An Architectural Reading of Islamic Virtue

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Abstract
O children of Adam, We have bestowed upon you clothing to cover your private parts and as an adornment, but the clothing of taqwa, that is the best. (Quran,7:26)

Islamic theology privileges the disposition of taqwa as a pivotal component of ethics (Quran,49:13). Taqwa is normally translated by `piety', which makes the term a difficult one to interpret for its potential architectural implications. However the translation is wholly inadequate. Taqwa implies multiple semantic layers and resonances for architecture. The term comes from the Arabic root t-q-y. Its literal meaning is “to protect/preserve oneself", suggesting important analogies and affinities with clothing, concepts of covering and adornment - all key conditions of architecture. The semantic and etymological study of taqwa can reveal aspects of Islamic theology that have significant implications for the ethical dimension of architecture and urban form. This paper proposes an analysis of the Islamic term taqwa that will foreground its multiple semantic resonances, the difficulties of its neat translation, and its implications for an ethical consideration of architecture. Using Walter Benjamin's contention that "the interlinear version of the scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation”, the paper will investigate the widespread, sometime contradictory but inevitably consilient meanings that attach to the term taqwa. In doing so, the paper will highlight the stakes and the opportunities presented by the task of travelling between theological, semantic, ethical and architectural ideas.

Keywords: Islamic Virtue, Piety, Architectural Interpretation

Introduction

Islamic theology privileges the disposition of taqwa as a pivotal component of ethics. There are many Qur'anic verses emphasising the role and importance of taqwa in Islam. Surah Al-Ahazab, which is mainly about etiquette, introduces taqwa as the highest standard of personal conduct in daily life: "O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honourable of you in the sight of Allah is the most pious (holder of taqwa) of you." (Q, 49:13) Beside Qur'anic verses, there are several Hadiths describing taqwa and its significance. Noting the high esteem of taqwa. Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the fourth guided Caliphs of Sunnis and the first Imam of Shi'a, stated: "taqwa is a head (chief, commander) of ethics". Islamic craftsman, artist and architects have also referred to taqwa and its relevance for practice in daily life and through professional work. Traditional manuscripts such as the few remaining manuscripts that lay out codes of conduct for architects and craftspeople demonstrate the strong connection between architectural and craft practices and taqwa as their principal ethical quality. Mimar Sinan (d. 1588 CE), the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, called architecture an "estimable calling", and that whosoever is engaged in it must first of all be pious (holder of taqwa) (Spahic Omer, 2011)

The form of the city and its architecture reflect the beliefs, manners and lifestyles of its people. The Fotovvatnamehs imply that pious disposition in architects will naturally produce pious architecture in proportion to the degree of taqwa held. Hence determining the complex meanings of taqwa, and their implications for space and architecture become critical to a proper understanding of the ethical bases of the Islamic city. However Islamic theology considers taqwa to be an internal virtue in the heart of pious people. Consequently measuring and evaluating taqwa are problematic undertakings; as is the applicability of its virtue to architectural and urban design practice. One way of engaging with this difficulty is to venture possible spatial implications of taqwa, and from there to suggest extensions of the concept into architecture and urban design.

The normal translation of taqwa as piety is inadequate, as it fails to capture the concept's thematic range and subtleties of meaning; and as it tends to consign it to a limited, purely moral register. In fact, taqwa does imply multiple semantic layers and resonances for architecture. From the late 12thC, piety has meant `mercy, tenderness, pity', and derives from the Latin pietas, meaning variously `dutiful conduct; religiousness, piety; loyalty, patriotism; faithfulness to natural ties; `gentleness, kindness, pity'. ("Online Etymology Dictionary," 2000) While some of these meanings do align with the moral dimensions of taqwa as it is understood in Islam, there are other registers in taqwa which suggest spatial and architectural dimensions which are absent from the concept of piety. Taqwa derives from the Arabic root t-q-y and its literal meaning is `to protect/preserve oneself'. The implication is protecting oneself from harm or from external threat, and preserving one's identity and being as a subject of Islam. A close semantic and etymological study of taqwa can therefore help to foreground the term's multifarious significance for the ethical dimensions of architecture and urban form. Implied in these gestures of protecting and preserving are notions of enclosure, of maintaining a boundary, as well as related ideas of clothing, covering and adornment - all concepts closely aligned to architecture and in

particular to the civic architecture of the city, as Gottfried Semper has shown. (Semper, 1989)

Covering:

