Towards a contemporary Islamic Architecture
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'Globalization': 'Large Middle East': 'The Global Village'. Each of these widely-applied terms presents a considerable challenge to the Islamic world. However, one of the most important shields that can protect our heritage from melting away lies within Islamic culture itself. We already have a significant heritage; the problem is we are not making adequate efforts to develop this tradition to take its place across the contemporary globe. Islamic architecture, in particular, is one of the most important features in the Islamic culture as it is the discipline that manifests that heritage in tangible form. It should be, therefore, one of our main concerns as professionals working in the field to bring the sparkle of this unique style back to the contemporary scene.

This paper will not, however, argue for an approach based entirely on models from the past. Instead, it addresses the potential that contemporary mural paintings might add to Islamic traditions; by using both digital technology and contemporary art styles to perform a contemporary Islamic architecture. For although there is little evidence to suggest that murals have been a significant feature in the Islamic architecture in the past this paper concludes that production of contemporary murals will be important for establishing a flourishing contemporary Islamic architecture.

Key words:
Contemporary Islamic architecture, mural painting, installation art, site-specific art, conceptual art, projection art.

TOPIC: Islamic Art and Architecture in out contemporary life.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever heard about an Islamic Installation piece of work? Or a contemporary Islamic mural? Have you ever heard about an Islamic Sculpture? These terms are commonly used with other contemporary art styles but not with the Islamic art, in spite of the potentials that allow it to be one of the most significant art styles on the map.

As a practitioner and a teacher in the field of art and design, mural painting is my main concern, and I am trying to make efforts in my practical- led research to develop and promote this kind of art as one of the most popular arts in the Arabic regions especially in Egypt.

However, there is little evidence to suggest that murals have been a significant feature in the Islamic architecture in the past, the well-known samples of Islamic murals are the ones that have been attributed to the Umayyad dynasty, the best of it is the elaborate mosaics on the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem(691-692 ac), the Great Mosque in Damascus (607-715ac) *Khrbet El.Mafjar Palace* in Palestine (724-743 AC)[1]. These murals were all made of mosaic tiles and were influenced by some previous civilizations like Byzantine and Hellenic culture, so they were not purely Islamic murals or have the significant Islamic approaches, some art historians even believe that these murals were probably made by Roman craftsmen.

We as professionals all know there are specific features that enhanced the Islamic art to be one of the well - known styles as an abstract art like lines, shapes, geometrical system, colours, the relation between positive and negative space etc., however, I will not discuss these visual features any more in this paper, instead, I will discuss more conceptual issues that enhanced Islamic art and then address the possibilities of using these potentials in a contemporary approach with some samples.

This paper will not, therefore, argue for an approach based entirely on models from the past. Instead, it addresses the potential that contemporary mural paintings and other contemporary art styles (Installation art, Site-specific art and Projection art) might add to Islamic art/architecture; to be produced in contemporary approaches.

I also will try to answer some other questions in this paper, which are: Can we deal with the Islamic art away from its religious context? How this can be done? The idea of using the Islamic art (patterns, motifs) with respect to the concept of how these patterns and motifs were built (structured) in terms of positive and negative interaction.

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[1] Islamic painting, by Dr.A.M.Farghaly, 1991

THE SIGINFICANT POTENTIALS IN ISLAMIC ART:

As previously said, I will not discuss here the traditional potentials of Islamic art (Lines, shapes, colours, etc.) as they have been discussed in many books and references, with the acknowledgment of the importance of these elements as the visual characteristic features of the Islamic art, I would rather discuss other conceptual features that enhanced this art style and gave it its uniqueness and originality. These potentials may be described in the following points:

- Islamic design may seem restricted to two dimensions but that the very character of Islamic design implies three-dimensional possibilities. Through the use of reflecting and shining materials and glazes, the repetition of designs, the contrasting of textures and the manipulation of planes, Islamic decoration becomes complex, sumptuous and intricate[2]. (Figure No.1).

- Space is defined by surface and since surface is articulated by decoration, there is an intimate connection in Islamic architecture between space and decoration. It is the variety and richness of the decoration, with its endless permutations, that characterizes the buildings rather than their structural elements, which are often disguised[3]. (Figure No.2).

