

Sacred Symbolism in Islamic Architecture: The Kaaba as a Design Paradigm in Contemporary Mosque Construction

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Abstract: *At the "ArchMoscow 2023" architectural exhibition, a new design proposal for the Grand Mosque in Kazan was introduced. The proposed structure features a large cube, reminiscent of the Kaaba, with a domed prayer hall inside. While the project received approval from Tatarstan authorities, it has sparked debate among architects and scholars. The controversy centers around the theological implications of replicating the Kaaba's form in mosque architecture. This study critically examines the uniqueness of the design, its alignment with competition objectives, and the broader discourse on Kaaba-inspired mosques.*

Keywords: Contemporary Mosque Architecture, Kaaba-inspired Design, Kazan Cathedral Mosque, Islamic Architecture, Mosque Symbolism

1. Introduction

The discussion about defining a distinct contemporary Tatar Mosque style has been ongoing, especially with the competition for Kazan's new Cathedral Mosque. The competition aimed to commemorate the 1100th anniversary of Islam's arrival in the Volga region. Participants were tasked with moving beyond the widely used neo-Ottoman style to create a modern architectural identity for Tatar Mosques. The goal was for this Mosque to become a religious and cultural landmark for the Turkic world. Unfortunately, the competition did not result in a universally accepted design that met both official expectations and public preferences.

A year later, at "ArchMoscow 2023," a new project emerged from the "Tsimailo Lyashenko & Partners" architectural bureau. This project was presented as an officially approved concept by Tatarstan's leadership. According to the architects' press release, the Mosque's cubic structure was directly inspired by the Kaaba. The Mosque, designed to stand on the water, features a public square connecting it to the Volga River banks. The black cubic building houses a central prayer hall, with a dome that references traditional Mosque architecture. The design integrates religious symbolism with a modern aesthetic, incorporating shifted stone blocks to allow distant views of the dome. A single towering minaret features an observation deck, reinforcing its role as both a spiritual and urban landmark. (fig. 1).

This article aims to examine the implications of incorporating Kaaba-inspired design elements in contemporary mosque architecture, with a specific focus on the Kazan Cathedral Mosque project.

This study is significant as it sheds light on the balance between religious symbolism and modern architectural practices, contributing to the discourse on mosque design in contemporary contexts

Is a Mosque Designed as a Kaaba Replica Justifiable?

The project's clear reference to the Kaaba has drawn criticism. Prominent architect S. Shakurov, who designed the Kul Sharif Mosque in Kazan and the White Mosque in Bolgar, pointed out a fundamental contradiction: the Kaaba traditionally serves as the focal point for worshippers, while this design places the prayer space inside the cube, effectively reversing their traditional roles. A. Sattarov, a previous competition winner, remarked that throughout Islam's history, no country has attempted to replicate the Kaaba as a Mosque. He argued that the project designers lacked an understanding of Islamic principles, Mosque functions, and spatial organization.

Historical precedents, however, suggest otherwise. The Baitul Mukarram Mosque in Dhaka (1959-1963) is one of the earliest examples of a Kaaba-inspired Mosque, though its cubic structure was rendered in white instead of black. In Zakan-Yurt, Chechnya (2011), architect Magomed Dadaev designed a Mosque with black cladding and gold calligraphy resembling the Kaaba's kiswa while introducing modified proportions, galleries, and arched skylights (Fig. 3). Similarly, the Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib Mosque in Grozny (2017) closely mimics the Kaaba, enclosed within a white gallery and featuring four minarets [4, p. 335-336] (Fig. 2).

While it is true that there cannot be a second Kaaba in a spiritual sense, its form can be symbolically represented in Mosque architecture. The Kaaba, as described in the Quran, serves as a sacred house (Bayt al-Allah), established by Abraham and Ismail as a blessing for humanity. Its sacred status is preserved through Quranic injunctions, pilgrimage, and sacrificial rituals. The Kaaba's uniqueness is further reinforced by its role in defining the qibla, the directional orientation for Muslim prayer.

Although Islam does not prohibit the replication of the Kaaba's form, the acceptability of such designs depends on interpretation. Unlike Christianity, where sacred sites and

religious imagery are commonly replicated, Islamic worship strictly adheres to facing the actual Kaaba, not its symbolic representations. This distinction means that while the Kaaba's image appears frequently on prayer rugs to indicate the qibla, direct architectural replication remains controversial [8].

The Kazan Mosque project presents an inversion of ritual space: worshippers inside the cubic structure would find themselves enclosed within the Kaaba's image while facing Mecca for prayer. This paradox could be interpreted in various ways, from reinforcing the sacred vector of Islam to blurring distinctions between the object of prayer and the prayer space itself. While architects may view the design as a bold visual statement, it risks clashing with theological perspectives on Mosque architecture.

