

Samina Nasim<sup>1</sup>

## Abstraction and Symbolism in Faisal Mosque: As Unusual Architectural Decoration in South Asia

### Abstract

*In twentieth century, a wave of change is observed in different fields, and architecture is one of them. Buildings are carefully designed to reflect the style and tradition of the region. Constructions were fostered in various innovative designs and architectural decoration speaks novelty, which were consciously designed according to their suitable compositions having harmony and balance in their exterior and interior design compositions. In the present research an attempt has been made to explain the significance of abstraction, symbolism and stylized conceptual representation in the architectural design and decoration of Faisal Mosque Islamabad, Pakistan. Which have never presented in any modern mosque of South Asia. The mosque presents a traditional and modern phase having deep perspective. The study explains the geometrical designs and stylized symbolic interpretation. In this mosque implementation of geometric designs with abstract representation having a degree of complexity and sophistication is observed.*

**Key Words:** Architecture, Abstraction, Symbolism, Modernity, Rectilinear geometry.

### Introduction

King Faisal of Saudi Arabia visited Islamabad in 1966, an idea to build grandiose mosque in the capital city of Pakistan was shared with him. He liked the idea and offered to bear the cost for the project. After an international competition the design of a Turkish architect Vedat Dalokay was selected as winner; the execution of the building was assigned to Pakistani workers and engineers. The total area allotted for the mosque complex was forty-six acres of land. The foundation stone for the mosque was laid in October 1976 by Shah Khalid, the successor to King Faisal.

The Faisal Mosque in Islamabad is considered as one of the most successful contemporary mosque among the modern mosques in the Islamic world. Its construction against the Margala Hills is exceptional. The soft muddy hills of the site do not reflect the sharp contours of the mosque in front of them. White structure of the mosque is dominant and presented as center of interest against olive hills. The plan, entrances, multiple tiers, structural design in built form, decorative elements and surface decorations all have uniqueness in their own, which is never presented before. The mosque speaks for a unique design of late twentieth century mosque construction and decoration. It presents a traditional as well as a modern phase of art of decoration in Pakistan, which has a unique thought provoking conceptualization and distinctive workmanship in its structural forms and surface decoration. In its composition we see a very judicious and harmonious combination of diagonal, horizontal and vertical lines.

After the Mughal period this mosque is the first which has unusual structural design, decorations and a unique status in Pakistan as it opens new dimensions to study modern construction and stylization with the combination of symbolism and abstraction. The mosque reflects an amalgam of influences linked with various Muslim countries in its forms and decoration. The blend of various influences is merged through rectilinear geometry. Its structural design, surface decoration and decorative techniques are the major attractive part of the entire composition of the mosque. Traditional techniques and stylized designs are used for its decoration, which have an unusual status in Pakistan.

Tile mosaic, latticework, metal inlay work, metal engraving, marble carving, intarsia and tarkashi are used for the decoration of the mosque. Along with maturity of the application of techniques, calligraphy and geometrical designs have their own importance according to the rectilinear composition of the mosque. Stylization, abstraction and symbolism of its functional and decorative elements are expressed through diagonal lines and impressive colours. The decorations of the mosque can be considered as developmental course of architectural elements and decorative mosques.



Figure 1. A model of the Faisal Mosque in the east court of the entrance courtyard.

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Samina Nasim is Chairperson of Fine Arts Department at College of Art and Design.

It is understood that ornamentation is the soul of Islamic architecture. Likewise play of straight-line geometry in a simple manner is the essence of the architectural decoration of the Faisal Mosque. Careful attempt of the linear compositional devices enhance its artistic merits.

Rectilinear geometry plays vital role in the decoration of Faisal Mosque both in its structural form as well as on the surface. Theme and skills of the mosque decoration is hidden in its linear compositions. They are equally used on the two-dimensional surface and in the three-dimensional decorations. In the pyramidal structure and decoration of the mosque; triangular shapes are prominent mostly in each decorative device. But somewhere square, rectangular and crescent shapes are mixed to support solidity of the arrangement of lines.



Figure 2. South entrance of the Faisal Mosque Islamabad.

### Abstract representation in the exterior of the Mosque

Pyramidal roof of the mosque is built on a square base having four triangular slabs set diagonally. The roof of Faisal Mosque without domical structure is break from tradition. It is constructed according to the rules of strict geometry having triangular slabs with gable point, designed and set according to advance technological methods of hyperbolic parabolic structure.

