temple of Amenophis III at Soleb in Nubia. This statue in red granite bears a dedicatory text of Tutankhamun on the pedestal and a much later inscription of the Meroitic ruler Amanislo on the chest [20]. For more examples, a lion's head is carved into one of the pulpits by Miguel Verdiguier at the Royal Chapel within the Cordoba Mosque in Andalusia of Spain. Moreover, lion statue is relatively common in the United Kingdom and

European Architecture as we can see for example at Trafalgar Square in London have four statues of lion, two at the Council House at Market Square in Nottingham and two lions head embossed onto overhead lintel, watching over the main entrance to the NatWest Bank building in Manchester City Centre. A lion is appearing symbolically as well in architecture at San Marco Square in Venice, Italy, Bruges in Belgium and Al-Hambra in Granada, Spain [21].

The symbolism itself is of interest here. On one hand, the lion is normally used as a symbol of strength, watchfulness and pride, but on the other, in Christian art it is a symbol of Christ, the Lion of Judah. It is also symbolic of Christ because of the myth that lion cubs are born dead but come to life after three days, a tale that reminded early Christians of the Resurrection. Conversely the lion can also resemble the treachery and stealth of Satan [22, 23]. The emancipation of architecture from religious motif is nearly impossible due to the beliefs that an architect holds.

**Design of Doors and Windows:** A particular feature of the ISTAC building is the design of its windows and some of its doors, which are knob grilled in brass. The design of these grills are similar to windows for the apartments of the great khans of Qansuh by al-Ghuri in Cairo and khans Ozdemur in Aleppo or khan Buyuk Yeni Han in Istanbul, built in 1764/24. The *khan* in North Africa is called a *funduq* which means hotel. Hotel sounds more luxurious to the modern ear. However, the actual building of the great khans offered storage and lodging, sometime stabling and shops for travellers which suit the needs of travellers at that period of time [24].

**The Decorative Element on the Wall:** Pomegranate has been wrought as a decorative motif on the front wall of the horseshoe shape arch which meets the eye upon entering the mosque from the courtyard. Al-Attas get the idea from the word "Granada" which means pomegranate. He purposely chose pomegranate to show his appreciation of Islamic architecture in Granada, Al-Hambra. Similarly, flora motifs were popularly used in Spanish Ummayyad decoration.

**Column:** One of the most attractive decorations wrought into the detail of ISTAC's supporting pillars at the main building is the feature of a wave form executed in relief at each capital of the pillars. Inside the crest of the wave is the shape of a woman's head, while the trough of the

wave features her womb as a symbol of fertility. The "fertility" here referred to is that of the human mind and its endeavours in the name of Allah, in this community of scholars.

**Al-Attas' Work of Calligraphy:** This sub title discusses on the particular abilities and artistic talents of al-Attas. Apart from his architectural talent that has been discussed in the previous sub title, he is also a skilful calligrapher.

For example, three of his best calligraphies were exhibited at the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam in 1954. He portrayed artistically the Arabic word *basmallah* (in the name of Allah) in three different living subjects. The first *basmallah* was portrayed as a kingfisher in 1970, the second as a chanticleer in 1972 and then as a fish in 1980. All of these unique calligraphies were printed in a pictorial tour of ISTAC represented in the book form and entitled "ISTAC Illuminated". These *basmallah* are placed at the very beginning of each chapter in order to reinforce the Muslim way of life by uttering *basmallah* before commencing any activity. On the one hand, al-Attas' calligraphic representations are very artistic but on the other hand, it legible only to the calligrapher, not to others.

The kingfisher is any bird of the family *Alcedinidae*, with a long sharp beak, which dives for fish in rivers etc., especially *Alcedo atthis*, a small European bird with bright blue plumage. Al-Attas formed a kingfisher from the *basmallah* as we can see below:

Comparing Persian calligraphy and Al-Attas' signify the similarity between the two. Al-Attas follows traditional Persian calligrapher in choosing animal form of his calligraphies. Persian calligraphy used to form animal such as cock, bird and lion. For example, Mushkinqalam, an Iranian calligrapher had drawn cock from *basmallah* with Persian verses in Shikasta, gold on blue paper in 1887. The copy of his work can be found at Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University [25]. Schimmel states that lion is a symbol of cAli formed from a Persian verse; Turkey 1210/1795 [25].

Scrutinizing a number of literatures on Art and Architecture in Egypt exposes their focal interest on living thing. Generally, the early art consists of statue, figure, tomb, painting, calligraphy and inscription adorned by spells, King or god, human being, animal that help them in their daily life or surrounded them like baboon [26], lion, bull, crocodiles, cat, goat, bird, fish, falcon, snake, camel, horse [26]. The buildings and tomb were pillared and

cylindrical in shape then the pillars were usually capitalized by forming flora or fauna [26]. Some of them had inscriptions.

**Symbol of ISTAC:** This contains the name of International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization in Arabic. The name is presented in circle as we can see below.

### CONCLUSION

Although Al-Attas's he had no formal training in architectural design, his contribution to Islamic architecture shows high level of his thought and creativity at the forefront of architectural innovation in Malaysia, in the late of 20<sup>th</sup> century. All of the experience had been realized on the Islamic architectural design of ISTAC. No other building of this kind exists in Malaysia. All of these experiences and observations are realized in the design concept of ISTAC ranging from style of design the Malay and Arab worlds to the European.

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