

Sacred Vs. Modern Design A Case from Iraq

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Abstract:

This project is being built on the site of a thousand-year-old mosque, one of five sacred places in Iraq. People visit the place to pray, not simply because it is an old mosque, but rather because they think that the last descendant of the Prophet Mohammed will eventually be resurrected with Jesus Christ and will pray there. In 2006, an architect was hired to design the building. The premises were: 1) the design should promote the concept of sacredness, 2) this project should show belonging to the society, and 3) it should last for centuries. The results were controversial, however, by the time it was revealed to the public, the foundations had already been casted, in the hopes that people would eventually accept it. On the contrary, visitors and pilgrims became upset and began to protest the design. The construction process was thus halted in 2008, and we were hired to utilize the same foundations for a new design, one that fitted with the pilgrims' notions of "sacredness". We began the project by surveying people's ideas about what mosques on "holy" sites might look like, determining what a "sacred" place meant to them, and why some places are "sacred." We discovered that most people think that "sacred" places should seem old. They also singled out some "sacred" examples for us. All these examples have one characteristic: they all hide "a certain kind of mystery". We studied those examples and then developed our proposal, it was approved in 2011 and will be opened for public in 2018.

Keywords: Islamic architecture, sacred, and Modern.

Background

Islam is divided into two major sects: *Shia and Sunni*. One major subsect of the *Shia* doctrine celebrates twelve descendants of the Prophet Muhammed and so is called *Twelvers*. Most of the *Shia Twelvers* live in Iraq and Iran. *Twelvers* build, gild, and glorify the tombs of those "holy" descendants. The twelfth and last of these imams, Al Mahdi (the Guided one) miraculously 'disappeared' in Iraq, about 1000 years ago. Shia believe that he is still alive, but cannot be seen physically, God hid him in order to preserve his life. He is called the "absent" or the "hidden" Imam, and so has no tomb. He is expected to return someday to lead the community and achieve divine justice. Shia believe that with his second coming there will be a reign of justice until the return of Jesus, at which time the world will end. Shia think that he will be resurrected from Al- Sahla Mosqu, so they visit it frequently. As such the mosque became a pilgrims attraction.

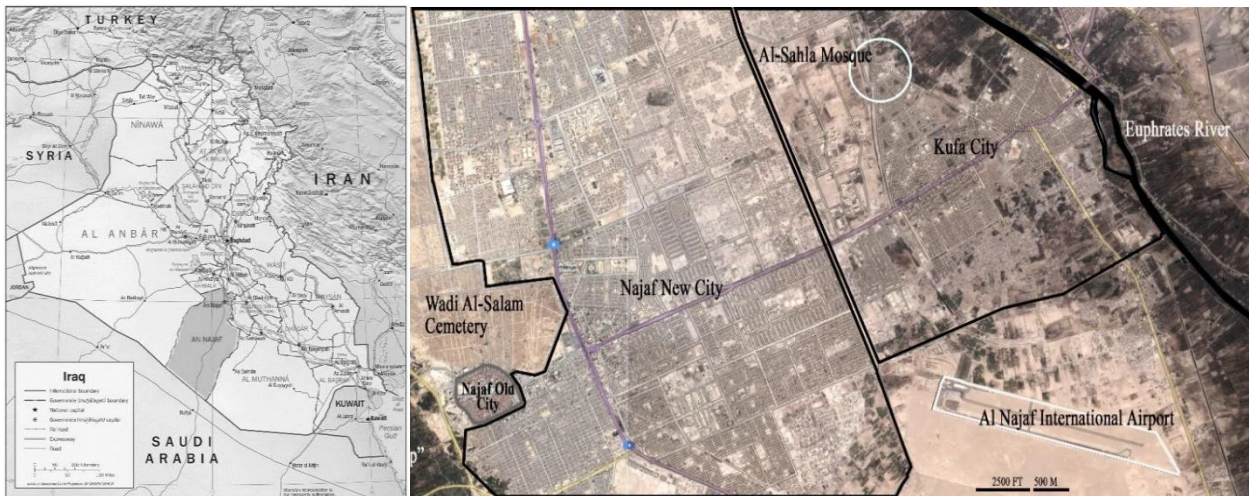


Figure 1 Left: Iraq Physiography map, 2008. Modified by the author. Source: Map resources, CIA.GOV, library. Right: Shows the Al-Sahla Mosque location. Source: 2017 DigitalGlobe. Bing.com/map. Improved by the author. 2017.

