

Establishing the Sacred Balance

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Sami Angawi has a PhD in Islamic Architecture from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He Founded the Hajj Research Centre in 1975 and was its director for 14 years. Since 1988, he has been the Founder and General Director of the Amar Centre for Architectural Heritage. In 2011, he founded Al-Makkiyah Al-Madaniyah Intercultural Institute. He designed his

Al Makkiyah mansion in Jeddah, which brings together traditional Makkan architecture with Islamic architectural traditions worldwide. It has become a popular attraction for journalists and high-level dignitaries visiting Saudi Arabia.

We verily sent Our messengers with clear proofs, and revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance (al-Mizan) so that mankind may observe right measure Quran 57:25

From the atom to the galaxy, everything in the universe has a centre. Likewise, we as the Ummah have a centre, the Holy Sanctuary of Makkah, with the Kaaba – the unmoveable, unshakeable constant – as its nucleus. Hajjiology – a discipline I founded at the Hajj Research Centre – is the holistic approach that balances the totality and the details of every aspect of the journey from all over the world to the Two Holy Sanctuaries of Makkah and Madinah, by using all means of science and knowledge. It is based on the Islamic concept of *al-Mizan* (the Balance) in which modernity and tradition, privacy and openness, stability and dynamism are equally represented, to generate harmony.

The architecture of Makkah must represent a balance of the diversity of global Islamic culture and local Arabian styles. It must be represented in substance, not just style. For example it must respect the natural environment, respect the crowd, and most importantly be respectful of the Kaaba.

People often speak of Makkah as if it were a city, even though the word ‘city’ has very specific, post-industrial connotations in the English language. One might say that ‘town’ is acceptable to describe Madinah. But Makkah is no city; it was always supposed to be a barren valley, a sanctuary and refuge, where the sole purpose was to face the Kaaba and raise one’s hands in prayer.

There are plans to make Makkah into a ‘smart city’. I think we should instead have it as a ‘smart sanctuary’, one where not only the lights switch on and off by themselves, but where we have intelligent town planning and a respect for the natural environment. And if we’re serious about having a smart sanctuary, we really must use the latest technologies to ensure this. We have to develop simulation models based on algorithms that test everything digitally before we build. For example, if we want to build a mosque or a tower of particular proportions, we can analyse the effect that will have on the natural environment, on electricity usage, on the crowd, on other buildings, and so on.

Architecturally, what really makes the Kaaba stand out is its simplicity. So, one must respect the majesty and scale of the Kaaba

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when building around it. Of course, if you say nothing is to be taller than the Kaaba, then everything will only be three floors! This is clearly not realistic, nor necessary. But in perspective, a concept well known in architecture, the scale of buildings ought to be proportionate to the Kaaba depending on their distance from it. So as a born and bred Makkan and an architect, I have mixed feelings about skyscrapers enveloping the Kaaba.

Another very important architectural consideration is to respect the people, the pilgrims. The architecture of a place should foster social interactions so as to avoid clusters based on race, nationality, socioeconomic class or gender. There was indeed once a time when it to be this way. We used to have common places, where people would come together, talk, socialise and pray regardless of who they were.

A review – with environmentalists, architects, town planners, perhaps some theologians – would be beneficial for the future of Makkah. We have many specialists in Saudi Arabia and we can also invite experts from across the Islamic world and beyond. We could also bring together the extensive studies we have already done at the Hajj Research Centre. This review should be more than a mere conference, but a thorough evaluation of the development of Makkah. There is no other model around the world that Makkah can replicate. And it doesn't need to. Islamic civilisation can serve as the inspiration, which together with the latest technologies can produce

a new model, unique to Makkah.

Meanwhile, preservation of heritage is important. As most of the historical sites of Makkah no longer remain, we at the Al Makkiyah Al Madiniyah Institute are trying to use historical and modern maps to scientifically locate them. We have an architectural library containing over 20,000 images of traditional architectural elements and buildings stored in our systems using the laser disc technology, as well as a library of architectural drawings of many elements with varying designs and styles. We are now building a fully interactive digital encyclopaedia that creates awareness and helps in creating visualisation of the history of the prophets starting from Adam and passing through the times of Abraham, Isaac, Ismail, Jesus and Muhammad (PBUT)*, with sites, buildings, and the sanctuaries of Makkah and Madinah in a virtual environment all based on authentic data, plans, and photo/video footage blended with current Google maps.

As we strive to preserve the history of Makkah, we must also seek to build a sustainable future for the Holy Sanctuary. The Makkan authorities are undoubtedly doing what they can to accommodate an increasing number of pilgrims. The intention is of course to provide the best possible facilities and the safest, smoothest environment. I am confident that moving forward we can do so using scientific solutions that are in line with *al-Mizan*. F

An early 20th century photograph of the centre of Makkah before the expansions of recent years



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* Peace be upon them