- Islamic artists developed geometric patterns to a degree of complexity and sophistication previously unknown. Nowadays this aspect generates a very high potentiality of reforming Islamic patterns digitally (using digital technology) to produce developed Islamic patterns that retain the same concept of traditional patterns but in a new and modern view. (Figure No.3&4)

- Both variety and unity in the patterns that have been used in Islamic art designs enabled Islamic architect/ artist to use several materials sometimes in the same wall, panel or any other applied surface, this particular feature makes many Islamic architecture or architectural detail, seems to be an installation piece of art (in terms of our contemporary definitions).

- Through its brilliant use of colour and its superb balance between design and form, Islamic art creates an immediate visual impact. Its strong aesthetic appeal transcends distances in time and space[4], this particular relation between time and space- in general, has attracted many contemporary researchers and artists to search for the ultimate harmony that might be established between time and space.

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[2] Spiritual City, an Islamic Oasis By B.E. Adam & S.B. Malik, site users, Birmingham. May 04

[3] Sources: Jones, D: Architecture of the Islamic World; Islamic Arts and Architecture Organization
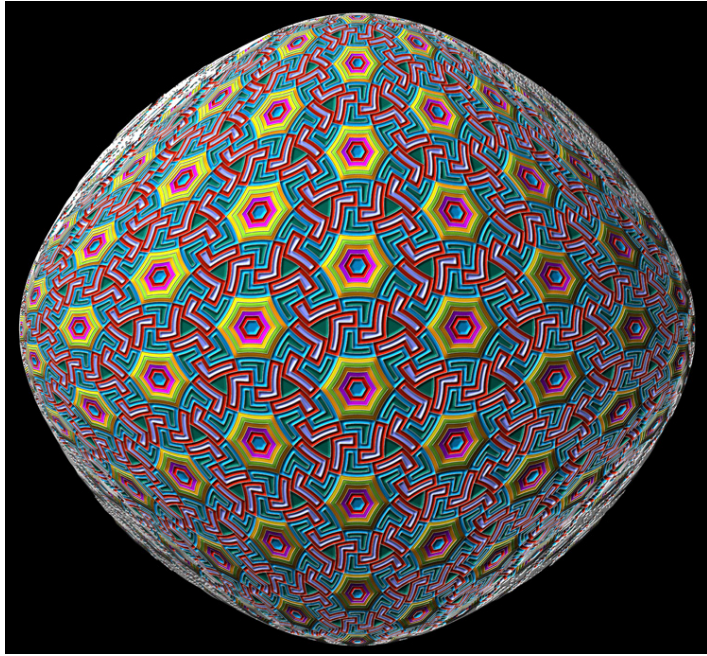
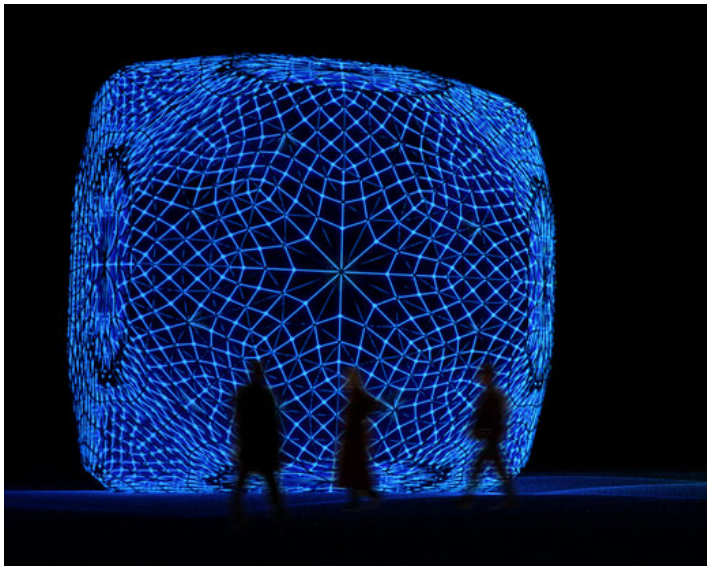[4] Source: http://www.lacma.org/islamic_art/intro.htm

Figure No.1
Islamic prayer alcoves (mihrabs), The Pergamon museum, Germany

Figure No.2
Decorated wall at one of the mosques in Afghanistan.

Figure No.3
Ball-O-fun. By Suranyami, A digital treatment for traditional Islamic pattern.

Figure No.4
Cube 4 "Architecture by Algorithm", which in large part is inspired by Islamic art,
(Presentation at VCU Qatar) By Mario Gagliard, November 30th- 2006.

Applications and Given Samples

In this part of my paper I will give some samples of contemporary Islamic art/architecture or works that have been inspired by Islamic art, these samples includes architecture, digital art, some attempts I made in my PhD research using Islamic patterns.