Rediscovering the Old:

We began the design by surveying people's ideas and thoughts about what a mosque on a holy site should look like, ascertaining what a "sacred" place meant to them, and why some places are or are not "sacred." We discovered that most people think that "sacred" places should promote an old architectural test and highlight the idea that "there is one just and almighty God for all people." Besides that, they singled out some "sacred" examples for us. It turned out that all these examples have one feature: a certain kind of mystery. Most of the offered examples were shrines for the Prophet Mohammed's descendants; Iraq has four of these shrines. One of the surprising realizations that came out of that survey was that people who revere such places do not distinguish between the architectures of those shrines and the Prophet Mohammed's decedents themselves, who were buried underneath. We do not know why this is the case, but keep in mind that Islam does not permit the picturing or sculpturing of "sacred" people. As such, people have no idea what the Prophet Mohammed or his descendants looked like, and so perhaps the buildings are the closest thing to them. To concenter all the above in a new design is challenging, because, Iraqi universities were based on a Western model that embraces creativity and novelty in architecture. For example, in the Department of Architecture at the University of Technology in Baghdad, we had always been taught to innovate and look for uniqueness; while copying and mimicking were undesirable.

So there were two choices, either copy the other "sacred" places and avoid criticism, or introduce a new design that blends the notion of sacredness with novelty and be ready for criticism. Yet, in any way, the design should resonate some of the old architectural designs of the Iraqi "sacred" places, and that because of the blurred conceptualization for the architecture and the "holy names" of people that associated with it.

Whilst we had seen and studied old Islamic architecture previously, we had never worked with it, and thus we had to develop our knowledge in this field. We studied a fundamental element in the old Islamic architecture, which was a bat-like vault; it was predominantly used in those

places.

The problem was that there were no professionals that know how to build this kind of architecture any more, except in Iran. So we went to the field, measuring and sketching old architectural shrines to find out how this part works. By using three dimensional modeling software, we have succeeded to develop an architectural prototype; however, there was still one difference from the old architecture. In the old genuine Islamic architecture and traditional methods of construction, structuring a building depended on only compression force analysis because they simply had no steel to reinforce the structure. As such, what are now called “architectural Islamic elements,” such as the four-center arches, a bat-like vaults, or domes were actually structural required elements, as well as part of the architectural design. The problem with our prototype that we have no good experts to build this bat-like vault as a structural architectural element, so it was mounted on a reinforced concrete structure.

Information about the project:

Project Name: Al-Sahla Mosque-

Iraq Footprint area is 2,056 m²

Estimated cost is USD \$8,224,000.

Work status: under construction since 2011 and will open in 2018. Architects: Shubber Falah & Wael Salman.

Visualizing works: Falah M. Falah.

Structural design: Haider Al-

Damerchi.

Clinet: Al-Sahla's Administration: Mohamed Al Hakim; Mudher Al Medeny: Ahmed Hatab.

