

# Impressions of islamic architecture



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The native architecture of the Middle East, Asia Minor, and parts of southern Asia is known as Islamic.

This is based on the culture and religious beliefs that shape the lives of the current inhabitants. While Islam has played a powerfully important role in shaping the structures built by these people, the actual basis of the designs and forms was laid out more than 3000 years before the birth of Islam. The cultures of the “Cradle of Civilization”, also known as Mesopotamia, were the original architects of what is, today, referred to as Islamic architecture. Mesopotamia was located in the Middle East and Asia Minor, between the Mediterranean, Red, and Dead Seas. This geographic region is notoriously hot and dry and receives very little rain.

These climatic factors were key in the early peoples design of their dwellings and other functional building types. The shape of almost every native house is short roofed and with a central courtyard, creating a form that is a “container”. As opposed to a modern Western home, which is “contained”. Another very evident aspect of design is the use of local materials.

Adobe is the primary method of construction for every building type. The lack of trees and large stone quarries makes this choice quite obvious. The added bonus for this material is its ability to work as thermal massing: insulating and storing heat during the day and releasing heat and blocking cold at night. This comes into play because of the lack of moisture and humidity; where in the days reach 120 degrees and at nights the temperatures plunge to 40.

Small window openings also help in this task. Another feature not noticeable from the outside are the one to two level basement areas of the buildings. These underground places remain at an almost constant sixty to seventy degrees. Sometimes “ wind catchers” aid in this cooling.

These towering forms aren't in every structure, but their purpose is to extend thirty to forty feet above the ground and collect wind in all directions from their octagonal vent shape and tunnel this moving air downwards in dark cooling corridors to the sub-surface levels of living. Although ancient in their creation these Mesopotamian designs for climate contribute highly to today's body of sustainable architecture. The most notable of the architectural forms found in the Middle East today are the great citadels and the impressive mosques. The citadel structure is fortress-like; in that smaller satellite buildings surround a central large palace or military installation and then all of these are enclosed within a very imposing perimeter wall. The citadel is very ancient in its form and function, the oldest dating to 2600 BC. Another notable and equally ancient structure is the pointed arch.

This shape has been found on ruins dating back to 3000 BC. The mosque, on the other hand, is relatively contemporary compared to the age of the citadel. The traditional form of a mosque is a circular dome surmounting an octagonal base with minarets, usually, positioned at the four corners.

Although this form is most common, there are other variations. The exterior shape of the mosques is based primarily on regular geometry. Placing simple geometric shapes in regular and repeating complex patterns creates details for the structure.

While this method is used on the exterior, the interior details are what receive the most attention. The ceilings, walls, and floors are literally covered with these tapestries of geometry. The aesthetics of Islamic architecture are quite breath taking in their mastery of geometry for simplistic form and complex detail, but the most important lesson to be learned is that of sensitivity to climate and local resources.