The analogy between clothing and taqwa is explicit in the Qur'an and Hadiths. While the analogy marks the symbolic importance of clothing, it is not confined to a literary trope. In the story of Adam and Eve there is an immediate correlation between clothing and taqwa. The nudity of Adam and Eve manifests only after the couple succumbs to a lack of taqwa; and this coincides with the moment of the Fall from paradise. As Giorgio Agamben has observed, before the Fall Adam and Eve were indeed unclothed but not yet nude; they wore the `veil of righteousness' or `cloth of taqwa' - representations of which are evident in innumerable paintings of the Middle Ages. Here, the absence of clothing does not coincide with nudity. The perception of nudity is linked to the spiritual act that scripture defines as `making apparent' (Q, 7:21) or in other words to the `opening of the eyes'. Giorgio Agmben remarks that:
"Nudity is something that one notices, whereas the absence of clothes is something that remains unobserved. Nudity could therefore have been observed after sin only if man's being had changed. This change, brought on by the fall, must have entirely affected Adam and Eve's nature. This distortion of human nature through sin leads to the discovery of the body, to the perception of its nudity". (Agamben, 2011)

In the Qur'an, the first temptation of Satan was to strip Adam and Eve of their clothing (their `cloth of taqwa') in order to reveal or make apparent their inner immodesty and shame, causing them to seek physical covering. Here, at its veritable investiture, the human being is interminably destined to a life of adornment, ornament and decoration. The Qur'an generalizes this story as a warning for human beings:

"O children of Adam, let not Satan tempt you as he removed your parents from Paradise, stripping them of their clothing to show them their shame." (Q, 7:27) In this verse there is a strong connection between being removed from paradise, a lack of clothing and a making apparent or revealing of shame. There is the inner clothing of taqwa that is not independent of nudity and represents a being's circumradiance or emanation that is a kind of halo; and there is its counterpart or counterfeit after the Fall, the outer clothing which covers nakedness and immodesty. The emphasis on modesty in the Qur'an and Hadiths is reinforced in Islamic jurisprudence that has developed detailed rules and instructions about degrees of covering the body (Hijab) and exposing adornment and ornament. (Q, 24:30,31). These are not absolute, as there is hierarchy of covering and revealing that apply to different people, different relationships and different settings. The critical theme here is the idea of covering and uncovering, and the very strange possibility that what is clothed or concealed in the cloth of taqwa can be the most revealing.

The concept of clothing and nudity can be translated into architecture in different ways. Valerio Paolo Mosco notes the role of nudity in architecture, outlining six different types of Naked Architecture: skeletal, rough, thin, lyric, frugal and primitive. In his point of view nudity in architecture is never an invention, but always a return.(Mosco, 2012) Naked are those works of architecture that seek to turn the structure into images of the building; those whose forms, surfaces and materials are undecorated and left bare; as well as those works of architecture for so-called

developing countries that in a certain sense are obliged to be bare for pragmatic or economic reasons, or to create an impression of humble frugality in line with prevailing paradigms of sustainability. (Mosco, 2012)

But from the Qur'anic point of view another attitude suggests itself. Three different metaphors for clothing are mentioned in the Qur'an: the clothing of taqwa (Q, 7:26), the wife and husband as clothing one for the other (Q, 2:187) and the night as clothing for the world (Q, 78:10). These concepts accommodate the prosaic function of clothing to cover and protect human beings but also its ornamental or costumery and customary functions of adorning the wearer. Not only by analogy but also factually, the fabric of architecture also clothes and adorns buildings as well as those who inhabit and use them. Different verses of Surah Noor (chapter 4) in Qur'an emphasise the important role of covering and protecting the private parts of houses and of spatially defining a hierarchy of different domains of the house. Verses 27 and 28 instruct visitors to not enter houses other than their own until they have asked for and been granted permission by the owner. Verse 58 refers to the privacy of the rooms of wives and husbands that function as clothing for them in front of children, other members of the family and visitors; as well as clothing for themselves in front of each other: "O you who have believed, let those whom your right hand possess and those who have not [yet] reached puberty among you ask permission of you [before entering] at three times: before the dawn prayer and when you put aside your clothing at noon and after the night prayer. [These are] three times of privacy for you." (Q 24:58)

The hierarchy from public to private zones in the planning and experience of traditional Islamic housing conveys this sense of covering, concealing and sequential revealing. External walls are generally without or have minimum apertures; intermediary spaces immediately after entry such as a hall or vestibule (hashti) provide transitions; the division of the inside space into two section - one for the household and intimate activities of the family(andaruni), and another for serving guests (biruni) - establishes a clear hierarchy; a hidden central courtyard and private yards provide a sense of the outside at the core of the private domain - all of these tectonic features reinforce the central concept of covering in Islamic architecture.