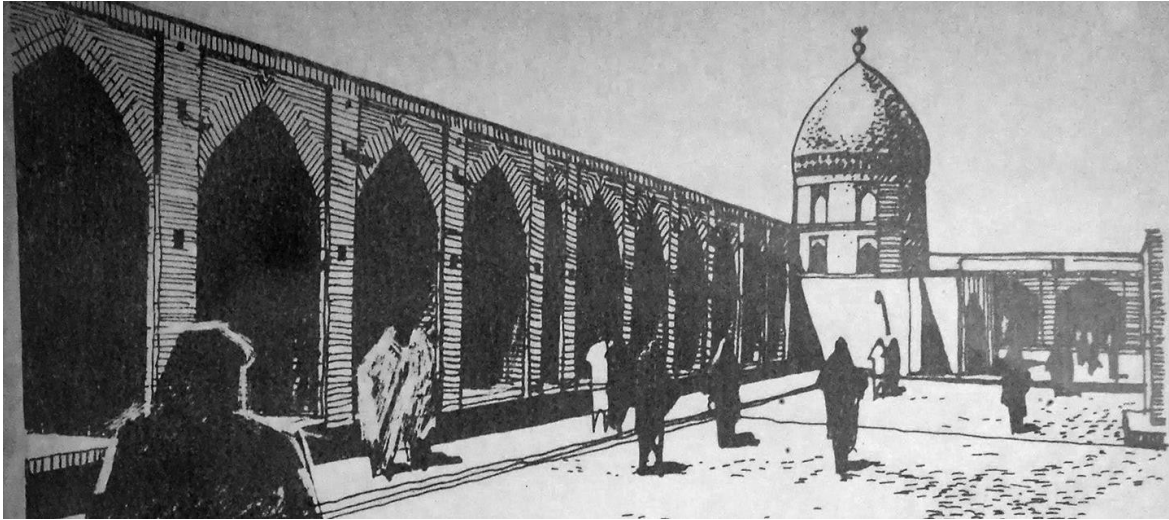
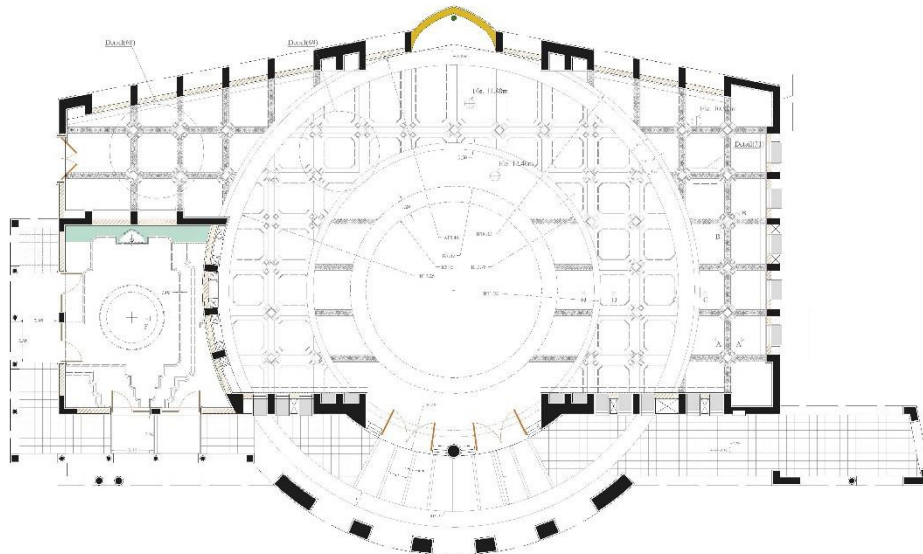


Figure 2: A sketch shows the old mosque of Al-Sahal before renovating it. Source: Mohamed Makiya: Photographic Archive, Courtesy of the Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT.



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Figure 3: The first design for the mosque which ultimately was rejected. 1: Three dimensional drawing and 2: A ceiling plan. Design by Jiwad Ramadhan& Majid Mayali; drawn by Alaa Assdi& Ammar Kaabi. 2009.

