
Tile Mosaic Decoration and Colour Philosophy in Ablution Area of the Faisal Mosque, Islamabad

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Throughout the Islamic world ablution area has been constructed as an important part of mosque construction to fulfill the requirement of cleanliness. It has been constructed with variety of decorative elements, techniques, and patterns. Comparatively Faisal Mosque has an unusual ablution area meet the height of complexity and stylized conceptual decorative elements in built form and surface decoration. In the present research an attempt has been made to explain the significance of ablution area of the Faisal Mosque with its structural importance and surface decoration having tile mosaic work, stylized geometrical designs and symbolic conceptual representation of colours. The mosque presents a traditional and modern phase of decoration in Pakistan having deep aesthetic value. The tiles are classified by simple technique in marvelous colour schemes. The study explains the geometrical designs, philosophical interpretation; pseudo knotted kufic calligraphy, geometrical designs and abstract representation of the mosaic work of the area.

The Faisal Mosque completed in 1988 is an unusual and exceptional Muslim religious building in Pakistan. Its forms convey the modern language of construction but ornament uses classical decorations and traditional techniques with creative concepts. The mosque is carefully designed to reflect the character of the site with its exotic view of the Margala Hills. From the ground plan we can imagine that the Faisal Mosque complex is all on one level but actually it is built on a mount with the sanctuary at the highest point. The double story rectangular plan of the mosque complex has four main areas, entrance courtyard, ablution area, main courtyard and sanctuary (figure 1). The most prominent feature of ground plan of the mosque is the spacious ablution area. Study of the location, plan, architectural decoration in built form, surface decoration, architectural elements, colour philosophy and aesthetics of ablution area of the mosque will be mentioned thoroughly.

The Mosque has its own importance because of its unusual, classy and modern architectural decorative values. Review of literature makes clear that the area needs a detailed study of its architectural elements including their origin, aesthetic value, comparative analysis of architectural decoration of the area with other mosques of South Asia and its influences on the contemporary construction of the ablution areas. The mosque is discussed by many scholars and art historians but no body focused to write about its ablution area and the architectural decoration of the area in built form and on surface. The present research has been made to explain the importance of its unusual construction, style,

and decoration.

Ablution means cleaning with clean water or the washing of one's body or specific parts of it, as in a religious rite. It is an essential part of the prayer. The worshipper has to be in a ritually purifying state before beginning prayers. A central fountain for ablution seems to make its first appearance in the Abbasid period.¹ Yemeni mosques had large pools for ablution.² Historically fountains or marble jars with basin and taps fulfilled the requirement of ablution. Fountains either in the center of the courtyard of the mosque or on the side, were often sheltered by a dome. In the mosque of Ibn Tulūn Cairo begun in 876 and completed in 879, a fountain has been set in the center of the courtyard.³

In South Asia, Mughal mosques usually have fountain pool in the center of the courtyard too. Jami Masjid Ahmedabad(1424), Masjid Wazir Khan(1634), Badshahi Mosque Lahore(1648), Moti Masjid Agra Fort (1648 – 1654). Sunehri Masjid (1753), all are the splendid examples of fountain pool in the center of courtyard. As in case of the Mughal mosques, the Faisal Mosque has its fountain in the center of the courtyard. The fountain is constructed as a part of ablution area below the main courtyard (figure 2).

The area of the fountain is not covered rather it is open to the sky. The modest ablution area is much different from the traditional leveled fountain pool of the historical mosques. Historically an ablution tank was usually set in the courtyard in front of sanctuary. At the Faisal Mosque the concept is same but ablution tanks and spigots are built on ground floor and are not visible from the first floor of the sanctuary.

The most prominent feature of the ground plan of the mosque is the spacious ablution area built below the main courtyard. The area stands on a marble plinth four steps high from the southern entrance court of the Mosque. Each of the white marble steps is six and a half inches high. The university area faces the ablution area on the east and north sides, and an administrative block is on the west side. The university block has a grilled entrance. Both the east and north entrances are usually closed; the worshippers use only two staircases on the north-west and the south-west corners and southern entrance of the area.

The area is square in plan and is surrounded by colonnades on all sides. The white-coffered ceiling of poured concrete is composed into triangles and is supported by square piers (figure 3). The piers of this area have recessed center sections like the piers of the covered area. But further divisions of the piers of the ablution area into horizontal units are in six in sections and they have faceted edges. Each square concrete pier in this area has a stylized square capital composed of four triangular pieces. The floor is paved with different shades of brown and white marble and set in groups. The white ceiling of the colonnade is coffered in triangular designs echoed by the small triangular glazed tiles on the side walls.

