Sacred Baha'i Architecture

Sacred Baha'i Architecture

Benjamin Leiker

1999-09

Abstract

Bahá'í architecture successfully incorporates spiritual, artistic, and cultural influences within its eight Houses of Worship around the world. In accordance with principles of the Bahá'í Faith, the edifices attempt to create an atmosphere where people of all beliefs, cultures, and traditions can come to pray, meditate, or simply enjoy the tranquility and artistry. Bahá'í architecture is very different from the sacred architecture of any other era, because its goals are to unify the people of many different races, backgrounds, and religions into one central area where peaceful and harmonious thoughts prevail.

The Houses of Worship were erected in Turkestan, India, Uganda, Panama, Samoa, Australia, Germany, and North America. In each location, the surrounding indigenous culture is restated within the temple's architectural form and sacred symbolic decorations. For example, the Turkestani House combines lines and forms of 12th century Persia with the Turkish style of minaret towers. African hues and hut design are evident in the Ugandan House, which has a large dome, shaped eaves, and natural colors. Furthermore, there are English, Asian, and aboriginal influences in the Australian design which uses arabesques and smaller domes above windows. German Bauhaus and European post-war styles have been blended into the German House. South American pre-Columbian form, Maya-Toltec and Mixtec patterns are present in the Panamanian House. In Samoa, the simplicity of the tropical lifestyle and the symbols of other world religions, have all been incorporated into the House. India's House combines modern engineering and traditional forms of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim structures. Symbols of Native American traditions, the star of David, and the cross are displayed in the Wilmette House.

Other religions have used architectural designs that reflect cultural influences. However, the Bahá'í Faith takes a "grass roots" approach to constructing a House of Worship. Consultation with the native people is an integral part of the decision process when designs are selected.

The Bahá'í House of Worship is an architectural and spiritual attempt to balance modern and traditional designs in an aesthetically pleasing environment. The designs include the symbolism of the divine circle, the reflection of heaven on earth, and the spirituality of sacred borders.

The success of Bahá'í architecture in including the elements of spirituality, artistry, and cultural heritage within the Houses of Worship can be measured by several criteria, which include their architectural soundness and strength; the universal appeal among visitors and experts; and the approval of the indigenous people. On the basis of these measures, the Houses are artistic examples of cultural beauty that represent the world's great religious traditions.

Paper

Most sacred structures, including cathedrals, mosques, synagogues, temples, holy tombs, stupas, shrines, and houses of worship, are built as artistic monuments to God and as representative symbols of various religions. Is it possible to create structures and designs which also reflect the cultures of the surrounding people and community, as well as other spiritual, artistic, and cultural influences? In the Bahá'í Faith, the primary goal of this religion's architecture is to incorporate unifying elements of surrounding cultures and religions in order to echo a familiar feeling to visitors of different beliefs. The underlying principles of this independent world religion, which was founded in Persia by Bahá'u'lláh in 1844, promote the ideas of the oneness of God and the oneness of mankind. In order to bring about universal peace, it believes that all prejudice, whether it be racial, religious, national, or economic, is destructive. Therefore, in complete agreement with these commitments, The House of Worship, or Mashriqu'l-Adhkár (Arabic for the "Dawning Place of the Mention of God"), attempts to reflect the similarities and essences of many faiths. Its structure radiates a "sense of kinship" among diverse beliefs and societies.[1] Bahá'í architecture encourages the visitor of any origin or belief to pray and worship God with comfort and in familiar surroundings. By using unique architectural techniques, symbolic patterns and designs, and pleasing lines and shapes, the Bahá'í Faith has made the House of Worship into a gathering place under a domed canopy. Each of the eight temples displays some resemblance to the nearby cultures and religions within its environment. All achieve this blending of humankind in a unique, but effective way. Other religions and indigenous people also beautifully reflect their heritage through sacred architecture, yet it is evident that the Bahá'í Faith makes a concerted effort to adopt local traditions and symbolic designs; it strives to encompass cultures within its visual arts by means of various innovative ways.[2]

