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# A Historiography of the Mosque: Reconciling A Renaissance of Spirituality in the Material Forms of Islamic Architecture

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## Abstract

The simplicity and austerity of the first *Masjid* or Mosque in Islam contrasted with the wide array, diversity and occasional grandeur of Mosque forms. A review of the historiography of the mosque often generates a stereotype view of the 'archetypical' form of domes and arches. What is missing is a discourse as to what constitutes a more spiritually-linked framework linking Islam to the formative ideas and eventual compositions of mosques in the modern world. The present diversity of the Islamic world including cultures in the Far East and the Western world necessitates a rethinking of what fundamentally constitutes the spiritual basis of space in Masjid. A historical and critical view of the mosque as a global type-form should be reviewed rather than the persistent hold of its Arab-Islamic origins in driving the notion of archetypes in Mosque design. The history of mosque was contrived from the Oriental perspectives and historical writings of the Islamic civilisation on architecture. As part and parcel of the reconciliation of the fundamentals of Islam in the field of architecture, this discourse aims to uncover common principles that can embrace the increasing diversity and dialectic of the *ummah*. The discourse attempts a re-look into how the spiritual ethos of Islam can be brought into a formal discourse of mosque architecture. It is hoped that if such forms can be read as the physical materialisation of inherent values of Islam, then it can account for the historical and formal evolution of mosque architecture throughout the world. In this sense, more fundamental principles can embrace its diversity and tolerance that has been its hallmark of Islam since its expansion outside the Arabian Peninsula. The study reviewed selected mosques of the globe including the mosques from the Malay Archipelago region or the *Nusantara*. The study hopes to reflect certain intentions and predisposition that linked ultimately to spirituality, identity and a certain monumentality needed in reading the multiple variations of the universal type-form Mosque, as the house of Allah.

**Keywords:** Mosque, Masjid, Islam, Spirituality, Functionality

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Colquhoun (1984)<sup>[1]</sup> asserts that to define 'historicism' in architecture is opposed to a 'Classical' conception of history; '*Society and its institutions are analogous to the individual. The individual can be defined only in terms unique to himself. It is the same with societies, cultures and*

*states; they develop according to organic laws and to be studied only in relation to the content of their historical development.*'. What Colquhoun was highlighting is an ideal that found expression in the field of historiography, in which some historians saw their task to 'reveal the idea beneath the empirical surface of historical events' or to find the idea or form which is hidden in the infinitely

*variable forms of the visible world.* The history of Mosque architecture is traditionally written from a particular point of view arising from Westernised conception of stylistic trends. Hence, Mosques originate from Arabic archetypes with stereotypical domes and arches are always seen as the ‘Islamic form’ of mosque expression. Such preconceptions are difficult to depart from the prevailing dogma. Arkoun (1995)<sup>[2]</sup>, through Seyyed H Nasr (1987<sup>[3]</sup>, 1991<sup>[7][4]</sup>), observes how the concept of Sufism on Islamic spirituality, was introduced into writings and architecture, as the ‘*inner dimension of Islam*’. In traditional Masjids, the *inner dimension of Islam* was interpreted within a framework of constructed spirituality of a complex combination of subjective desires, hopes, and representations embodied in rites and words projected into spaces, places, time, cultural works and others as a shared tradition and values inherent in the Islamic tradition. He reiterated that the critical approach to spirituality in Islamic context today is particularly absent. Great architects are commissioned to design ‘Islamic’ urban patterns often with stereotypical so-called ‘Islamic’ features. Hence, it is not a surprised that many architects who endeavour to build mosques in the spirit of Islam today are seen to have neither a critical historical understanding nor an anthropological approach that could see Islamic spiritual forms beyond the Arab-Islamic origins. Arkoun also queries meaningfully: ‘Are conventionally *the components of a Mosque such as mihrab, mimbar, minaret, courtyards* intrinsically Islamic, and, therefore, *unchangeable throughout time and culture?* It is, therefore, imperative that an attempt should be made to rework a historiography<sup>1</sup> of the mosque, into underlying principles based on spiritual viewpoint and basis rather than a cultural one.