The coffered ceiling has no Islamic prototype but recalls the ceiling of the dome of the Pantheon in Rome, built in 118-125 A.D.⁴ The design and way of construction of its coffered ceiling is not similar with the ceiling of the Faisal Mosque. The coffered ceiling of the audience hall of Aula Palatina Basilica,⁵ in Germany built in early fourth century, composed with the square coffered design of the ceiling but for the coffered ceiling of the ablution area of the Mosque square shape is divided into two parts with a diagonal line which creates triangular shape. The ceiling of the mosque is a composition of several

triangular shapes. The ceiling of the audience hall was in wood instead of concrete structure.

The central pool of the area has two levels both made of light blue tiles (figure 4). The fountain serves as a decorative attraction and maintains the tradition of the early Muslim architectural trends but is no longer used for ablution. The lower level is an articulated square with chamfered corners, forming an octagon. Its long side is sixty feet three inches and each chamfered side is twenty-eight feet two inches in length. The water is three feet nine inches deep. The fountain is made of rods, four inches in diameter. There are twenty-eight circular fountains each two feet three inches high in this lower pool. A shallow square basin is set in the center of the fountain, carried on an octagonal pedestal. It is seven feet and four inches above the bottom of the pool and its top is twenty-nine feet square. It has four straight rods for the cascade along the side and several rods are arranged vertically.

The center fountain and basin do not function as an ablution area (figure 5). The requirement for ablution is fulfilled by fixed taps on side walls of the covered ablution area (the colonnade). There are 177 taps set on the walls, twenty-eight on the south, forty-five on west, fifty-two on north and fifty-two on east. A marble stool one foot three inches high is placed in front of each tap allowing the worshippers to avoid the impure water on the floor.

The total height of the walls of the ablution area is fourteen feet. The walls are divided into two parts. The upper nine feet are decorated with glazed triangular ceramic tiles measuring three inches on a side. The triangular coffered ceiling of the area reflects the tiles shape.

The tile decoration is a major attraction of the ablution area and western staircases. In the ablution area cerulean and cobalt blue are major colours on the walls but magenta, red, yellow and orange are also used. The lower part of the walls is covered with white marble design in vertical lines. The side walls of the two western staircases leading to the main courtyard from the ablution zone are covered with ceramic glazed tiles with dissimilar designs.

The way the material has been used in the Faisal Mosque is different from the way it was used earlier. In the Faisal Mosque, for the sake of modernity triangular shape tiles of ablution area are three inches on a side, and tiles of the staircases are seven inches on the other side. The size of the tiles of the ablution area is too much bigger than the size of tesserae of Opus tessellatum. But the tiles in the western staircases are larger than the Opus tessellatum style. The Faisal Mosque's tile mosaic work has some similarity with this style because of the use of tiles and geometrical designs. The geometric designs with mosaic work are influenced by earlier Roman ones but in a stylized form. This technique was developed in the Islamic world and varieties of design and format are found.

In the South Asian monuments tile work was influenced by early Iranian style. The tomb of Shah Yusuf Gardizi, built in 1150 at Multan, is the first building of the region where enameled tiles in turquoise, cobalt, and cerulean blue on white base were used.⁶ Historically tiles were classified in different traditional methods like simple technique, luster tile, over glaze, under glaze and Cuerda Seca.

In the Faisal Mosque the latest Turkish industrial method of tile making has been adopted. Traditionally the glazed tile decoration adorned the lower part of the walls (dados). In the Faisal Mosque the upper part of the walls are covered with decorative tiles instead of the lower, yet other innovative features of the Islamabad mosque (figure 6).

The Mosque's geometry is applied to a degree of intricacy. These patterns exemplify the Islamic concern for symmetry and continuous generation of pattern. Here we see a very judicious and harmonious combination of diagonal, horizontal and vertical lines. The tile decoration of the ablution areas and the west staircases has beauty through harmony of colours, lines and complexity of design. But the question can be raised as to what is the historical importance of these colours? Why have these colours been selected for the area? And what is the philosophy behind it? Colours are powerful tools to express feelings and also convey philosophic and symbolic implications. Each colour has its own symbolic significance and logic, which can add dimensions to evoke moods and make overall view of the place more powerful and aesthetically strong. This is true in the case of the ablution area of the Faisal Mosque.