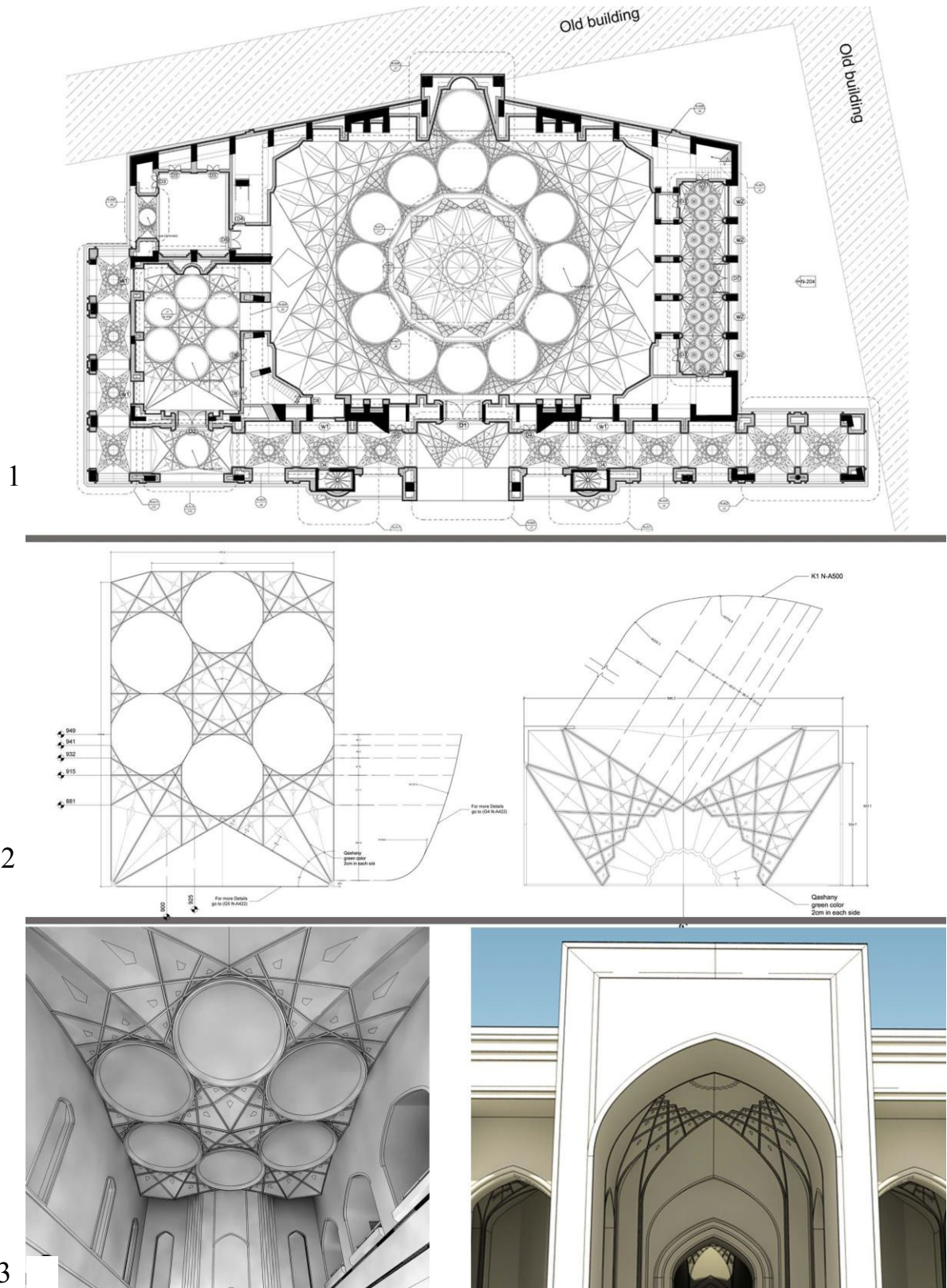


Figure 4: The proposed design, 2010. Section 1: is a ceiling plan. Section 2: a two dimensional study for selective details. Section 3: a three dimensional study the same details above. Designed and drawn by Shubber Falah, Wael Salman, and Falah M. Falah. 2009-2013.