Bahá'í architecture is very different from the sacred architecture of any other era, because its goals are to unify the people of many different races, backgrounds, and religions into one central area where peaceful and harmonious thoughts prevail. The worldwide Bahá'í community may well be the most diverse body of people on earth. Their desire for unity within its vastly different backgrounds is expressed in its architectural designs which share theologies, customs, and heritages. Through its familiar yet "matchless, beautiful design,"

it creates this oneness so that "love may grow between" the visitors. The Bahá'í designs around the world mirror many aspects of cultural diversity within their domes. For example, there are features similar to Islamic mosques with minaret-like towers and a dome-like tomb surrounded by gardens mimicking those of 12th century Iran.[3] African indigenous architecture is also evident in Bahá'í Houses of Worship which have a large dome, shaped eaves, and colors which make the building seem like a part of the natural surroundings. Furthermore, there are English and Asian influences in the Australian design which incorporates arabesques and smaller domes above windows. German Bauhaus and European post-war styles have been used as well as South American pre-Columbian form, Maya-Toltec and Mixtec patterns. In Samoa, the simplicity of the lifestyle of the culture, in addition to the tropical climate and the symbolism of other world religions, have all been blended into the Bahá'í House of Worship.

Similarly, other religious designs have used surrounding traditions. For example, Jewish Houses of Worship, or synagogues, have included styles that are meant to "reach out and make a connection with the community".[4] It can be argued that by including so many symbols and styles under one roof, a contrived or clumsy atmosphere is established. However, if one reviews the careful efforts of the Bahá'í designers and the finished effect of the temples, this argument is completely invalid. The structures are extremely subtle.

In 1903, the House of Worship in Ashkhabad, Turkestan, destroyed by an earthquake in 1948, was the first to be built of the eight Houses of Worship. It was the beginning of the combination of culture and the Bahá'í Faith in that it based many of its lines, forms, and designs on Iranian heritage from the twelfth century. In the entrance of this Bahá'í Temple there were two large minarets traditional to Iran and Turkey. By placing these structures in front, the architect was boldly illustrating how it was possible to mix a new religion with ancient styles of architecture. Even though traditional mosques were shaped as a square with four arches that faced an open court, Bahá'í influence of this sacred building made the overall design seem drastically different by using nine sides instead of four. In Islamic architecture, tombs are sometimes given an octagonal shape, not sacred buildings. The eight sides in this case were used to represent the "eight gates of Paradise, entry ways to eternal bliss."[5] In the Bahá'í Faith nine sides are very symbolic in a similar way. The nine doors or sides represent the nine major world religions, which are the doors to God.

In the early 1900's it was rare to see a nonagonal shaped building that also combined other aspects of different religions and surrounding cultures. Thus a new perspective of religious architecture evolved.

The House of Worship built in Uganda, Africa, continues with the idea of relating indigenous architecture to the sacred construction of a Holy Temple. The architect of this House of Worship deliberately attempted to make it resemble a native hut, and to reflect its practical function and the simplicity of its beauty. This Bahá'í Temple uses brilliant colors of the surrounding

countryside to give the visitor a vision of the magnificence of the local nature and the exuberance of the indigenous people. The interior displays colors such as golden yellows, deep marine blues, and vermilion reds to exemplify the earth, water, and sky. The view seen from within the temple is described as follows in the Bahá'í World magazine: From the inside, the Temple seems almost a part of the outdoor world. The dome is an unusual indescribable blue, the walls of the drum are white and lower walls and columns are soft green. The windows and the grills are green and amber. When the nine great doors are open, the interior colors seem to melt into the hues of sun-drenched fields, hills, clouds, and the sky outside. The whole effect is of oneness with the untouched world of nature as God created it.[6]

The architect produced a building that would be harmonious with the surrounding land, as well as the culture by using natural color schemes. Every aspect of the Houses of Worship is utilized for a purpose far greater than aesthetic appeal. There is a deeper meaning for every use. Examples of this are the flaring eaves and large dome with a circular shape, which are adapted directly from native African huts for the Ugandan House of Worship. Even the materials of each House are specifically chosen for their practicality, as well as their indigenous qualities. One purpose is to save on cost, but for the most part, the building is meant to reflect the local heritage and lifestyle. Although other religious structures in Africa, especially those of Islam, use some of these methods, the Bahá'í Faith takes on a "grass roots" approach to constructing a House of Worship. The native people are always brought into the decision process when designs are selected.

