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Uncertain and Absent Histories: Their Certain and Crucial Role in Monument Production

What does the Burj al-Arab, a secular monument, have in common with the Great Mosque of Mecca, one of the most famous mosques in Islam? At first glance, they only share one similarity: the location (the Middle East). However, upon further investigation, more similarities appear; most notably, the two monuments both have an uncertain or absent history. In addition, both continue to attract a multitude of visitors every year. As the Burj al-Arab gains fame as “the hyper-luxurious sail-shaped” hotel, the Great Mosque of Mecca gains fame as the site of the *hajj*--Islam’s required pilgrimage (Ali 52; Rabbat 59). When looking at these two buildings, the definition of a “monument” comes into play and two components emerge: the physical and the metaphorical. The physical asks, *How is the monument actually built?* The metaphorical asks, *Why does this building attract people?* In this case, the Burj al-Arab and the Great Mosque of Mecca illustrate how an uncertain or absent history can construct a monument. In the physical sense, history inspires and provides guidelines for monument production; in the metaphorical sense, history plays a key role in transforming a building from an ordinary structure into an attention-attracting monument.

It may be helpful to first examine each monument separately. To understand how an uncertain history inspired the Great Mosque of Mecca, one must return to its religion: Islam. One of the most-followed religions, Islam boasts an enormous following of 1.6 billion people

worldwide (Rizvi 70). Its history, as with all religious history, remains uncertain and shrouded in a lack of concrete, recorded knowledge. Islam's place of worship, the mosque, appears in a variety of styles, from the simple to the extravagant. In wealthy countries known for luxury, mosques are large and expensive, serving as tourist attractions as well as places for worship. For example, as the "national mosque of the Emirates," the Sheikh Zayed Mosque "[serves] as both the religious [center] of the city and popular tourist [destination], mostly for foreign visitors" (Rizvi 14, 151). As such, the mosque must represent its country in the best light. "Swarovski crystals and colored glass" decorate the chandelier, and many "transition zones...are...gilded with gold" (Rizvi 179). Though not needed for a place of worship, this extravagance attracts and awes tourists, and reflects the luxury and wealth of the United Arab Emirates.

However, most mosques do not need to fulfill this additional purpose (that is, serving as a "tourist destination"). Therefore, as the audience shifts from international travelers and local citizens to only local citizens, the mosque can prioritize function over form. This local, "everyday" mosque exists in numerous cities and towns worldwide; even in the Emirates, a country known for wealth, "mosques...[range] from the modestly scaled to the monumental" (Rizvi 160). Though not as large and expensive as, for example, the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, the "everyday" mosque nonetheless fulfills its purpose as a place of worship. As one continues to compare these two contrasting styles, one sees as many similarities as differences. Intriguingly, across this wide range of cultures, budgets, and audiences, almost all mosques share a *mihrab*, a *qibla wall*, an *adhan*, a *minbar*, and *minarets*.

A *mihrab* is an "empty niche or indentation" on the *qibla wall*, which marks the direction towards Mecca (Islam's holy land) (Rizvi 10). As the only "required architectural feature in a

mosque,” the *mihrab* gives Muslims a designated place to pray (Rizvi 10). Since prayer is paramount in Islam, a mosque would not be an adequate place of worship without the *mihrab*.

On the other hand, there are architectural components that are not required, but nevertheless appear, in almost every mosque. For example, an *adhan*, which is often compared to “church bells marking the time,” calls followers to pray five times a day (Rizvi 10). Oftentimes, the *adhan* sits on top of a tower called the *minaret*. In addition, a *minbar* (the pulpit for the *imam*, the “prayer leader”) often stands near the *mihrab* (Rizvi 11). All these architectural components help the mosque fulfill its purpose as a place of worship. However, who started these trends? Why do most mosques share these architectural similarities, when there exists only one required component (the *mihrab*)? These questions can be answered by the uncertain history of Islam, which “continues to provide important guidelines” for mosque construction (Rizvi 10).

According to the history of Islam, the first mosque belonged to Prophet Muhammad, who resided in Medina. Though not the focal point of this paper, Medina still illustrates how history can transform an ordinary place into a “monumental,” attention-attracting city. Once Islam started spreading, Caliph Umar utilized a prophecy from the holy text and thus restricted access to “the land of the Arabs” (Peters 107). Unexpectedly, Medina was not negatively impacted by this declaration; “the [great] success of the Prophet’s message” caused the city’s economy to boom, even as an entire category of consumers disappeared. Muslims began to make pilgrimages to Medina, and “altered the entire trading pattern of the Red Sea area” (Peters 134). Now, Medina is considered one of Islam’s holy cities (Peters 107). Evidently, history, even one as uncertain as religious history, can make a place monumental; this same principle can extend to the mosque.