Architectural Examples

 Zaha Haded is one of the most significant contemporary architects; her style implies a great talent that enabled her to win many international prizes in regards of her unique architectural style. The following pictures represent one of her famous designs that she made for the Department of Islamic Art to be housed in the Visconti courtyard of the Louvre.

The design was totally inspired from the traditional Islamic art, but what is interesting here is the way Zaha manipulated the original pattern and gave it this modern style, further more and as shown in the pictures from different angles, (figures 5,6,7,8,) The building does not need any additional features or decorative enhancements, it is completely perfect and gives the direct visual impact the same way Islamic art usually does, and this is what I meant in the introduction by mentioning The idea of using the Islamic art (patterns, motives) with respect to the concept of how these patterns and motives were built (structured) in terms of positive and negative interaction.

There are two points should be mentioned here, the first one is the high technology that have been used to perform this quality of virtual reality, which made this design looks like a real project, the second one is the cultural background of the architect, does it matter to mention that the architect has an Arabic and Moslem background, these two points will be discussed in more details later in this paper.

Speaking about Islamic art in the west, I should say while we as professionals are almost neglecting this valuable discipline in our institutes and Universities, many western countries are having a number academies and institutes that have adopted Islamic art and architecture to be taught in an academic level, especially in the United Kingdom, France and the United states, There is no doubt that many of us nowadays think about Islamic art as a monumental art style that should be kept inside art galleries and museums, but if we really aim to promote Islamic art and really want to develop it in a contemporary approaches, this negative view should be changed.
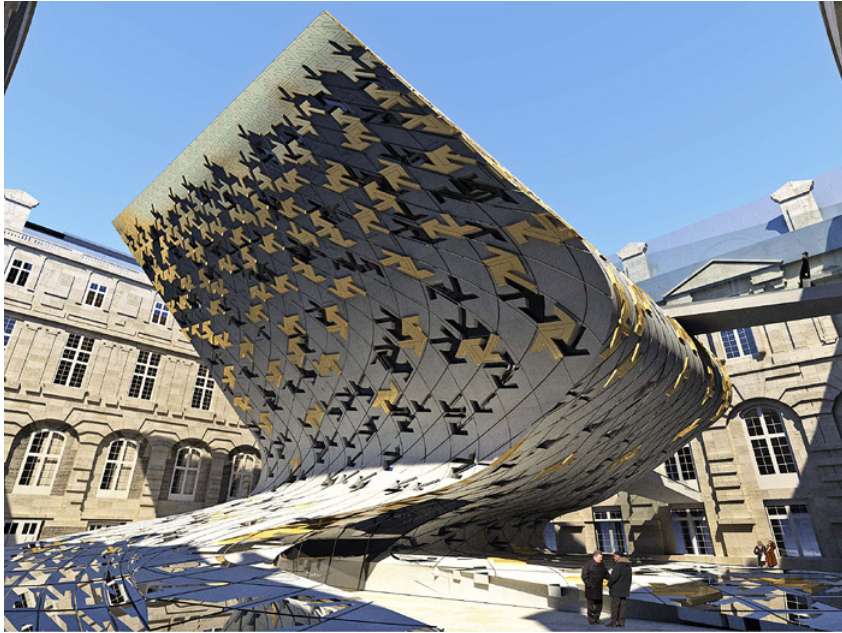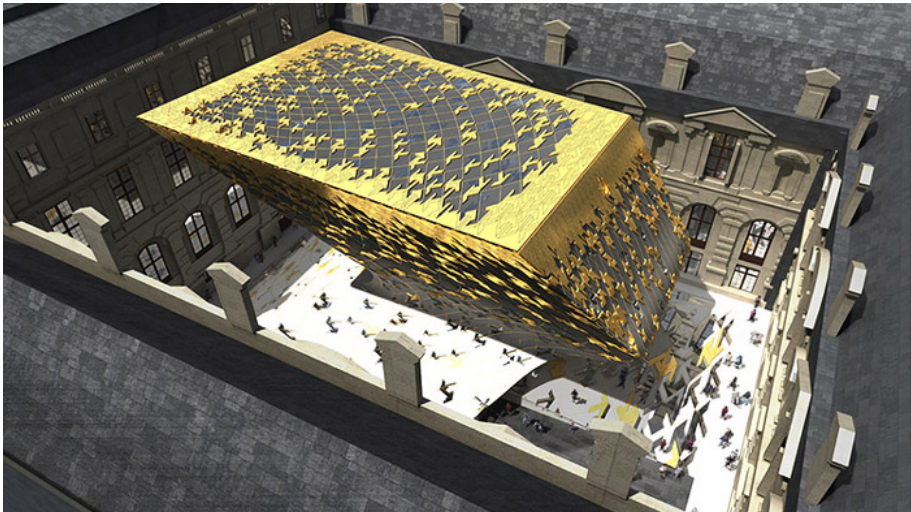
Figure No. 5
Design for Department of Islamic Art, Visconti courtyard, The Louvre.
Zaha Haded
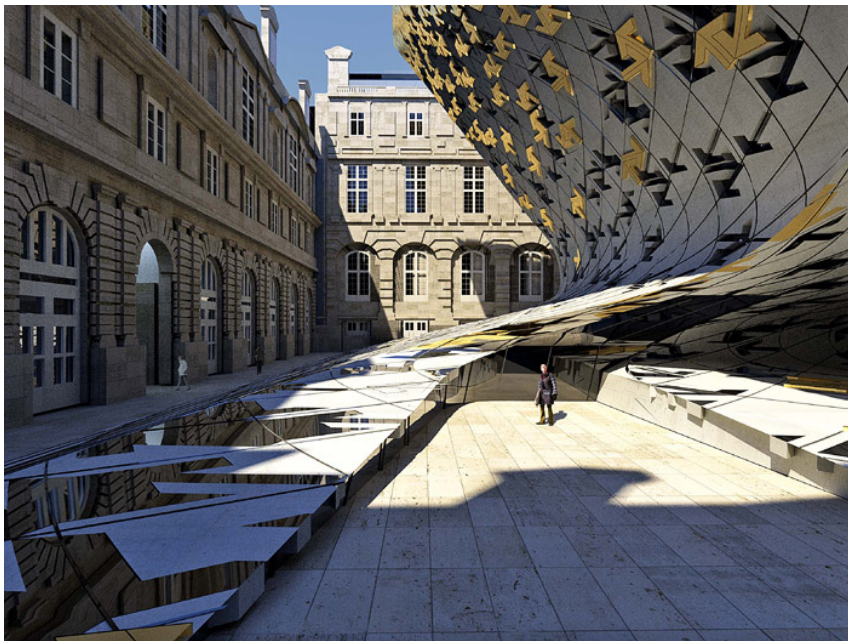
Figure No. 6
Design for Department of Islamic Art, Visconti courtyard, The Louvre.
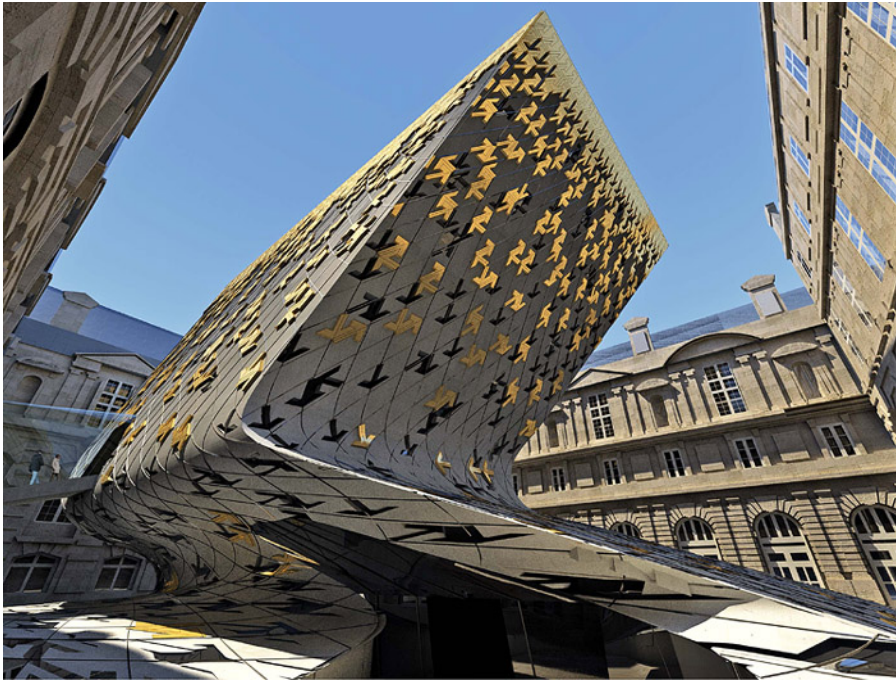
Figure No. 7
Design for Department of Islamic Art, Visconti courtyard of the Louvre.