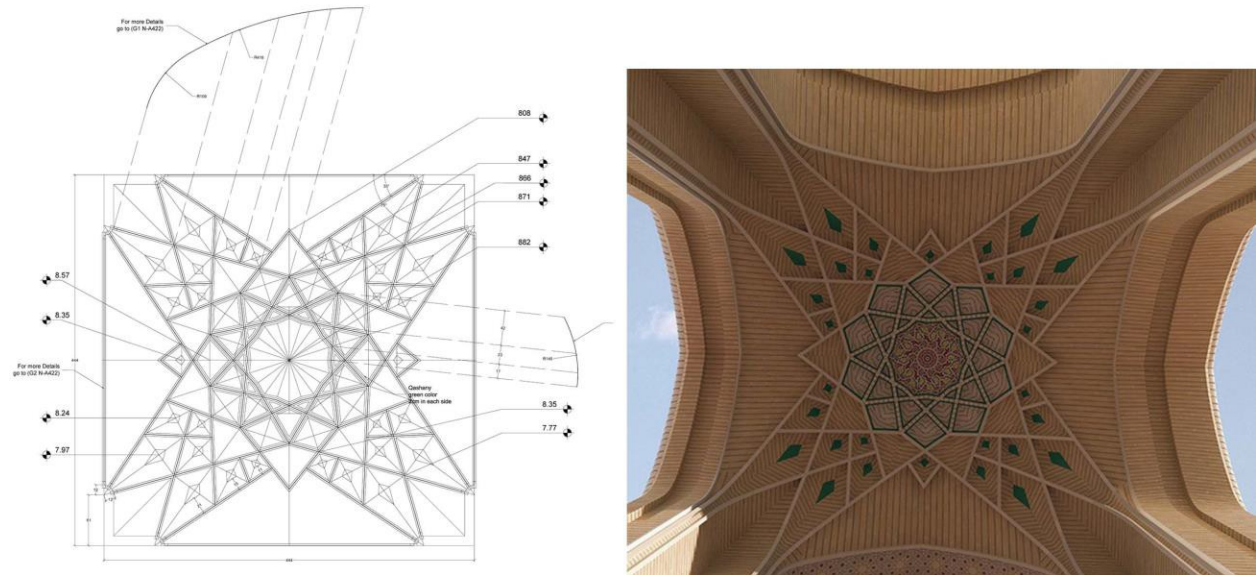


Figure 5: A three dimensional study for the bat-like vault. Designed and drawn by Shubber Falah, Wael Salman, and Falah M. Falah. 2009-2013.



Figure 6: three dimensional drawing shows the final proposed design. Designed and drawn by Shubber Falah, Wael Salman, and Falah M. Falah. 2009-2013

Author Biography

Shubber Falah

Shubber Falah is an architect, holding a BSc and MSc degrees of architecture from the University of Technology in Bagdad, since 2001 and 2004, respectively. He joined the University of Kufa in 2006 to be a faculty member at the Collage of Urban Planning. He launched his private design office, “Design Home” in 2009. Ever since, he designed and supervised on several projects, such as hotels, parks, mosques, and offices buildings. In Nov 2012, he left the country heading to the United States to join the College of Design, School of Architecture in DAAP, to pursue his PhD in architecture. In 2016, Shubber Falah became a PhD candidate and ever since he has participated in two conferences: 1) “Presencing Sustainability:

The High Line Park in New York City” In *Spaces and Flows: Seventh International Conference on Urban and Extra Urban Studies* and the Spaces and Flows knowledge community, University of Pennsylvanian, Philadelphia, from 2016/11/10 to 2016/11/11, and 2) “The Vernacular Architecture of Warfare And Welfare” in the *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*’ (IJAS) International Conference for Social Sciences and Humanities, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts from 22 to 26 May 2017.