Cobalt and cerulean blue with few touches of red, yellow, orange and magenta have great prominence in ablution area decoration (figure 7). As an architectural expression cobalt blue has historical importance. It increasingly became a part of brilliant colour schemes for the surface decoration of ancient architectural monuments. In Muslim art the use of cobalt blue was introduced in the twelfth century. Muslim tiles are sheathed in the seven colours of the spectrum in which the blue colour has a fundamental role. In Muslim Art cobalt blue was frequently used for the decoration of *mīhrābs* and domes. The dome of the Madian Mosque in Kashan, built in 1226 is sheeted with blue tiles and is one of the earliest examples in coloured mosque decoration.⁷

During the second half of the thirteenth century the technique of *lajvardina* was used in Persia, in which a few colours and angular shapes of gold leaf were applied against a cobalt blue or turquoise ground. Coloured hues produced elegant and sumptuous effects. Most of the religious monuments of the Islamic world especially in Central Asia, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan have polychromatic tiles in marvelous colour scheme. But blue and turquoise are dominating among other colours. Helen Varley writes that, "Vast expanses of sky and ocean accommodate the spirit carving release through a sense of infinity; their loftiness and depth have endowed their colour with a noble character".⁸ The blue colour of the sky has a variety of tones at different times during the day and night. In the Faisal Mosque cobalt blue is an abstract representation of the sky. The logic behind its use is that it creates a spacious and unlimited sky. The cerulean blue tiles of the pseudo-knotted Kūfic are the source of grace and give an effect of vastness to the ablution area and the staircases (figure 8). Streaks of yellow, red, magenta and orange in the blue are clearly set between the hexagons squares in an abstract linear design, symbolizing the different time periods of the five prayers in a day offered by Muslims.

Ablution is a major obligatory act prior to perform prayer. Its ritual importance is reflected in the design of the tile decoration of the ablution area walls. Cerulean and cobalt blue create an unlimited space of sky during most of the time at the day and night, and represent the timings of the dawn and night prayers (*salat-al Fajar* and *salat-al Īshā*). Yellow represents the bright sunlight and relates to the warm temperature at the time of the

afternoon prayer (*salat-al Dhohar*). Magenta, the colour of dignity and spirituality, is a fusion of red and blue. It relates to the cool evenings as the sky with blue and streaked red (*salat-al 'Asr*). During the evening, sunset shows an arrangement of orange and light magenta with a pinkish tint, this corresponds to that of the light at the time of the evening prayer (*salat-al Maghrib*). As Varley suggests, red is the colour of the nobility of the royal livery and has various connotations of blood.⁹ Manning writes that red is reflective of the strongest and basest emotions, such as lust, power, life, vitality and energy.¹⁰ Red is also associated with energy and shows the desire and love to perform the ritual prayer and the warm feelings and the spiritual link with the Almighty. All these colours present the semiotic language of the five times of prayers.

The floor is paved with different shades of brown and white marble. Every brown marble tile measuring thirty-two by six and a half inches is set in groups of twenty resulting in several large squares. The squares are separated by white marble slabs, measuring thirty two by seventeen inches.

The yellow ochre and brownish shades of the marble flooring of the ablution area of the mosque create a contrast with the white of its ceiling and lower part of walls. Brown is the colour of earth and relates to nature. The earth colour shows somber, natural, authentic, woodiness and utility symbolism.¹¹ In this area brown colour does not harmonize with entire colour scheme and is applied as a contrast and creates natural earthiness. Every brown square has twenty rectangular marble tiles of different intensities of brown. These square shapes are outlined with one foot wide marble slabs to emphasis their colours. The use of consciously composed designs and the selection of colours are the basic characteristics that create aesthetic value for the Faisal Mosque. In the ablution area polychrome tiles are only applied on the upper part of the walls. The colours of the ablution area are divided into three groups. First, the entire colour harmony of the floor is in earth colours; second, light soft pastel colours with white are found on lower part of the side walls and third, the rich hues of ultramarine and cerulean blues with orange, red, yellow and magenta on the upper wall. One might wish that the architect has linked each area by intermingle more colours.