Figure No.8
Design for Department of Islamic Art, Visconti courtyard of the Louvre.

The next architectural example is the Kuala Lumpur's most famous landmark, the 1,483-foot (452-meter) Petronas Twin Towers (figure 9). The 88-floor buildings that were constructed in 1998 by American architect Cesar Pelli. For six years they were the world's tallest buildings (Taipei 101 now holds the title). They were designed in keeping with Islamic patterns. That was achieved by using geometric art – such as squares, hexagons; octogons. The Arabesque octagons at the top of each tower are part of that form. The plan of this building represents the Famous Islamic star.

The deferens between this example and the previous one is the instant visual impact or may I say the first impression, it is very clear from the first sight that the first one is a new vision of a contemporary Islamic art, or at least it is something that was clearly inspired from traditional Islamic art, but in the second design (Petronas Twin Towers) the viewer needs to be an expert or to stand for a few minutes to realise the fact that this building was also inspired from Islamic patterns. I am not trying to judge any of the designs here, I am just pointing to a clear visual fact, and this fact does not reduce the architectural value of the Petronas Towers. But in terms of searching for a contemporary Islamic art, this point should be mentioned and discussed, as I believe it is a very critical point in this paper.

The question again is: does that have something to do with the cultural background of both architects? I will try to answer this question later on.

Figure No.9
Petrons twinTower, Malaysia 1998.

Contemporary Islamic Art and Digital Art:

As I said before, one of the most promising features of traditional Islamic art is the very fact of using geometrical patterns that were based on mathematical calculations, this particular feature in our daily digital life promotes the Islamic art to be represented in a post modern style with the simplicity that might be achieved by using digital technology.

The following pictures represent some contemporary attempts with digital art to reproduce contemporary Islamic art.

The first one is a spherical shape that was completely covered with the Islamic star using digital approaches (Figures 11,12,13,14).

This unique experimental project was made by Craig S. Kaplan, University of Waterloo, David H. Salesin University of Washington and Microsoft Corporation[5].

They described the procedures of making this Islamic object by saying

" We present Najm, a set of tools built on the axioms of absolute geometry for exploring the design space of Islamic star patterns. Our approach makes use of a novel family of tilings, called inflation tilings, which are particularly well suited as guides for creating star patterns. We describe a method for creating a parameterized set of motifs that can be used to fill the many regular polygons that comprise these tilings, as well as an algorithm to infer geometry for any irregular polygons that remain. Erasing the underlying tiling and joining together the inferred motifs produces the star patterns"[6].

They add" By choice, Najm is build upon the subset of geometry that makes no assumption about the behaviour of parallel lines. As a consequence, star patterns created by Najm can be designed equally well to fit the Euclidean plane, the hyper bolic plane, or the surface of a sphere"[7].
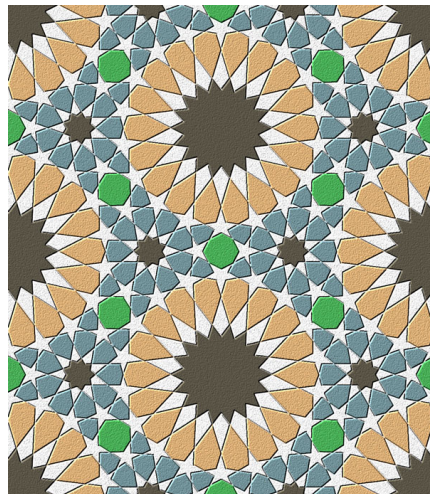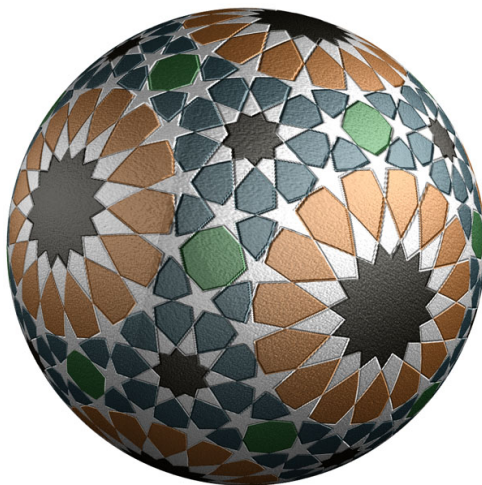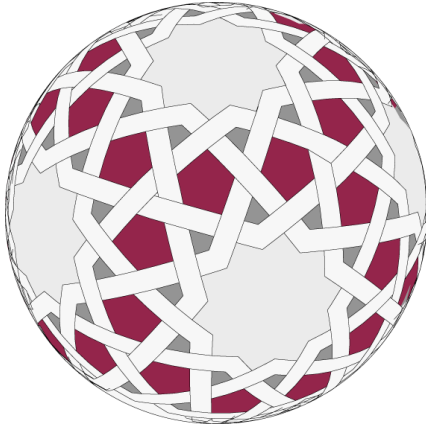
[5] Source: Articles in press TOG 23(2) April 2004
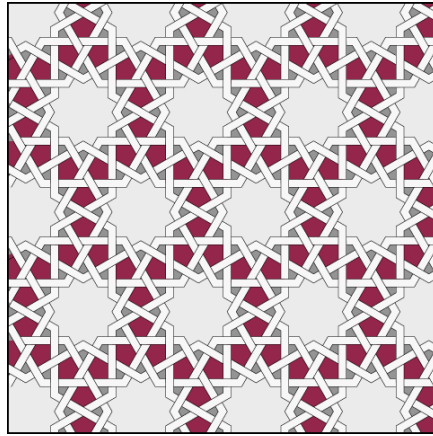
[6] Same previous source.

