

Religious Structures  
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Cultural identity can be expressed in many ways; perhaps most apparent is its manifestation in architecture. The contemporary mosque as a building type not only expresses collective identity but also symbolizes piety and is emblematic of how communities present themselves to the outside world. In general, contemporary mosques from the 1950s to the 1970s revealed a concern for projecting the 'modern Muslim'. However, since the 1980s, mosques commissioned by national governments and institutions seem to be more architecturally conservative and tradition-bound, and refer to past models that are seen as manifestations of political and religious authority. A case in point is the Mosque of Hassan II in Casablanca, Morocco, completed in 1993.

King Hassan II, who ascended the throne in 1961, continuing in the line of the Alawid dynasty established in 1666, commissioned the grand complex. The King, often referred to in Morocco as *Amir Al-Moumine, le Réunificateur, le Saveur et le Réassembleur* (in the senses of 'Leader of the Faithful, the Unifier, the Saviour and the Builder'), is an active patron of the arts and seems to have been conscious of the power of buildings and places to impart a sense of stability and legitimacy. In 1968, the King announced his decision to build a grand mosque in Casablanca, the economic centre of the country, which lacked a focal monument.

It has been said that the siting of the mosque was inspired by the Quranic verse describing the Creation of the World: 'and His throne was over the waters' (Sura XI:7). Casablanca, on the sea, was also seen as having a natural advantage from which to signal the presence of Islam. This intention is clearly manifested in the form of the massive 200 metre-tall minaret, a landmark with a laser light-beam shining towards Mecca for a distance of 30 kilometres. The building itself is the largest mosque built in the modern world.<sup>1</sup> The issue of scale, of representation of the importance of the Kingdom and its ruler, was resolved in an equation of 'greatness equals size'.

The architectural language draws permanency and legitimacy from the great historical Moroccan mosques of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Kutubiyya in Marrakech. For the King, who is both the secular and religious head of the country, these considerations became important amidst the uncertainty of modern political circumstances.

Given this formidable assignment, the French architect Michel Pinseau had limited scope for interpretation and innovation. The complex is comprised of five main ele-

# Identity, Authenticity and Power: the Mosque of Hassan II

ments. The Mosque itself consists of a prayer hall which can accommodate 25,000 worshippers, areas for ablutions, thermal baths, meeting and VIP rooms, press facilities and other ancillary spaces, and the tall minaret. Next, the *madrasa* is a semicircular protrusion containing a Quranic school, a library specializing in Islamic sciences, and other conference and audio-visual spaces. A third element is the Public Library and Museum, composed of two symmetrically arranged separate buildings along the main access plaza. The esplanade itself, a huge open space covering some 30,000 square metres and surrounded by columns, is an area that can be used as an extension of the prayer hall to accommodate over 80,000 people. The fifth element is that of transport facilities, with an underground road and parking spaces for 1,100 vehicles and 40 large coaches.

The building, following the styling of the historical Moroccan mosques, is far larger in scale and even richer in the use of materials and detailing. In plan, the complex is reminiscent of a basilica in that the narrow end of the rectangular prayer hall (200 x 100m.) is adjacent to the *qibla* wall, instead of the customary wider side allowing for the maximum number of worshippers to be aligned together facing Mecca. A huge retractable roof covers the centre of the prayer hall to form an internal 'courtyard' when it is opened. The hall itself rises from a height of 27 metres to 65 metres above the floor. Women's galleries occupy mezzanine floors along each side of the main hall with direct access from the ablution facilities. The ablution chambers below the prayer hall present

a forest of columns and fountains, the most elaborate facilities of their kind anywhere in the world. In addition, there are *hammams* and a heated pool that may well conjure up images in the Orientalist paintings of Ingres or Gérôme. The sumptuousness of the interiors takes traditional Moroccan craftsmanship and ornamentation to new heights and the beige marble, green tile work, copper and brass doors, and traditional green roofs of the exterior help unify the grand complex.

The project was financed mainly through the subscriptions of about 13 million people contributing approximately US 400 million. Taxes and contributions from individuals (almost mandatory for government employees), corporations and the royal treasury made up the rest of the funds. Official figures published at the time of the opening put the cost at US 700 million, but it appears that the real cost may have been about US1 billion. In 1995, another appeal through the media was made, this time for funds to maintain and operate the complex.

After seven years in construction, the building was finally inaugurated in August 1993, on the eleventh day of the month of Rabi' al-Awwal (the eve of the anniversary of the Prophet Mohammed's birth) in the year 1414 AH. This was exactly four hundred years after al-Mansur inaugurated his Baadi Palace in Marrakech. The anthropologist Elaine Combs-Schilling pointed out the similarity in the way these ceremonies were conducted. She notes: 'The significance of such a gesture is not accidental. The ceremony itself, almost identical in content and form to the one centuries earlier, reaffirms nationhood and the King's secular and religious roles. The prayer hall is full to capacity; the King and his cortege enter watched by his subjects, presidents and diplomats from around the world, and some one thousand media people. The candle-lit procession, the prayers led by the King, and the incantation of paeans of praise to the Prophet by the three winners of a poetry competition culminate in a new symbolic event. The King asks the female winner of the fourth award to read her poem – probably unprecedented in a mosque – and the ceremony closes with this reading.'<sup>2</sup>

The values that the monarch stands for, both as Guardian of the Faith and father of his people, are reaffirmed by these symbolic acts and by the architecture of the building. It is the same idea that was manifested in the Shahanshah Aryamehr's (Shah Reza Pahlavi's) celebration of the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire, held in historic Persepolis in October 1971, televised to an audience of millions in Iran and throughout the world. In the 20<sup>th</sup> centu-

ry, such acts of national reaffirmation are extended into the international arena, aided by mass communication technologies and the media.

The use of architecture to represent power within one's own state has a long history. However, it should be noted that, in Islam, the building of a mosque is an act of piety. Even when an individual builds a mosque it does not belong to that person but to everyone – in reality often to the State or to a *waqf* (endowment or trust). The action of King Hassan blurs the line between individual and state patronage, but the operation of the mosque speaks somewhat more strongly of state influence. The status of this building brings it close to being a national mosque. Because of its importance, it has not one but two imams. Nominations to these positions are confirmed by the King. This has become customary in Morocco, as well as in some other countries, and can be viewed as a form of political control. It should be noted that in some places the mosque has been used by opposition groups as a 'refuge, lair and a springboard' (to use one of Mohammad Arkoun's phrases)<sup>3</sup> for political activities, something which may well have been observed by the astute monarch in Morocco. The evidence of state control of the mosque is not to belittle the genuineness of the motivation to build the mosque, but it does illustrate the issue of the use of architecture to represent 'authenticity' of culture, and to express the authority and legitimacy of the State. ♦

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#### Notes

1. For a more detailed description of the Hassan II Mosque, see Renata Holod and Hasan-Uddin Khan's *The Mosque and the Modern World* (London: 1997), pp. 56-61.
2. I am indebted to Elaine Combs-Schilling for her interpretation of the opening ceremony of the mosque. See her book, *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice* (pp. 157-174) and 'Casablanca 1993: Negotiating Gender and Nation in Performative Space' in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 10 (Summer 1996), pp. 3-35.
3. Mohammad Arkoun, 'The Metamorphosis of the Sacred', in Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan (eds.), *The Mosque* (London: 1995), pp. 268-272.

**Hassan II Mosque by the sea. The plaza with the museum and library are in the foreground with the mosque and madrasa complex in the background.**