Prophet Muhammad's house served as the first mosque, and "consisted of an open courtyard" (Rizvi 10). "Simple" and "mundane," it was a "social" and "public" space, where followers would come to pray and engage in conversation with others (Rabbat 58). In time, Muslims coined this "large open space" as the *musalla* (Rizvi 11). The *musalla* only became a typical component for the mosque due to Islamic history: Prophet Muhammad created the first mosque, with a large courtyard, and deemed it a "social" space; henceforth, this history inspired followers of Islam to view their place of worship as a "social" space, as well as a place for private prayer and worship. This uncertain history of the first mosque inspires future mosques to have their own *musalla*, and inspires Muslims to view the mosque as a space with multiple purposes (Rizvi 11). Indeed, "the liturgical elements that became essential features of every mosque...had their origins in some initial prototype" from Prophet Muhammed's mosque (Rabbat 59). Clearly, history inspires mosque creation. In fact, without it, there would not even be a reason for the mosque's existence! After all, how can a place of worship exist, without a deity to worship? The history of Islam plays a key role in inspiring the physical construction of the Great Mosque of Mecca. However, why is this mosque considered a monument? What differentiates the Great Mosque of Mecca from the numerous mosques scattered around the globe? How does this uncertain history transform a building into a monument?

According to "one of the five fundamental Pillars of Islam," all Muslims must make a pilgrimage to Mecca (Rabbat 57). At the heart of the city stands the Great Mosque of Mecca, which houses the Ka'ba, "an ancient cubical stone building with no definitive origin" (Rabbat 57). Why are people drawn to the Ka'ba (and the Great Mosque of Mecca), which remains mysteriously shrouded in an absent history? Perhaps, when it comes to monuments, a concrete,

recorded history has little significance. After all, the Great Mosque of Mecca attracts people who don't believe in the history of Islam; some even risk their lives to see it in person. It almost appears as if this lack of history is what makes the Great Mosque of Mecca so monumental.

The Mosque of the Prophet in Medina supports this argument as well. After all, how can it compare to the Great Mosque of Mecca? The pilgrimage doesn't even include the Mosque of the Prophet. Why would Muslims even remember or care about it? Why is it considered a monument? Simply put, "what lent the Mosque its fundamental and unique significance and ensured its lasting remembrance was first and foremost its contiguity to the House of the Prophet" (Rabbat 58). Since Prophet Muhammad serves as the "moral and behavioral example to follow" for Muslims, it is no surprise that they would hold this mosque to such high regard (Rabbat 58). Though "simple" and "mundane" and surrounded by a "measly row of shacks," the mosque remains monumental due to its proximity to the prophet's house (Rabbat 58). Though uncertain, the history of Islam, not necessarily extravagance or the *hajj*, plays a key role in giving a mosque its monumental status.

On the other hand, the Burj al-Arab does not have a religious history; in fact, it does not have a history at all. Located in Dubai, a city focused on "ever-newer, ever-grander, iconic construction projects," the monument was once "the world's tallest hotel" (Ali 2). Evidently, Dubai is not focused on the past. Instead, the city looks towards the future, constantly working to be "ever-newer" and "ever-grander." Therefore, instead of an uncertain, religious history, the Burj al-Arab leans on an *absent* history; the future, not the past, inspires the monument. The building doesn't commemorate an important event in Dubai's history, nor does it draw on inspiration from the past. In the case of the Great Mosque of Mecca, an uncertain history inspires

and draws people to the mosque, thus making it a monument. A lack of history especially draws people to the monument inside the mosque: the Ka'ba. The history of Islam created the metaphorical monument, as well as the physical. Therefore, what specifically draws people to the Burj al-Arab? What makes it a monument?

Much like the Great Mosque of Mecca, the Burj al-Arab's purposes include serving as a tourist attraction; indeed, "its value is in advertising Dubai" (Ali 52). Therefore, the hotel must represent the city well. As the Sheikh Zayed Mosque reflects its city's culture of luxury, the Burj al-Arab reflects Dubai's mantra: "iconic" (Ali 39). Its strange sail design, height, and high cost continue to pique curiosity; though no longer the tallest in the world, the hotel nevertheless remains monumental, attracting numerous people every day. This absent history and focus on unusual, never-seen-before components regarding design, height, and cost, transform the hotel into a monument; the future, not the past, inspires the Burj al-Arab.

In conclusion, an uncertain or absent history can play a key role in inspiring monument production. Oftentimes, monuments commemorate an important event, such as a battle, or an important figure in a country's history; for example, the tourist attraction Mount Rushmore features four former presidents of the United States, and brings "visitors face to face with the rich heritage [American citizens] all share" ("Plan Your Visit - Mount Rushmore National Memorial"). However, the Burj al-Arab and Great Mosque of Mecca demonstrate how monument production, both in the physical and metaphorical sense, can rely on a concrete, recorded history as well as an absent or uncertain one. Indeed, faith in something, even in an uncertain history or an uncertain future, can be just as influential as a concrete, recorded history.

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