[7] Same previous source.

Figure No.11   *Figure No.12*

Figure No.13   *Figure No.14*

Digital implementation for the traditional Islamic star by Craig S. Kaplan, University of Waterloo, David H. Salesin University of Washington and Microsoft Corporation.

Another example of using digital art in producing contemporary Islamic art is the following one, which represent the Basmallah (A very common sentence in the Islamic traditions that should be said in many occasions specially before reciting the Qora'an). (Figure15).

The unknown artist who made this piece has used digital treatment in producing such piece of work that based on one of the most significant features of Islamic art, which is Arabic calligraphy. Many art historians believes that Arabic Calligraphy is the most important and pervasive element in Islamic art, as it has always been considered the noblest form of art because of its association with the Qur'an. There is no doubt that using digital art with Arabic calligraphy would result in producing thousands and thousands of visual ideas that would never been obtained without using this digital technology.

There are numerous examples of digital art samples that have adopted Islamic patterns or Arabic calligraphy; many of them were produced in a very high quality, but due to the lack of time and space in this paper, I would rather show these samples on my presentation at the conference.

Figure No.15
Bismillah – Fire
Digital Art
a modern twist on Islamic Art principles such as repetition

My Attempts in Contemporary Mural Painting:

In this section I would like to present a couple of my attempts to produce contemporary murals, (in both ways interior and exterior experimental designs). The main idea in my research is how to produce contemporary mural designs based on classic structural systems that have been used in the Renaissance period, my way of doing that is to use modern and post- modern approaches like installation art, conceptual art and projection art. In the following hypothetical samples I have used Islamic patterns as an essential part of the design with regards to the concept, scale, proportions and the basic traditions of the Islamic patterns, without any attempt to manipulate with the original pattern or distort it to fit the space or the media I am using to implement my designs.

The first one: figure No.16

A hypothetical mural design that was made to be placed on the main wall at the entrance of the Learning Resource centre - University of Bedfordshire, UK.

Figure No. 16
Learning Resource Centre - University of Bedfordshire, UK.
Installation art made by the author. 2007

This piece of work was inspired by, and has almost the same pictorial composition of one of the analyzed paintings I did upon my return from the field research I conducted in Italy. The original painting is located in *Chisa di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei frari*, in Venice, and it is by an artist called Bonifacio de Pitati. The original painting is an easel painting but the composition was deliberately made to fit in an extended rectangular space. This is one of the most important shapes that I am working on, as it is considered to be one of the most difficult spaces that a muralist may deal with. I found many murals in Italy that have adapted this specific type of space and I have analyzed them all, but I have chosen this particular one for the following reasons:

Visually

1. I could represent the same pictorial composition in these organic shapes with the ability to extend them or extract them to fit the space and retain the same composition.
2. These organic shapes have added some life to the space (in the way organic shapes always do) and I have not covered the whole wall with these shapes. Instead, I have left parts of the background wall and made some apertures on the foreground to add some depth. This also enables the foreground and the background to interact with each other in reciprocation.
3. I have used base colours (Red, Blue, Green and Yellow) to emphasise the simplicity of the approach (being more radical). Furthermore, as this wall is considered to be the biggest plane walls on the scene, and the space is usually busy (especially in the morning), using these colours will ensure that the mural dominates the space.
4. I expect that when the space is busy, or even if it is not, when two or three people stand beside the wall for a quick chat they will be part of the mural. This effect will be especially created by those who are coming out from the LRC barriers, and when the lights are perfectly set.
5. Using Islamic patterns also fragmentizes the large shapes and gives some detailed objects, providing another rhythmic order.