## 2.0 MEANING

Mosque or *Masjid* (in Arabic) was derived from the word ‘*sujud*’ or prostration. In early Islam, the mosque was built as a simple structure for the congregation of Muslims. Although everyday functions from individual to daily community needs are held in mosques as centres for the community, its main purpose was containing the act of congregational *Salah* or prayer. *Salah* is essentially a state of the physical ritual of submission that leads to the temporal-spiritual immersion of oneself in conversation to the Creator-Allah. The mosque’s spirituality lies in an embodiment of Islamic view of worship or ‘*ibadah*’ which see no compartmentalisation between the mundane and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual. Spirituality in Islam is a simple condition intrinsic to every practising Muslim way of life - *taqwa*<sup>2</sup>. The mosque was just a simple space

<sup>1</sup> **Historiography**, is the writing of [history](#) based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination. The term historiography also refers to the theory and [history](#) of historical writing. (Encyclopaedia Britannica at <http://global.britannica.com/topic/historiography>)

<sup>2</sup> **Taqwa**- Linguistically Taqwa means forbearance, fear and abstinence, but in the Islamic terminology, Taqwa has a distinct meaning. Taqwa is a high state of heart, which keeps one conscious of Allah's presence and His Knowledge, and it motivates him to perform righteous deeds and avoid those,

and place for contemplation in the ritual of obligatory prayers. The mosque constitutes as space for a state of temporal withdrawal from daily activities as spiritual checkpoints. Rather than asserting an ascetic and monastic way of life, Islam enjoins the conflation or fusion of the mundane and the spiritual at all times.

## 3.0 ARABIAN BEGINNINGS

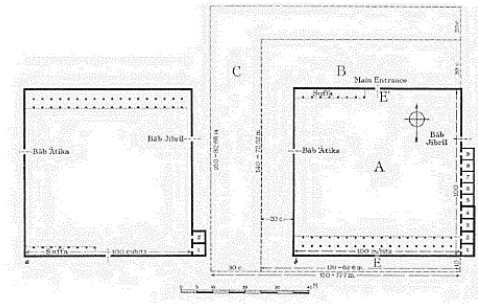


Figure: 1 The Prophet’s Mosque -An Nabawi, Earliest structure

(source: KAC Creswell 1979)<sup>[5]</sup>

The Prophet Muhammad, PBUH built the first mosque in Quba, a village he stopped while en route to Madinah (formerly Yathrib), in his historic Hijra (migrated) journey from Makkah (Mecca). However, it is the Prophet’s mosque, An Nabawi, due to its eminent significance in the development of Islam, is chosen as the original reference. The Quba mosque has since expanded but continue to receive pilgrims as the fourth sacred Mosque in Islam after Masjidil Haram, Nabawi and al-Aqsa.

The original shape of An Nabawi (Figure 1) during the Prophet’s era was rectangular, measuring approximately 68 metres in length from south to north and 57 metres in width from east to west, come to about 3,876 square metres in area. The simple mosque was of a person’s height, was evolutionised to accommodate the expanding Muslim community, technology and new architectural innovation. During Caliph Uthman bin Affan’s time, the original mosque was demolished and rebuilt to orientate towards Makkah. After the end of the Rashidin Era<sup>3</sup> and in the time of the Ummayyad Caliph Al-Walid bin ‘Abd al-Malik, a new qiblah wall was constructed with a *maqsurah* (an enclosure at the centre of the qibla wall for the ruler)<sup>[6]</sup>. The mosque had a teak ceiling decoration. Apart from the enlargement of the mosque, the Umayyad introduced the minaret, the mihrab and the paved in marble minbar-with-

which are forbidden. (Authentic Islamic Resources and Information at <http://www.ahya.org/amm/modules.php?name=Sections&op=viewarticle&artid=154>)