From west wall of the ablution area two stare passages are leading towards courtyard. The walls are entirely covered with tiles and here the pseudo-knotted Kūfic is readable as the word Allah. The tiles, which are set on the side walls of the staircases, are seven inches on a side. On these walls cerulean and cobalt blue ceramic tiles are used. In cerulean blue the name of Allah is repeated 112 times in pseudo-knotted Kūfic calligraphy, a tenth century Persian calligraphy. It forms a regular or periodic pattern in two and three dimensions. The name of Allah is producing a rhythmic series here placed in a cerulean blue against cobalt blue background of the walls. The pattern is slightly raised (about .8 inches) and stands out against the prominently cobalt blue tiles of the background. In comparison to the side walls of the ablution area, the cerulean and cobalt blue triangular ceramic tiles have small touches of yellow, orange, red and magenta to break the monotony of blue. All these ceramic tiles on the walls have been imported from Turkey but the tiles used in the fountains and reflection pools of the mosque are locally made.

In the ablution area geometry is applied to a degree of complexity and sophistication. These patterns exemplify the Islamic concern for symmetry and continuous generation of pattern. Here we see a very judicious and harmonious combination of

diagonal, horizontal and vertical lines.

On the east wall of the ablution area wooden lattice work is used for ventilation and replaces the ceramic tiles (figure 9). The design of the lattice work is similar with the design of stone lattice work at the Jami‘ Mosque at Bijapur, in the Deccan, India, built in 1551 and decorated in 1636 (figure 10).¹² Similar design is also used for wooden screens of balconies of historically built houses of Azad Jamu Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan.

In South Asia lattice work was used for the ‘Ala’i Darwaza built by ‘Alā ul- Din Khiljī in 1311 as an extension of the Quwat ul-Islam Mosque. Screens with perforated lattice work are set in the windows on both sides of the entrance. In Pakistan the tomb monuments of Uchch have wooden screens of lattice work in a variety of geometrical designs.¹³ During the Sultanate and Mughal periods, the technique was used for similar architectural purposes and it continues today at the Faisal Mosque.

Conclusion

The paper presents a tour of the ablution area of Faisal Mosque and its important features with special reference to tile mosaic work and colour philosophy of the area. The historical background and sources of the decoration are recognized. In the ablution area structural designs of the fountain and cascade are dominating. As surface decoration there is polychrome tile work on the side walls. Symbolically the colours link with the five prayers performed in a day by Muslims. On the walls of the staircases of the ablution area the name of Allah is written 112 times, in a design adopted from knotted Kūfic script. The tiles are all small triangular shape. Triangular tiles used in the area have Turkish Saljuq’s influence. Design of the lattice work of the area has its prototype in South Asian region. Entire ablution area is a bold expression of vastness, modernity, and abstractions.