Throughout history, religious leaders, especially the Popes of the 17th century, have felt that the value of color and contrast were important in creating a spiritual atmosphere for the believers. Consider the magnificent stained glass windows which are so prominent in Christian architecture.[7] In a similar way, Bahá'í structures have given careful consideration to the hues and patterns of the culture where it is being erected. The people whose culture is to be reflected in the Bahá'í structure are commonly called in to consult about the appropriate shades and textures of the building materials and interior fabrics. Another point of debate is that perhaps the temples are merely mimicking a culture, without really understanding its essence. On the contrary, the designs are painstakingly selected by all involved and are joined by other tasteful symbols.

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of Panama and the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of Samoa are similar in design. The architect explains that each is based upon the simple lifestyle of the people, as well as the tropical climate of the area. Similar to the approach that was used when designing the African temple in Kampala, Uganda, the structures in Panama and Samoa are still quite unique.[8] The Temple in Samoa was designed to express the prominence of openness in the architectural style of the island country. The idea of openness is used so prevalently in the Samoan culture, that it is natural that the House of Worship would also mirror this simple, yet efficient design. In Samoan architecture,

fales, which are posts arranged in circular patterns that hold a thatched roof, are often used. The fale-like composition is also used in building the Samoan House of Worship. The feeling of openness and airiness was accomplished by creating large slits in the walls and ceiling to let in air and light. This technique produced a simple air conditioning system, which is efficient and in keeping with the local housing design.[9] Wood carvings and tapa fabric designs adapted from the traditional bark cloth used in the Pacific area are used on the inside and outside walls of the Samoan Temple. Again, consultation with the native people was part of the effort to merge the culture and the building.

The Panamanian Temple was completed in 1972. Its unique architectural design is beautifully suited to the contour of its mountain setting. Latino families have nurtured thousands of saplings and shrubs and have transplanted them in the surrounding gardens, in an effort to make the temple blend into the local setting. "The Mother Temple of Latin America" incorporates a pre-Columbian style that uses marble chips to create a relief pattern on the ceiling.[10] The outer brick walls are designed with Aztec steps, which are found in their ancient temples. The intertwined stair-step patterns represent their journey to the afterlife, which is a very common theme in Central American traditions. These motifs are often used in the Mixtec traditional weavings and rug schemes. They represent the towering mountains, blazing sun, and hanging clouds.

The Bahá'í House of Worship is an architectural and spiritual attempt to balance modern and traditional designs in an aesthetically pleasing environment. Ancient symbolism has long been utilized to suggest the "reflection of heaven on earth" in many holy structures. Louis Bourgeois, the architect of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, has stated:
Into the design of the Temple is woven, in symbolic form, the Bahá'í teaching of unity -- the unity of all religions, and all of mankind. Like the Buddhist entering the Borobudur, like the Navajo seated in the center of a sand painting, or the Christian following the maze at Chartres, the believer can enter the temple and find the "Heart of Being."[11]

The symbolism found in Bahá'í architecture, often drawn from local culture, is created to transform us from the literal world to that of the spiritual plane, where we can experience another world.

The Temple of India is a perfect example of the combination of modern engineering and architectural techniques with traditional meaning and form. The "Lotus of Bahápur" has an extremely innovative design which has attracted people of different religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds from around the world. The lotus flower was chosen to be the main theme of the Temple because it was a very important and well-known symbol in Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim structures.[12] For the people of India, the flower is a sign of purity and peace. It rises from the muddy water and still emerges as a beautiful specimen. The lotus flower is also recognized as a manifestation of God by several faiths; it can be seen in the bodhisattva's hand, as a petalled throne in the Buddhist religion. This flower also demonstrates some Bahá'í beliefs in the

purity and freshness of the new Revelation, which is Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Faith.[] Similar to other temples, the cooling system for this House of Worship is based on the techniques that are successful and economical in its home country. The fresh air which passes over the fountains and pools becomes cooled and then is pulled through openings in the basement and circulated through the central hall.