<sup>3</sup> **Rashidun**, (Arabic: “Rightly Guided,” or “Perfect”), the first four [caliphs](#) of the [Islāmic](#) community, known in Muslim history as the orthodox or patriarchal caliphs: [Abū Bakr](#) (reigned 632–634), [‘Umar](#) (reigned 634–644), [‘Uthmān](#) (reigned 644–656), and [‘Alī](#) (reigned 656–661). The 29-year rule of the Rashidun was Islām’s first experience without the leadership of the Prophet Muḥammad. His example, however, in both private and public life, came to be regarded as the norm ([sunnah](#)) for his successors, and a large and influential body of [ansār](#) (companions of the Prophet) kept close watch on the caliphs to insure their strict adherence. (Encyclopaedia Britannica at <http://global.britannica.com/topic/Rashidun>)

stairs in the *rawdah* (space between the original mosque and the prophet's house). The ever dynamic evolution of the Prophet's mosque is thus the reference to the world mosques in its holistic essence -the physical and the spiritual.

#### 4.0 THE NUSANTARA REGION

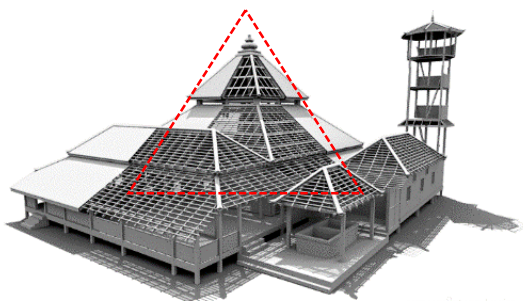


Figure 2. Kampung Laut Mosque, Nilam Puri Kelantan showing the spiritual core under the three-tiered roof

The Nat Tanjung mosque or Surau Aur at Aur village, Saiburi District, Pattani, Thailand, is one of the oldest indigenous vernacular mosques in the Malay Peninsular. It was built more than 359 years ago at a village called Bendang Jung. Bougas (1992)<sup>[7]</sup> described Nat Tanjung mosque had a gable end to its three-tiered roofs known as a “*pemeleh*” roof. The prayer hall is a rectangular shape measuring eight to five metres, and its space opens to a rear annexe that resembles a traditional house. The building was raised from the ground on five timber pillars in modular construction. The highly steeped roof clad with *singgora* clay tiles breaks into three layers with two sloping ventilation panels for airflow at the gable end.

Another old mosque built between 14-17th century still in use today is the Kampung Laut Mosque in Nilam Puri, Kelantan (refer Figure 2). The mosque basic structure is timber. Held by four main pillars or *saka guru*, the main structure was supported by sixteen internal pillars and twenty-four veranda pillars. The layered vernacular form of the pyramidal roof itself is perhaps, the most recognisable part of the building including its system of crisscrossing beams which are supported further by four central timber pillars that form pointed tiered structure. The square prayer space underneath constitutes the main architectural foci with veranda spaces extended from the central core and meditation or *i'tikaf* area located in the loft above the core space. This type of mosque architecture represents a predominantly collonaded form. According to Ahmad Sanusi Hassan (2010)<sup>[8]</sup>, both typical mosques of the *Nusantara* region demonstrates the very nature of the congregational prayer with its linear discipline in active movement, thus, require an orthogonal layout of uninterrupted space.

