DESTROYING ISLAM, the case of ISIS

In July 2014, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria announced itself as a new Islamic Caliphate. The day after, its ruthless members proceeded to demolish religious shrines and mosques of other Islamic sects. The group’s brutal crime propaganda videos are usually set either against a bare desert (recalling the Arabian landscape of Prophet Muhammad’s era), or a religious structure, like the neo-classical Grand Mosque of Mosul. The architecture of the neo-classical Mosque and the optic of the demolished historical mosques are critical parts of this extremist group’s visual construct.

Architecturally, at every historical turn, the mosque proved itself to be one of the most hybrid, ever evolving religious building that still stands as a living witness to the historical multiplicity of Islam—a threat to ISIS’ flawed, nihilistic regime of intolerance. Here, reading and writing an alternative mosque architecture history become an integral part of a cultural war against an autonomous and reactionary discourse that wants us to believe (not unlike its Orientalist counterpart) in the pre-determinism of the Islamic cultural landscape.

BUILDING ISLAM, an incomplete history of the Mosque architecture

Building Islam, is not about Islamic buildings; nor is it an attempt at forming a comprehensive history of the built environment of the Islamic world. Instead the class will aim at critically re-formulating (re-building) the field of inquiry of the history of the architecture of the mosque - the most ‘Islamic’ archetype.

We will pursue this objective through two parallel and simultaneous methods:

1) The class will start by surveying the established (academic) historiographic narrative dealing with the now problematic notion of ‘Islamic Architecture’. We will critically unpack the Orientalist roots (western centrist) of this field of thoughts. Characterized by a deterministic framework, this meta-narrative (pioneered by Oleg Grabar, Robert Hillenbrand, etc.) understands the architecture of the mosque either stylistically, through dynastic periodization abruptly ending in the 18th c (Umayyad, Abbasid, Ottoman, etc.) or through a purely religious lens.

2) In parallel, the class will adopt, study and analyze (using the architecture representation tools that we are most familiar with), a series of mosques across geography and time – transitioning into modern period. The objective is to gather and graphically organize and represent the wealth of knowledge collected about those case studies through an illustrated paper. The hope would be to re-contextualize and re-learn those buildings in the light of the gaps and contradictions that are uncovered through the research. This would neatly feed into contemporary academic pursuits in the field of ‘Islamic architecture’ (post Edward Said ‘Orientalism’ text), that aim at breaking free from the old fixed single model of understanding the mosque typology, in favor of a dynamic intercultural theoretical framework.

To complement our familiarity with those buildings and their contexts, we will also read original documents and material produced by and about Muslim and non-Muslims travelers across what was once a more free and fluid geography, erasing along the way the East-West divide, or the ‘Islamic’ ‘non-Islamic’ world.

Building, is also the opposite and the complementary act of destroying. Because dynasties are also built on the destruction of their predecessors, we will seek to learn about the monuments that have been altered, transformed or erased, in the name of God.
* See Nasser Rabbat, *Islamic Architecture as a field of Historical Enquiry*

Schedule:

**Week 1 – 9/12:** Overview / seminar structure

**Week 2 – 9/19:** Orientalism - The Islamic City?


X Stefano Bianca, *Urban Form in the Arab World* Past and Present (UK: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2000), Chapter 2


**Week 3 – 9/26:** The History of the Mosque (textual overview)


**Week 4 – 10/3:** What is Islamic Art and Architecture? (1) Who: collectors and Scholars


Week 5 – 10/10: What is Islamic Art and Architecture? (2) Where: ‘At the Exhibit’

- Timothy Mitchell, “Colonizing Egypt”, Chapter 1: Egypt at the Exhibit, (p1-34)

Week 6 – 10/17: What is Islamic Art and Architecture? (3) How: Methods and Theories

- Oleg Grabar, “Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art”. Muqarnas 1, 1983, (P 1-14)

Week 7 – 10/24: What is Islamic Art and Architecture? (4) – Alternative Narratives

- Additional Reading: Mariam Rosser-Owen, “Mediterraneanism: how to incorporate Islamic art into an emerging field”

Week 8 – 10/31: The Early Travelers

The Travels of Ibn Battuta - tbd

- Ibn Khaldun “muqadimah” – Ch 4: Countries and Cities, and all other forms of Sedentary Civilizations (432-478)
Week 9 – 11/7: No class - (ELECTION DAY)

Week 10 – 11/14: Case Studies Presentations

Week 11 – 11/21: Case Studies Presentations

Week 12 – 11/28: Case Studies Presentations

CASE STUDIES (DRAFT):

Hagia Sophia. Istanbul. 537
Bayt al-Nabi (Prophet’s House). Medina. 624
Mosque of Córdoba. Cordoba. 784
Mosque of Uqba. Kairouan. 670
Umayyad Mosque. Damascus. 715
Al-Zaytuna Mosque. Tunis. 698
Great Mosque of Samarra. Samarra. 851
Mosque of Ahmad ibn Tulun. Cairo. 876
Jami’ Al-Qarawiyyin. Fes. 859
Great Mosque of Xi’an. Xi’an. 742
Great Mosque of Isfahan. Isfahan. 1072
Zavareh Grand Mosque. Zavareh. 1136
Qutub Mosque. Dehli. 1193
Great Mosque of Seville. Seville. 1198
Divriği Great Mosque and Hospital. Divriği. 1128
Khirki Mosque. New Delhi. 1351
Jame Mosque of Yazd. Yazd. 1324
Sultan Hassan Mosque. Cairo. 1359
Haseki Sultan Mosque. Istanbul. 1539
Djingareyber Mosque. Timbuktu. 1325
Rustem Pasha Mosque. Istanbul. 1561
Takiyya Mosque. Damascus. 1555
Suleymaniye Mosque. Istanbul. 1559
Eski Mosque. Ederne. 1402
Semsi Pasha Mosque. Istanbul. 1581
Selimiya Mosque. Ederne. 1574
Badshahi Mosque. Lahore. 1673
Uyghur Mosque. Turfan. 1779
Aga Bozorg Mosque. Kashan. Late 18c
Hassan Fathy Mosque. Kurna. 1929
Dalmabahce Mosque. Istanbul. 1855
Great Mosque of Djenne. Djenne. 1907
National Assembly Building of Bangladesh. Dhaka. 1963
National Mosque of Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur. 1965
Mosque in University of Baghdad. Baghdad. 1957
Tooba Mosque. Karachi. 1969
Namaz–Khaneh Mosque. Tehrān. 1978
Sherefudin’s White Mosque. Visoko. 1980
Faisal Mosque. Islamabad. 1987
King Khalid International Airport. Riyadh. 1983