Ornament:

"Say, who has forbidden the ornament of Allah which he has produced for his servants."(Q 7:32) In the Qur'anic point of view, clothing is not only for covering shame but also for the sake of ornament and beauty - it has both moral and aesthetic value. Verse 26, Chapter 7 adds ornament (rish) to covering as a second function of clothing. Seyed Mohammad Hossein Tabatabaei , the prominent Islamic philosopher and interpreter of the Qur'an, notes that the first purpose of clothing relates to modesty and the second to ornament and beauty. Other Islamic scholars refer to this verse in advocating for decorative clothing in Islamic law. (Tabatabaei, 1995)

In this verse the word 'rish' is used to express the beauty of clothing. While rish is normally translated as 'ornament', its primary and literal meaning is the 'feather of birds'. In Arabic, the term is interchangeably used to mean adornment, ornament and beauty, with the predominant sense of the value that attaches to a synthesis of form and function - the function of clothing, flight and ornament that enables the species to

propagate. Consequently, in Islam, ornament is not a crime as Adolf Loos claimed (Loos, 1908), but a desirable and necessary quality. As another Hadith states: “God is beauty and likes beauty and likes to see the impression of his blessing on his servants.”(Nadimi, 2007)

This kind of ornament, in contrast with the modernist conception advanced by Loos, is not a sign of degradation but a mark of spiritual strength. Those verses of the Qur’an that mention adornment, ornament and beauty suggest two different types of ornament; the first is true and real ornament which enhances the original qualities of the thing adorned; the second is illusory ornament which is an instrument of deception. This second type stands between an entity and its beholder, revealing to the latter not what the entity actually is, but rather what is not. (Spahic Omer, 2010) Such beauty is a deception from Satan: “Satan made attractive (fair-seeming, beauty) to them that which they were doing.” (Q 6:43) In fact freedom from this kind of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength from the Islamic point of view.

While the true and genuine ornament or the 'ornament of Allah' is praised in the Qur’an, there are conditions. The first is not to engage in excess: “O children of Adam, take your adornment at every masjid (mosque), and eat and drink, but be not excessive. Indeed, He likes not those who commit excess.” (Q 7:31). Moreover there are some other verses in Quran about hierarchy of ornament’s application:

“Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is acquainted with what they do. And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their head covers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, ...” (Q 24:30-31)

These verses do not prohibit ornament as such. Rather, they introduce a hierarchy for its proper application and its role in protecting the integrity of society and the family as its foundational building block. Allied to this is the requirement that ornament should never be so excessive as to create discomfiture to others, or threaten the socio-ethical cohesion of society by such excess. This can help to explain the usual difference between the quality and richness of ornament outside and inside of traditional Islamic houses. Typically, traditional houses reserve ornamentation to the courtyard and interior spaces, presenting only a simple facade to the public realm.

Conclusion:

If architecture does indeed correlate built form with the belief systems, thoughts and ethical values of those who build it, then studying such correlationships can provide lessons for contemporary practice. Taqwa is a key ethical value in the Islamic world and has influenced the world views, designs and practices of craftsmen and architects. At first glance, the term taqwa and its common translation as 'piety' does not readily suggest implications for space, architecture and the city. However, a close study of the term using scriptural and etymological analyses reveals a range of themes and concepts that have substantial implications for architecture and space - concepts such as enclosure, boundary, clothing, ornament, decorum, concealing and revealing.

These correlations are analogical; but they are also concrete and effective within the socio-spatial context of Islamic dwellings and cities - a context that must be considered primarily an ethical as well as an aesthetic setting for human life.

The connections between taqwa and clothing in Islamic theology, together with the now well established connections between clothing and the tectonics of architecture, can enable new avenues of research into the tight linkages between ethics and aesthetics, philosophy and built form. Architecture clothes human beings and human life in pragmatic and symbolic ways - since to clothe is also to invest, to furnish, to equip, to render operable, to decorate, to resist the indecorous and the immodest. These qualities may be analogical but they are also directly embodied in the tectonic fabric of Islamic buildings - in their valorisation of the inward and the private; their emphasis on centrality and poise; their organisation of space into patterns of hierarchies; their focus on the intermediate and the in-between zones of transition; their relatively modest civic face and ornamented interiors.

Such ethical values have potential applicability to architecture and the city provided that they are read in terms of their spatial correlates and parallels. The effects of modernity on contemporary Islamic architecture and the contemporary Islamic city can in some respects be attributed to the adoption of values antithetical to taqwa - attitudes that orient society and its productions towards the concrete rather than the sacred, that valorise individuality over community and multiplicity over unity - and whose immodest consequences can be read in every contemporary Islamic city as an extreme parody of modernity itself.

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