Historically, pitched roof was introduced by Egyptians and later on the construction style was adopted by Greek-o-Romo, Medieval, Byzantine and Gothic building. Then gradually during the revival of Gothic style (1840-1880) the style became intricate. Throughout the centuries, sloping sharp contours of Egyptian pyramids traveled all around the world. Afterwards in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries it became more complex for the construction of American houses, such kind of construction called 'stick style'.

In Islamic history gable roof was not commonly used. The Great Mosque of Damascus and Al-Aqsā Mosque at Fustat, are the earliest examples of the construction of pitched roof. Later on, in modern construction mostly every Muslim country built its monuments according to latest technologies and innovative design elevation having pitched roof in different way. Sloping roof constructions become a feature of 20<sup>th</sup> century with latest construction method of hyperbolic paraboloid.

The white sharp contoured structure of the mosque is highlighted as center of interest against muddy olive Margala hills. Ahmad Rafiq, civil engineer of the Mosque mentioned that Vedat Dalokay, the architect of the mosque wanted to balance the structure of the mosque against the Margala hills. Basically, the elevation of the mosque is planned as a continuity of diagonal lines of Margala hills by creating harmony and balance. The exterior of the mosque has realistic and abstract representation at a time.

Dalokay mentioned in his interview that he produced the structure of the mosque out of a cube of the Khana Kabah at *Macca*. He mentioned that he tried to apprehend the, geometry, proportion and spirit of Kaaba with abstract approach.

The concept is presented idealism in the elevation of the mosque. Imaginary one can feel a triangular network of straight lined geometry by thinking cross-section of invisible diagonal lines from every apex of the four minarets to the opposite built base of the minaret, e.g. one can imagine that a line diagonally scaled from the apex of the south-east minaret to the base of the north-east minaret and the zenith of the north-east minaret to the bottom of the north-west minaret. Similarly same method can be repeated from the pinnacle of the south-east minaret to the base of the north-west minaret and the apex of the south-west minaret to the bottom of the north-east minaret. The cross-section of the diagonally scaled invisible lines will make a network of symmetrical triangular shapes with the help of imaginary lines with in the cube. By this way the lower part of the cube is constructed with a strong composition of triangular shapes in constructive form and the upper part of the cube is showing imaginary network of the triangular composition within the cube as we can see (figure 3) (Nasim, 2008, p. 24,25). Similar triangular shapes are the real spirit of the entire construction of the exterior and interior of the mosque.

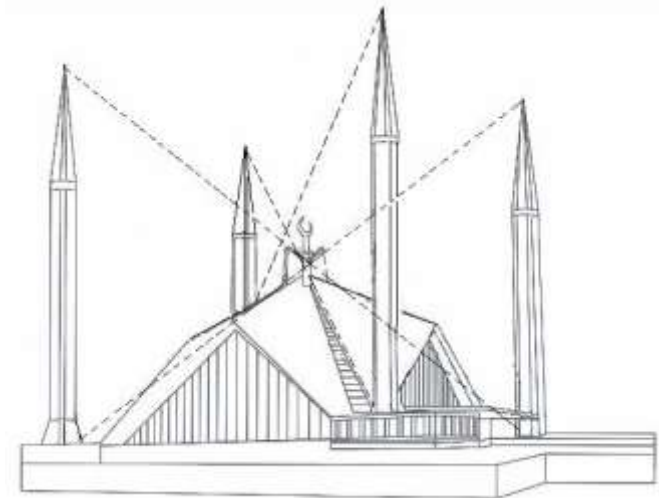


Figure 3. Exterior of the mosque showing imaginary triangular shapes within the cube.

Composition of invisible triangular geometry of the external elements of the mosque has maturity, shows solid conceptual representation of abstract geometry. The overall exterior of the four minarets is giving an impression of massive square based rocket. All minarets of the mosque are in rocket shape symbolically shows a mark of infinity presenting inter-connection between Allah and Muslims. Secondly, they are setting square frame around the dome less triangular slab structure of the sanctuary.



Figure 4. Triangular arches in abstract form created with the help of hyper shell.