#### 5.0 SPIRITUALITY AND ITS FORMAL PRINCIPLES

When Islam was at first revealed to the Arabs, it was nothing short of a new message representing a revolution in the mindset of the Arabs and a continual message of the

previous Prophets of Allah prior Muhammad PBUH<sup>4</sup>. It gave the Arabs a new conceptual and a fundamental displacement of their old worldview. It sought a re-arrangement and re-alignment of their previously-held beliefs into a God abiding system with its implications and values. In its proclamation of *shahadah*, Allah claims on humanity an absolute and uncompromising exclusiveness. Allah is transcendent, immanent, Universal power and Pervasive. Based on this principle of *tauhid*, a spatial driver of Mosque from must begin with the notion of a spiritual core which a hierarchy of intensity of awareness and consciousness of one-God prevail. The *Jemaah* or congregation prayer itself has rewards according to the proximity to the *Imam*<sup>5</sup>, and such Islamic principles can constitute a framework of the physical hierarchy of space for active worship and contemplation. If Islam is a manifestation of the two worlds of man – the mundane and the elevated, then at its most fundamental, space in a Mosque represents similar hierarchies of ‘elevated’ and ‘core’ zones differentiated between ‘outer’ and inner realms. The outer realm is a supporting space such as a courtyard from which one enters the inner sanctuary of prayer from the outer world. In the Arabic context, this is often represented by a courtyard. However, the same pattern can be found in every other culture. In the tropical context, the surrounding collonaded space drew from the vernacular principle of the verandah or *serambi*, play this role. In whatever ‘cultural’ form it takes, the principal aim of space through which Muslim traverses from the physical into the realm towards communing with the Divine remain the same. Hence, the framework of the Mosque is synchronised with goals and ambitions of Islam, i.e. to bring man closer to his or her Creator. On reviewing various mosques designs throughout the globe, one can discern other fundamental patterns of space that can be developed and elevated into a new set of principles based on a new method of looking at the historical evolution of mosque. Some of the mosque new design principles can be highlighted and identified as follows:

- The fusion of prayer space, in terms of ‘core and transition’, and hierarchy and order;
- The functionality of space in ‘*ibadah*’ terms including ritual and orientation of space, and the zones of purification;
- The positioning of woman and children in prayer space as spiritual principle; and
- The role of phenomenology or contact with the surrounding physical elements to alleviate senses that touch the soul, such as the role of water elements, gardens and light.

<sup>4</sup> – Peace and blessings be upon him - as salutation made to the Prophet of Allah by Muslims

<sup>5</sup> Imam-person, who lead the prayer. The word "imam" in Arabic means "to stand in front of". The term refers to the placement of the person who is the leader, in front of the worshippers during prayer and recites the verses and words of prayer. The people follow his recitation and movements after his due. In leading the prayer, the imam stands facing away from the worshippers, toward the direction of Makkah. There is no clergy in Islam. Muslims believe in direct connection with the Almighty, without the need for an intercessor. (<http://islam.about.com/od/prayer/tp/Imam.htm>)

Any attempts to recreate an alternative theory and historiography of the mosque should relook into common themes across all nations and cultures and not merely using the Arabian form as the only template for mosques. One must differentiate what is essentially ‘cultural’ and what is ‘Islamic’. The tolerance and diversity of Islam must emerge from a singularity of its spiritual fundamentals and its universal meanings and concepts, which can then explain and embrace its multiplicity of form and its tolerance to all cultures.

**6.0 SPACE AND FORM: SPIRITUAL PHENOMENOLOGY**

In spiritual terms, the Mosque is not only a physical entity. It is a purpose built facility that contains and facilitates ‘actions’. The spaces within the facility must rise to the level of able to create ‘emotion’. The Mosque during the Prophet’s time was straightforward and austere because the Prophet PBUH himself and his companions themselves were physically present. Their eminent presence, with intense spirituality in themselves, compensates the simplicity of their surrounds and physical space. However, a mosque in the present day must be denoted as a physical structure. No matter what scale, size and context, the mosque must represent recognisable ‘signs’ or elements that can facilitate such links with the unseen Creator. Hence, a mosque in architecture can only be rendered successful if the design can elicit a particular momentary experience of contemplation or spirituality for the worshipper with his/her Creator. It is only then that either consciously or subconsciously, architecture becomes an instrument that has supported the human being as he or she sought the answers to this perennial question on the purpose of Man on earth. Therefore, only by being in the realm of a mosque, can the environment becomes justified as able to temporarily or momentarily cut-off Man from the outside world enabling him/her to contemplate momentarily his/her purpose of life and the mystery of the universe from the Source.