Conceptually:

1. The basic colours for me indicate the main cultures and how they are acting together; the red represents the Eastern culture, the blue represents the western culture, the Yellow represents the Far East and the green represents the new culture that should be overwhelming as a result of mixing these cultures. The green colour is located at the back of the design to represent the dream that is trying to emerge[8].
2. The Red colour is apparently overwhelming and is surrounded by the Blue colour as a reflection of land represented on a map of the world. The extensive use of the blue colour indicates that the Western culture has the most distribution over the globe, while the red colour of the Eastern culture is stable where it is - with some features from the past glory represented by the Islamic fragments.
3. Representing the Islamic patterns in yellow colour refers to the scientific evolution that took place in the Far East at the end of the last century.

In addition I have used Islamic patterns in this design for the following reasons:

1- To emphasise my identity by merging my cultural background with the contemporary studies I have been conducting for my PhD research.
2- The use of such patterns is very common in western countries especially in England, as one of the most popular destinations for Arab and Muslim ethnicities.
3- As a decorative art style, Islamic art is generally using the concept of positive and negative space in most of its innovative patterns, whether it is geometric or vegetal patterns (Arabesque). I am using the same concept (Positive and negative

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[8] Like most of the Universities in UK, Bedfordshire University is adopting a huge variety of ethnic backgrounds form all over the world.

spaces) as the main theme of the mural designs I made to emphasise the integration between the mural and the architectural surroundings. The obvious different between the two approaches is that covering surfaces with patterns composed of geometric or vegetal elements in Islamic art as one of its significant characteristic, is visually create the impression of unending repetition (the infinity).

  In my case I am using the concept of positive and negative space as one of the most bounding elements I rely on to establish a real integration between a mural and the architectural space, by making negative spaces to the wall based on the pre- given architectural elements, the out come (the mural) would normally be part of the space. Furthermore, negative and positive space is one of the will known theories in architecture.

The Second one: figures 17,18
A hypothetical design I made for the National Theatre building in London, UK, using Islamic patterns. From the first scene, it looks very normal and has no innovative aspiration, but when you know it is not only decorative patterns that cover some parts of the building, but also they are not materially there, and can be seen as moving object as well, I think the whole view will be changed.

The main idea here was to use projection art to occupy these particular parts of this purely concrete building (the main staircase and the top of the building) to add an additional rhythm (a moving one) to the one that emerges from the concrete structure it self. One of the best options I had to implement this idea was to utilise Islamic patterns for the unlimited potentials Islamic art has which would give the best visual impact.

These potentials as previously mentioned would simplify the mission of using projection art as a digital method to produce several visual solutions to the space, the very fact that Islamic patterns are digitally flexible, extendable, variable and visually enjoyable, makes it easier to obtain such impact. And if I have enough time and space in this paper I would have given a real example for this hypothetical design.

I have chosen the National Theatre building in London for the following reasons:

1- I like the structure of the building in spite of being just a concrete structure, because it emphasises the strength and stability of the building, and also indicates (in my opinion) the genuine functional aspect of it.

2- The pure concrete structure gave me such a wonderful opportunity to implement my idea of using projection art without adding or deducting any thing from the concrete structure of the building.

3- These kinds of concrete buildings are very common to be seen in many different places, and many of them have no particular architectural style, which make them a very good place to adopt this kind of art work (projection art).

4- Using projection art to decorate this kind of buildings has the potential of being changeable, so you can see the same building in a different façade every while, especially when it is a public building that houses variable occasions. (like the National Theatre).

5- As a designer that would deal with such building, I have a very good chance to chose which part of it will be perfect to apply my digital ideas on, that would enable me to be more concise and dominating at the same time, and this is a very important quality I believe every contemporary artist/ designer should have.

Figure No.17
A hypothetical design made by the author for the National Theatre building in London,
UK 2007
Projection art

Figure No.18
Detailed picture for the same design, from a different angle

Before I end up with the results and recommendations of this paper, I would like to quote what architect Garry Martin said in his essay "Building in the Middle East Today, in search of a Direction"[9]. He said" in the 20th century, the Islamic concepts of unity, harmony and continuity often are forgotten in the rush for industrial development".