Figures

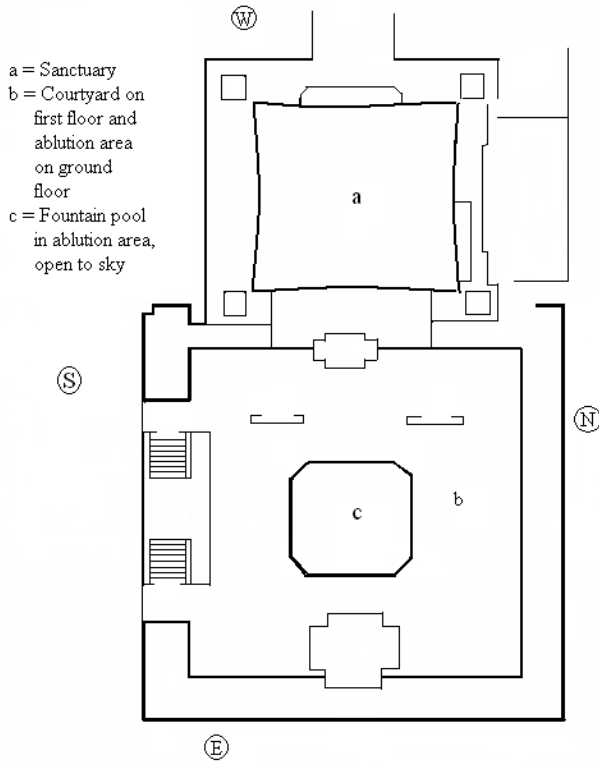


Figure 1. Ablution area in the Faisal Mosque

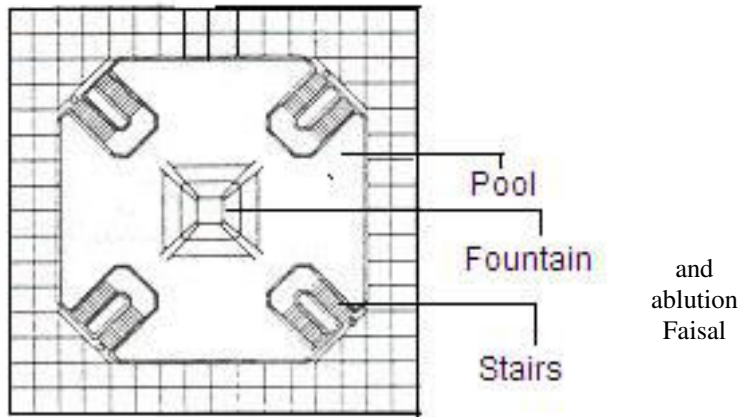


Figure 2. Pool fountain in the area of the Mosque.



Figure 3. Capitals of the square piers in the ablution area.



Figure4. Central basin and circular rod fountains in the pool of the ablution area.



Figure 5. Interior of the central basin with fountain in the ablution area.

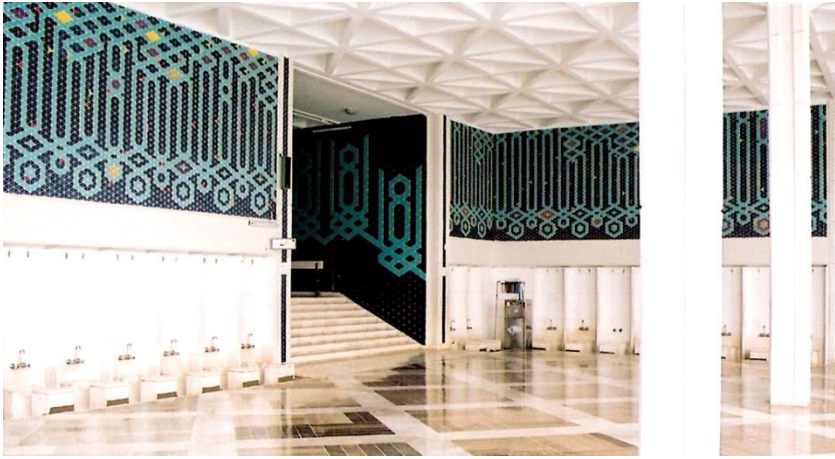


Figure 6. Tile decoration on the walls of the ablution area and the stair cases.



Figure 7. Tile decoration in the ablution area.



Figure 8. Detail of the tile decoration on the side walls of the staircases.



Figure 9. Wooden perforated lattice work used for ventilation in the ablution area.

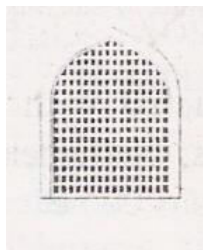


Figure 10. A lattice work opening of the *Jami'* Mosque, at Bijapur Deccan, built in 1551 and decorated in 1636. Source: Ahmad Nabi Khan (2003), *Islamic Architecture in South Asia*.

Notes and References

¹Petersen, Andrew. *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1996), 197.

² Martin Frishman, and Hasan-Uddin Khan, eds. *The Mosque: History Architectural Development and Regional Diversity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 99.

³ Creswell, K. A. C A. *Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), 314.

⁴Tansey, Richard G. and Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages, 10th ed.*, (New York, Harcourt Brace College Publisher, 1996), 254.

⁵ *ibid.*,

⁶ SajjadHaider, *Tile Work in Pakistan*, (Islamabad: National Institute of Folk & Traditional Heritage, 1987), 51.

⁷ Alexandre Papadoupoulo, *Islam and Muslim Art*, (London, Thames and Hudson, 1976),

⁸Venetia Porter, *Islamic Tiles*, (London, British Museum Publication, 1995), 17

⁹Varley, Helen. *Color*, (London, Marshall Editions, 1980), 212.

¹⁰ <http://color-of-truth.com> (accessed Sep 27, 2006).

¹¹ http://www.logotree.com/html/color_logo_graphic_design.htm (accessed July 27, 2006)

¹² Nabi Ahmad Khan, *Islamic Architecture in South Asia*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2003), 168.

¹³ Frishman and Khan, *The Mosque: History Architectural Development and Regional Diversity*,99.

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