**6.1 Emerging From the Spiritual to the Mundane in Space**

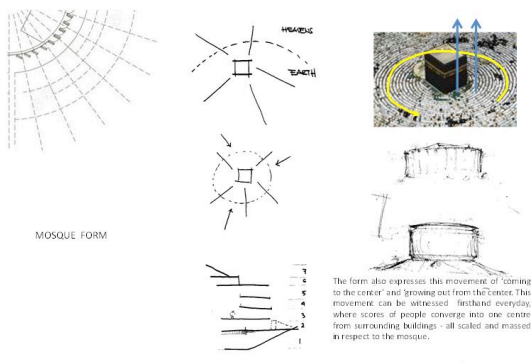


Figure 3: The Spiritual Centre of the Qibla-the Kaaba and how it defines form

All mosque begins from a ‘spiritual core’ of space

where the act of prayer and congregation takes place. Except Masjidil Haram, this core space contains the line of *saf* within the prayer hall from behind the *qibla* wall. The mosque facilitates praying in congregation or ‘*Jemaah*’ and requires the minimum group of two people. This solemn line or ‘*saf*’ behind a prayer leader or an ‘*imam*’ is a regimented act in synchronisation of the members of the congregation to stand in solid line, shoulder to shoulder and are not allowed to precede the imam in position and action as an act of loyalty and solidarity.

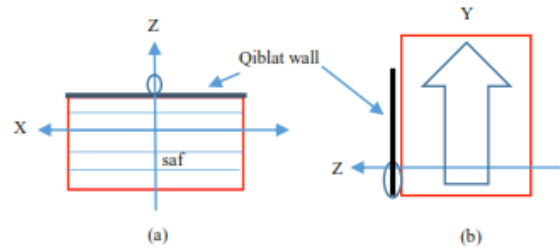


Figure 4: Typical Layout Plan of Mosque(a) and typical vertical section (b) showing the hierarchy line of *saf* (X) connection Man and Man in one direction towards the qibla (Z), and vertical connection of Man and God in prayer and supplication (Y).

The orthogonal or rectangular space is, therefore, the most facilitative towards congregation which encourages ‘the first amongst equals’ where those who attain punctuality in striving to populate the front most row or ‘*saf*’, obtaining the highest rewards. Underlying this complexity is a simple principle of an initial core, a grid and a basic extension or expansion of the grid. There is a tripartite relationship between the three principal axes defining this space – X extending the ‘*saf*’. Y extending the spiritual roof and the *qibla* wall with the mihrab as directional niche representing the Z axis perpendicular to each other where X and Y are capable of extension and transformation based on aims, conditions of site and functions. These grids are invisible lines of order from which space and form are intrinsically-articulated. This positioning can almost be interpreted as a silent ‘*tasbih*’ or repeated praise to Allah or *zikr*.

A congregational line behind the *imam* is a part of curved lines that entirely circle the earth and centred or merged towards the *Kaaba* as the *Qibla*. This spiritual movement can thus link to the universal movements throughout the universe such as an atom, galactic cycles and even the movement of planets and rotation of the earth. The generation and categorization of space connect with the universe and has a spiritual core. The requirement governs the character of space causing a rippling effect throughout entire world mosque development.

**6.2 Spirituality as a generator of space and roof**

All ritual prayers ended with a *du’a* or supplication by cupping both hands and raised slightly towards the sky-

heaven. The Prophet PBUH was known for his supplications, and in times of difficulty, his arms would be raised in devoted supplication to Allah to ask for special help. Space above the prayer hall provides the environment or physical means of gravitating the worshipper to the heaven above and making oneself insignificant or humble as an ummah. Although Allah is ever present, symbolically, He is located in a celestial domain in heaven. Spiritually, the principle of capping the core zone encompasses the diversity and plurality of forms whether dome shape, pyramidal or of lofty height. The roof must be the highest point in the core space; suggesting a unity of adherents without hierarchy or inequality in prayer, all stand equal before Allah. Oneness is thus emphasised as a cosmological centre. This centre becomes both - the spatial and symbolic representation of a house of Allah.