Martin lists three directions contemporary Islamic architecture has taken:

1. "One approach is to completely ignore the past and produce Western-oriented architecture that ignores the Islamic spirit and undermines traditional culture".

2. "The opposite approach involves a retreat, at least superficially, to the Islamic architectural past. This can result in hybrid buildings where traditional facades of arches and domes are grafted onto modern high-rises."

3. "A third approach, Martin notes, is to understand the essence of Islamic architecture and to allow modern building technology to be a tool in the expression of this essence. Writes Martin, "Architects working today can take advantage of opportunities that new materials and mass production techniques offer. They have an opportunity to explore and transform the possibilities of the machine age for the enrichment of architecture in the same way that craftsmen explored the nature of geometrical and arabesque patterns..." The forms that would evolve from this approach, adds Martin, would have a regional identity, a stylistic evolution and a relevance to the eternal principles of Islam".

I would apply what Martin said about contemporary Islamic architecture on all other kinds of Islamic art, because that is what really happening nowadays even in our art institutions. The solution is simply like what Martin said about understanding the essence of Islamic art and architecture to allow modern technology to be a tool in the expression of this essence.

That would lead me to answer the vital question that have been asked previously about the importance of being an Arabic or Muslim architect/artist to produce Islamic art style whether it is traditional or contemporary one.

"Islamic art" as its title quite obviously expresses, has a tangible link with the religion of Islam. The geometric shapes, the floral designs, the exquisite calligraphy and the intricate embroidery are all not only totally void of living figures (in line with the teaching of the Quran and sunnah) but also "convey rich messages"[10] about unity between Muslims, the acknowledgment of the singularity of almighty God to be worshiped and so forth.

However, the answer (in my opinion) is no, it is not that important to be an Arabic Muslim Architect/ artist to practice Islamic art, it is preferable to have such background but it is not essential. You should learn, understand and taste the essence and the conceptual issues that enhanced this unique style for more that 14 centuries.

There are some restricted constants and variables in Islamic art that should be respected at any level, this is one of the most conceptual issues that should be

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[9] Source: http://www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthemonth/march02_index.php? l=5

[10] Spiritual city - an Islamic Oasis By B.E. Adam & S.B. Malik, site users, Birmingham. May 04

understood, however, dealing with this particular concept is the ideal way to developing or establishing a contemporary Islamic art.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATION:

Results:
- Using contemporary mural design/painting in contemporary Islamic architecture will have a positive impact that would enhance and improve the quality of Islamic or non- Islamic architecture especially in western countries.

- Activating modern technology and contemporary art approaches like installation art and projection art to be used in Islamic art/architecture, will help in spreading the Islamic culture over the glob in less expenses and good quality at the same time.

- Islamic art/architecture has a huge variety of visual and conceptual potentials that meet with our contemporary life; these potentials deserve to be taught in our institutions and academies more seriously and side by side with the western culture.

Recommendations:
- We have to promote Islamic architects and artists who are basically using the Islamic art in their innovations through publishing their works on an official web sites and regular journals/magazines that should be established for this particular reason.

- Commission some public projects to the well-known architects and artists all over the glob and make an annual international competition for the best Islamic project or piece of art work.

- If these kinds of things are already there, then it should be activated in such conferences and forums.

Finally I would like to add that no sincere artist/architect who appreciate the value of Islamic art would like the idea of using Islamic patterns or motives out of their conceptual context, to produce some façade shapes or forms and then relate them to the Islamic art; I believe that this is an illicit form of quotation, which will have a negative impact on the history and the future of Islamic art.
What I mean by that is, some architects/ artists who are claiming that they are producing contemporary Islamic art, but unfortunately they are defacing the history of the Islamic art, for example how many times have you seen an Islamic star pattern that has been enlarged ten or twenty times (maybe much more|) out of its original size to decorate a building or to indicate that a particular store is dealing with something related to the Islamic culture.
As I said before this kind of treatment to our Islamic heritage is no more than corrupting the Islamic identity. I believe that the Muslim artist when he invented his pattern was absolutely sure that it is going to fit the place it was made for, he did not play this kind of tricks of enlarging or minimizing the pattern to fit, every thing he made was will made to be applied on a certain space, nevertheless, sometimes he was using the same pattern in different ways or forms.

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