Originality or Compilation of Existing Ideas?

The Kazan Mosque project was a centerpiece at "ArchMoscow 2023," showcased within a five-meter black cube, which won "best exhibition stand." However, the extent of its innovation remains questionable (Fig. 4).

While Mosque architecture allows flexibility in form, it is difficult to create something truly novel. Many Mosques have historically featured cubic structures topped with domes [2, p. 91-95]. For instance, the design concept of a dome within a cube is reminiscent of the Tauba Mosque in Karachi (1969), the Nilin Mosque in Omdurman (1976), and the Yesilvadi Mosque in Istanbul (2004-2010) [4, p.328].

Similarly, the structural separation between the outer shell and the prayer hall in the Kazan project evokes design principles seen in the Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo (9th century) (Fig. 5) [6, p.51-57].

Another widely discussed feature of the Kazan project is its placement over water. While the architects justify this by citing the symbolic meaning of "minaret" as "lighthouse," such an idea is not unprecedented. King Hassan II of Morocco built a Mosque partially extending into the Atlantic Ocean, inspired by the Quranic verse that describes Allah's throne as being upon water (Qur'an 11:7). The Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca (1986-1993) and other waterfront Mosques in Jeddah, Mumbai, and Malaysia share similar concepts [9]. However, unlike these locations, the Volga River's fluctuating water levels and seasonal freezing conditions could pose practical challenges for construction and maintenance.

The Shift in Competition Rules

The architects' claim that their project had already been approved by Tatarstan's leadership surprised both the media and Kazan residents. A. Sattarov raised concerns about the legitimacy of the selection process, questioning whether an international competition was necessary if the winner would later be chosen under different circumstances? Originally, the Mosque was to be constructed in Kyrlyay Park, requiring careful urban planning considerations. However, relocating the project to the Volga River eliminates previous site restrictions and nullifies the effort competitors put into addressing those constraints.

Furthermore, last year's competition emphasized preserving Tatar's architectural heritage. Competitors were encouraged to draw inspiration from historical monuments.

However, the Kazan Mosque's translucent cube-on-water design does not reflect local traditions. Given these inconsistencies, it is understandable why previous competition participants, especially the winners, might feel sidelined by this new development.

2. Conclusion

Despite calls for modernizing Mosque architecture, the Kazan Mosque project remains controversial. While its minimalist aesthetic and striking presentation at "ArchMoscow 2023" drew attention, it lacks fundamental innovation in Mosque construction. Its reference to the Kaaba, intended as a symbolic tribute, instead raises theological and cultural concerns. The design neither introduces a new national tradition nor surpasses a collage of well-known architectural references. While some officials may support the project, Kazan deserves a more meaningful and culturally resonant architectural landmark. While the Kazan Mosque project introduces a bold architectural statement, its resemblance to the Kaaba raises theological and cultural concerns. Although Kaaba-inspired Mosque designs exist, this particular project inverts traditional spatial orientations, leading to controversy. Moving forward, mosque architecture should balance innovation with religious symbolism while respecting historical and cultural contexts.

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Figure 1: The project of the Kazan Cathedral Mosque from
«Tsimailo Lyashenko & Partners».



Figure 2: Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Dhaka, Bangladesh. 1959-1963.



Figure 3: Mosque n. by Magomed Dadaev, Zakan-Yurt. 2011.
<https://northcaucasusland.wordpress.com/tag/zakan-yurt/>