### 6.3 The Communal and Supportive Spaces

Once the core space is determined, other spaces are supportive and almost subservient to it. The growth of the community must emerge from the intersection of the spiritual that emanate into the mundane spaces. The mosque's community functions as extensions of the spiritual core may accommodate multiple types of 'mundane' but complementary facilities such as classrooms, libraries, retail outlets, spaces for weddings, funerals and meeting facilities. The spaces are itself an embodiment of the spiritual aspiration or *ibadah* whether as an individual or communal activities in support of the *ayah* (words of the Quran) that encouraged the worshippers to roam the land for Providence upon completion of *solah* (prayer).

### 6.4 Universal Patterns

Throughout all forms and shapes of the mosque, there are patterns, trends and elements that persist no matter whatever time, space or location. In arid climates, courtyards have evolved as an integral part of a mosque architecture and developed into a range of urban typologies. Such 'cultural' forms of courtyards are products and type-forms related to a particular geographical region. Spiritually their function can be linked to the idea of a spiritual threshold or transition space to prepare mentally for the act of prayer prior entering the 'space' to perform the worship of Allah in the state of full contemplation. Hence, rather than a 'must-have' feature, courtyards is only one amongst the many spatial strategies of a mosque elements. The main aim of such spaces in to contain spillovers during Friday prayers and towards delineating a 'boundary' or transition space between the mundane and the spiritual 'sanctum'. It helps the soul to separate him or herself from the fast pace of life outside and bring towards a contemplation of the essences inside.

### 6.5 Ornamentation As Devotion

Visual forms of Arab-Islamic architecture have often communicated through the essences of the physical world by the existence of proportion, order, balance, a hierarchy

that are manifested through a range of geometry, calligraphy and flowing, often floriated, rhythmic designs of arches and details. Spahic (2009),<sup>[9]</sup> states that if Prophet Muhammad PBUH intended to prohibit the act of beautifying and decorating the mosque totally, either he or the Holy Quran would have clarified it without ambiguity. Hence, the position, viz-a-viz, decoration of mosque generates a range of appropriate approaches including ambiances of the spaces. The principle is that the mosque must promote a sense of tranquility and peace to aid spiritual interest intrinsic in its permissibility. Order and natural elements such as an open courtyard, garden, water elements and natural lighting are essential elements that promote this aim. However, Muslims should not live under the illusion that they had innovative means in defending and glorified Allah's religion through excessive and meaningless mosque beautification.

### 6.6 Markers (Landmarks & Reminders) and Minarets

The minaret is not a fundamental element of a mosque architecture. However, it remains as an essential structure having significance in the community social life as social landmarks. In the *Nusantara* region, the *adhan* (call to prayer) in the old mosques was initiated through the sound of drums or the beat of the wooden barrel (the *beduk*) placed at the corner of the mosque. When the time for prayer comes, the sound of the *beduk* can be heard from village to village transforming the "acoustic community" to synchronise in the moment of the call to prayer. It reinforces the importance of community (*ummah*) in Islam, remind of the specific time of day as social calls and exudes a unifying effect of the public call to prayer for continuous purification of self. With or without the minaret, the *adhan* continues its role to facilitate an acoustic structure of everyday life through the call of the five daily prayers. As markers, landmarks or acoustic beacon, the minaret, although remain as an optional architectural structure, depending on the need of the community, it can be added, subtract, integrate or reformed. Figure 5 illustrates an award winning mosque without the minaret, is still a mosque in all its regalia.