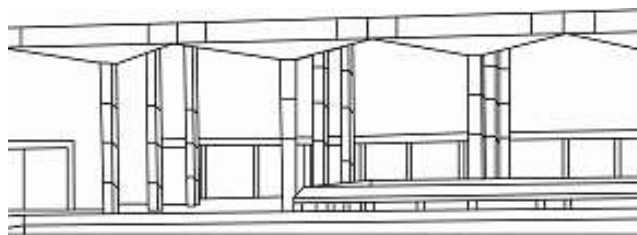


Figure 4. Porticos in the main courtyard with triangular arches.

### Abstract appearance of triangular arches outside entrance of the sanctuary and porticos

From centuries presence of arch is considered as essential part of mosque construction. In Faisal Mosque the architect avoid direct representation of arch in construction form, but he preferred to show it in abstract form in the porticos of the courtyard (figure 4). These triangular arches are created with the help of modern construction technologies and hyper shells.

Every square pier of the area has a stylized capital constructed with the help of four triangular shaped slabs set together by making a solid composition having joining point at the capital. The fundamental scheme of the white ceiling of concrete structure is build up in numerous square units. Series of these capitals is creating abstract representation of arches noticeable from a distance. These units are perfect example of modern, systematic and well organized construction showing abstract realism in the representation of east façade of the sanctuary, arches, and arcades of the porticos.



Figure 6. Coffered Ceiling and Capitals of the square piers in the ablution area.



Figure 7. Tile decoration on the walls of the ablution area and the stair cases

#### Colours

Colours are effective tools to express feelings and convey symbolic and philosophical involvements. Every colour has its own significant dimensions to suggest mood and logic of its presence in the particular area. Similarly, on ground floor the tile mosaic work of the ablution area shows symbolic representation of five prayers perform by Muslims in a day, in the form of Cerulean blue, Prussian blue, yellow, red, orange, and magenta coloured triangular shaped tiles embedded on the upper part of the walls. Whole composition of the area including floor, ceiling and decorative tiles are in triangular form and have strong impact of rectilinear geometry.

#### Linear Composition

Exterior and interior of the mosque create balanced designs. These designs are aesthetically strong and have qualitative values of rhythm and symmetry of lines, which create individual shapes. Arrangement of these shapes creates balanced design patterns and arrangement of these motives becomes composition. South entrance of the mosque leads different levels of the ground has a play of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines. Especially on the ground floor square pebbles in the form of several rays are embedded around the round pool of the main entrance and the floor of the covered area on the ground floor.

One such row is designed with square shape black pebbles and the other has a flat surface and is made of grey



granite imported from Italy. The design gives an impression of the sun and its vertical tapered rows of stone pebbles represent its rays.

#### Aesthetics through linier composition

Linear designs of tile work, design of floor, coffered ceiling and lattice work of the ventilation in the ablution area create interest and help to develop aesthetics through the combination of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines. On the first floor, the most striking visual expression is the exterior of the sanctuary and the minarets. These are composed in a bold expression of polygonal lined composition in the structural form. Their linear composition and variety of interesting shapes rotates in the main courtyard, porticos, entrance veranda and also in the sanctuary.



Figure 8. Perforated ceiling design set at the joining point of the girders and beams.



Figure 10. Central chandelier in the sanctuary of the Mosque with outer ring.

Its interior is also planned by developing a strong link of the decorative elements with the help of straight lined geometry like its surface and structural forms and shapes of the exterior. Like exterior its interior is also depicting a strong bond of wedge-shaped shapes intermingling with the network of straight lined geometry combining symbolism and abstraction.

The internal features of the sanctuary of the mosque have symbolic representation among the strong composition of rectilinear geometry. The design and artistic representation of decorative elements in built form such as *minbar*, *mihrah*, marble fountain, *kursi*, *mu'adhdhin* pew and Kufic calligraphy inbuilt and surface designs in the sanctuary all are connected with each other through strict rectilinear geometry.

For its surface decoration traditional decorative techniques are also preferred with modern construction design in built form. In these techniques metal engraving, mosaic work, marble carving, *tarkashi* and lattice work, and implemented. On the other hand, developmental course of the traditional techniques like inlay work, tile mosaic and intarsia is also giving verity of material and ideas with the amalgamation of innovative simplifications, forms and symbolic representation, especially in the tile mosaic work of the ablution area and the west wall of the sanctuary of the mosque, which is never presented in the history of South Asian mosque construction.