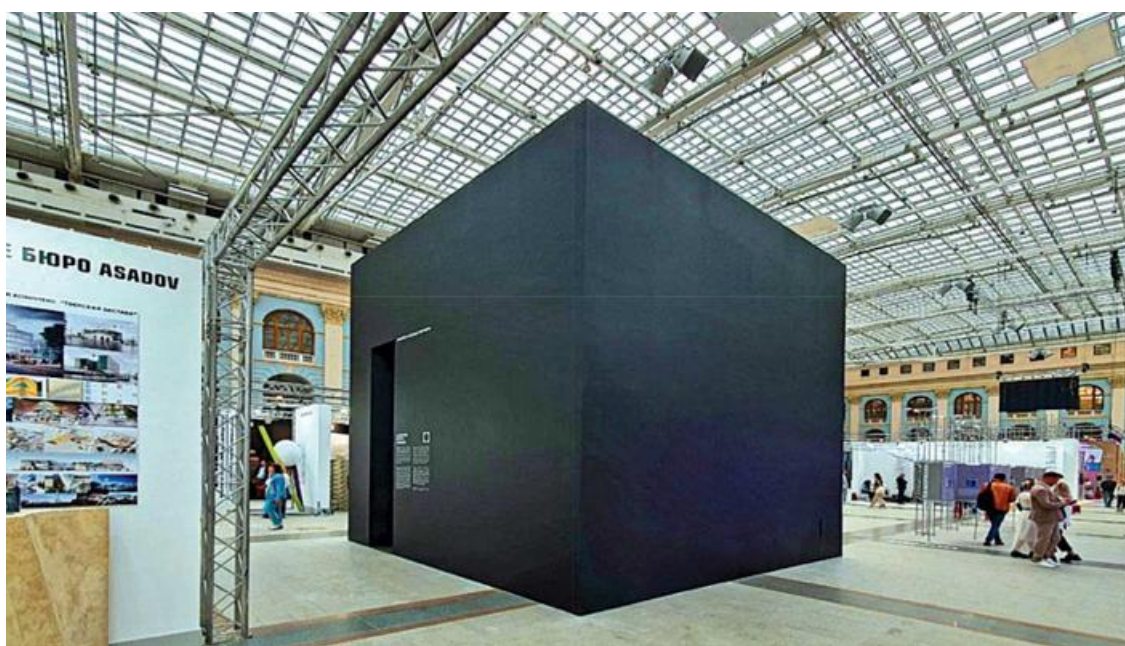


Figure 4: The stand of the bureau «Tsimailo Lyashenko & Partners» at «ArchMoscow 2023».

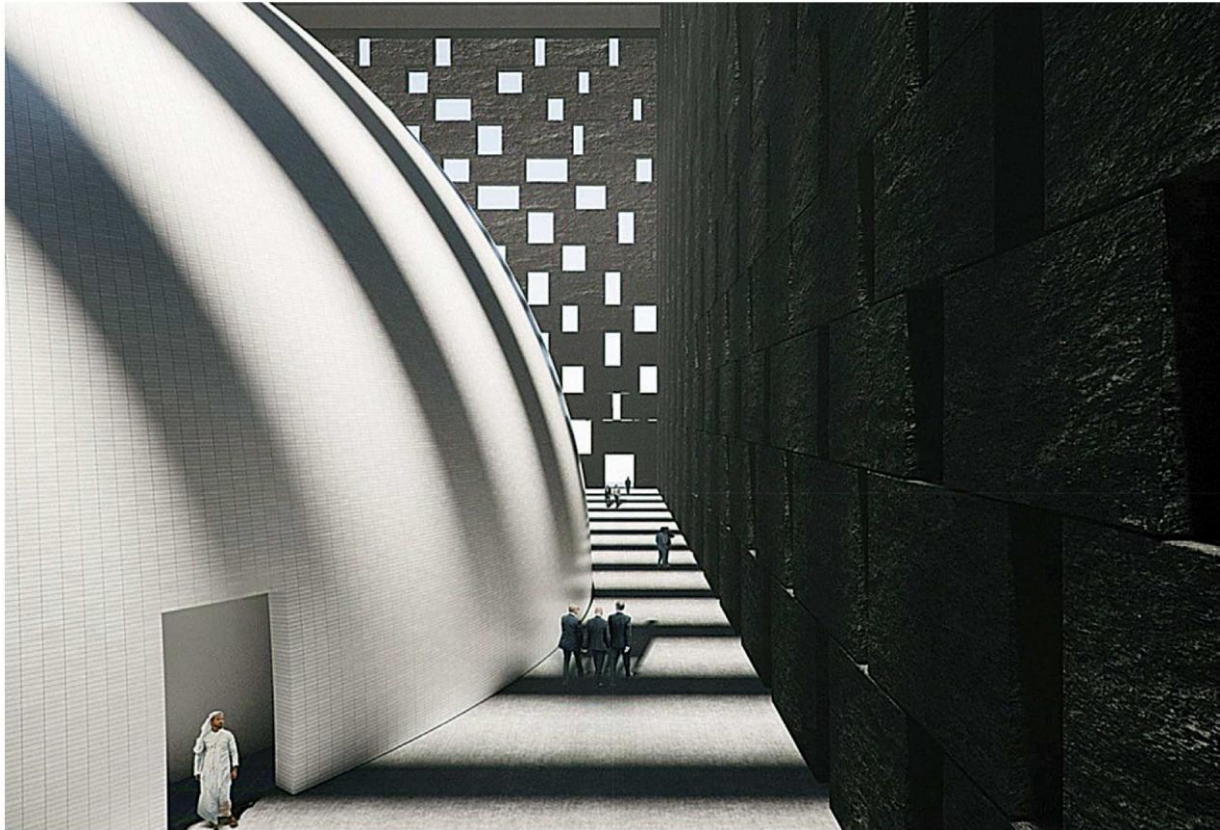


Figure 5: The project of bypassing the prayer hall of the Kazan Mosque



Figure 6: Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca, Morocco. 1986-1993.