### 6.7 Light

Light is frequently associated with the primitive context identifying solid and void and affects perceptions of mass. Natural light endowed space with a sense of Divine presence. It is also a way of rendering the soul to inanimate objects. The verse from the Qur'an: '*Al Kahfi*' relates the dynamic penetration of light into a cave as a means of relating a large span of time. Light seem to render a certain de-materialisation to solidity and bruteness of physical construction. In religious architecture, the introduction and admission of natural light from upper-level openings are used time and time again towards imbuing a sense of spirituality through nature and its presence in space. In the Mosque of the National Assembly, Turkey (Figure 5), the prayer hall is served by both direct and indirect lighting. Direct lighting is provided by the

large windows located within the steps of the pyramid roof. The large windows located along the *qibla* wall of the prayer hall with *mihrab* niche visually open the hall to the cascaded garden situated in front of it.

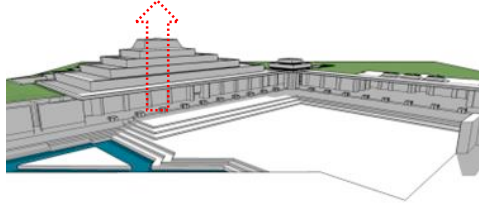


Figure 5: National Assembly Masjid, Turkey. Exterior form and courtyard. Spiritual space marked in dotted line.

### 6.8 Water and Purification

Water is part of the ritual in preparation for prayer as ablution. As water symbolises purity and purification, in Islam, the ritual of purification or *wudhu*<sup>6</sup> is religiously conducted before the performance of prayers. It is a spiritual ritual act in itself with a clear intention to conduct prayers before actually performing the physical act of prayer itself. A Muslim in the state of *wudhu* is untouchable by *Satan* and hence in a state of purity. Although cleansing of oneself in the absence of water is available in Islam i.e. in the form of stones and dust (*taharah*), water is still the main medium and priority for cleansing. Access to water in the event of non-*wudhu* state is, therefore, critical for the worshipper to remain clean and pure at all times. In Islamic architecture, the function of water is extended from spiritual and psychologically to architectural functions in providing thermal comfort in addition to its cooling impact to the surrounding environment.

### 6.9 Adab and Hijab (Ritual & Privacy) - Segregative Space

Women is a natural distraction for men. Hence, segregation of space between male and female, adult and children is not only a matter of a separation from social interaction but must be seen as the processes of *adab*, *hijab*, safety and security as one enters the mosque. It is processed even before the prayer itself to ensure tranquility of the mind for both male and female worshippers from the mundane issues of the world.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The historiography of the mosque must be revised to extend the view of the mosques from traditional historiography and stereotypes into forms based on an Islamic understanding of 'spiritual' principles which are themselves drawn from the goals of Islam. It is the spiritual drivers of prayer that should become the method of interpreting the transmutation of space into the varied mosque form of any nations. The mosque, from the time of

the Prophet PBUH, only requires a space which is clean to worship and prostrate. Current discourses focus on styles, decorations, treatments and historical evolution which merely represent a physical, historical juncture. A review of the historiography of the mosque from forms of the mosque must be discussed beyond the stereotypical conception of arches, domes, and minarets. There is a need to broaden the field of discourse through emphasising the spiritual themes in spatial terms and develop the fundamentals beyond the layers of historical styles, into archetypical patterns. The theory and historiography can be rebuilt into a framework of ideas and understanding that transcends the 'moment'. This paper attempts to create a broader view and had thread common ideas through specific cases studies of mosque designs through patterns of spaces, functions and style. Once the discourse of the mosque is elevated into themes and principles that are essential and linked to the ultimate goal of instilling the spiritual dimension, it is only then a renaissance of the spiritual will be created and cast its mark into architecture for the house of Allah-*Wallahualam*.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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<sup>6</sup> Wudhu' is a prerequisite act of cleansing of parts of the human body, namely face, arms and feet before prayer with water.