In the sanctuary of the Mosque, perforated lattice work on the marble walls of the women's gallery, abstract symbolism on ceiling, perforated lattice work on the wooden screen at the north-east corner of the sanctuary, inlay work on the walls and floor of the fountain and kursi have polygonal geometrical designs. Central area of the ceiling of the sanctuary is in round shape but it is filled with straight lined perforated design composition. Gold plated aluminum chandelier hangs from the apex of the ceiling. Chandelier and ring around it is in curvilinear appearance.

Abstract representation of vegetation on the west wall of the sanctuary, presence of *Sura-e-Rehman* on the book form of the *mihrah* show symbolic representation. On the other hand shapes and forms of the book form chevron- tiles on the walls of the sanctuary and metal chevron embellishment on the doors show a symbolic presence of the Qur'an itself and unity of design.

In the sanctuary of the top area of the muezzin pew is decorated with a painting painted by a famous Pakistani artist Sadquain. Its inscriptions show symbolic representation of peace and unity between Muslims.

Historically geometric motives in the high degree of complexity are exemplified. It shows artistic interest of Muslims in continuous creation of designs. In these arabesque designs usually natural floral designs and curvilinear geometry are used on the basis of accurate mathematical proportion. But in the Faisal Mosque mostly polygonal geometry is selected for decoration. Geometrical designs of Paleolithic cave paintings were the first appearance of the linear embellishment as architectural decorations.

Application of straight-line decorative designs was also popular for the embellishment of pot designing, during the Neolithic period. It was continued through Sumerians, Egyptians, Greek, Romans, and Byzantines; to be finally adopted by Muslims.

First geometrical patterned Islamic building is Dome of the Rock. In Abbasid period abstract and semi-abstract designs were used and achieved full expression in abstract geometrical patterns. In the Fatimid period floral and particularly an abstract linear style of decoration was developed for the mosque decorations. Arabesque designs of the period had a floral and abstract linear pattern in stone carving, wood carving. Its highly stylized nature had a great role in its architectural decoration. Later on geometrical designs, in naturalism or in the abstract form with the combination of Islamic calligraphy, become a part of the architectural decoration of mosques.

Polygonal and naturalistic designs are used in the Islamic decorations. Geometrical designs represent a major art form with the harmonious arrangement of patterns. It implements the principle of repetition, symmetry and change of scale with continuous flow of design to create interesting maze-like complicated effects with different techniques. It always played a vital part for the mosque decoration in every period throughout the Islamic world. Islamic history is filled with several examples of the geometrical designs, which cover the entire surface with framework creating different shapes. These shapes help to create divine atmosphere for the prayer.

After a short introduction of the historical designs of the Islamic architecture, it can be said that every type of design is present in Islamic decorations. So, what is new in the design of the Faisal Mosque, which could be considered as modern?

Same tradition of application of the geometrical design is adopted for the surface decoration of Faisal Mosque. Though, in the Faisal Mosque the uniqueness is in the selection and the unusual style of presentation of design, for the variety of shapes is similar with the Islamic architectural decorations but the composition and arrangement of the shapes and the formulated design is not similar with any historical design formation. Some surface designs of the Faisal Mosque have little in common with the historical designs, due to their shapes. Their design compositions are not exact but have some similarities between them. These designs are composed according to the compositional harmony of the mosque, main important objective of the design, which gives unique status to the mosque, is the addition of sensation and conceptualization in the stylized design.

### Conclusion

Diagonal lines are the real essence of the beauty of the mosque. These lines link all the designs together and the composition of the mosque is balanced with the linear connection. Continuous flow of these contours dramatically moves the eye. Side by side vertical and horizontal lines are also balanced by the arrangements of the diagonal lines in the form of triangular shapes, abstract representation of the elements and symbolism in forms, shapes and colours.

These shapes are prominent in the entire architectural decorations. Regular decorative scheme of the linear linkage gives an independent identity to the mosque. In this mosque straight lined composition of structural forms and surface has confident hold on the entire structural design. Minor use of curves is not fit in the polygonal decoration.

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## Biographical Note

Prof. Dr. Samina Nasim is Chairperson Fine Arts Department at College of Art and Design, Punjab University