The "Lotus Temple" is so ingenious in its design and method of construction that many find it hard to believe that it was created in India. Yet the architect, Mr. Fariburz Sabha, said that it couldn't have been built anywhere else in the world, because it would be hard to find both "the traditional craftsmanship, pride in one's work, empathy for spiritual undertaking, perseverance under all odds and ample patience, as can be found in the people of India."[14] This truly demonstrates the tremendous importance placed on the people and their culture in the building of the temple. It seems that the simplicity and the symbolism of the unity of all religions comfort many of the visitors. It is a place where differences have subsided and calmness prevails.

In Sydney, Australia, the House of Worship, known as the "Angel of Sydney," was built using several different architectural styles. It demonstrates, for the most part, the transcendence of English style architecture to Australia. In addition, there is a slight sign of Asian influence and that of a 16th century Italian architect, Andrea Palladio. His style is depicted within the small domes and arabesques that flank some of the windows.[15] The Temple was planned to resemble the opal, which is the gemstone of Australia. When the skies are sunny, the crushed quartz which is encased in the walls sparkles, and the Temple appears pearly white.[16]At twilight, it takes on a grayish glow.

The Temple was designed to appeal to all peoples of Australasia and the Pacific area. There are nine slender pillars that rise into a soft green dome that reflects the forces of nature. Fred Murray, a full-blooded Australian Aboriginal was brought to tears when he first saw the House of Worship. In the entry way, he saw the Aboriginal "Celestial Flower" symbol used as a marker to the "Sky-Door," which represents his culture's access between the worlds of matter and spirit. He said, "I would like to thank my friends for building this temple in my homeland."[17] This mixture of styles from a variety of countries is quite effective in making a place which touches so many people.

Plans for a House of Worship to be built in Langenhein were strongly opposed at first by Germany. In fact, there were over 600 articles which appeared in newspapers debating the issue. However, the Bahá'ís made a suggestion to include a design based upon the European post-war era style. Once this idea was reviewed by German citizens, they eagerly anticipated the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. There were sleek lines which were comparable to the designs of the Bauhaus School of Architecture, this style was developed after World War I and was very popular in Europe. The Temple is decorated with detail ornamentation, again reflecting the Bauhaus design, which uses smooth structural lines in a straightforward manner. The Germans especially appreciate the curtain walls of glass and the simple post and lintel structures within the House of Worship. At

night the dome is lit up showing pierced openings surrounding the entire edifice. How appropriate that this building, which stands for unity and tolerance, was erected in an area so recently destroyed by a great world war. [18]

The Wilmette House of Worship was designed by Louis Bourgeois, who tried to present the principles of the Bahá'í Faith in architecture. In order to be appreciated by the American society, he felt it would be necessary to display symbols from many major ethnic groups and belief systems. Throughout the edifice, he has included some of the following symbols: circle, triangle, pyramid, serpent, sun, fire, stars ranging from five to nine points, the star of David, the swastika, and the cross. The religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Native American traditional beliefs are manifested within the ornamental arches and pillars of the temple. Rarely does one find such a collection from many different religions, gathered into one architectural design. A comparable example might be the Hindu and Buddhist stupas found along the mountain trails of Nepal. It is here that the two religions have become interwoven into a single religious shrine.

During one point of Bourgeois' planning, he was asked if it was possible to include a more Occidental feel into the House of Worship. He was very eager to do whatever possible to fulfill the will of the people. Not only were Western and European influences blended into the "arabesque tracery," but the style can also be compared to Islamic architecture.[19] The interior arches of the Moorish Mosque in Spain are similar to the scalloped arches of the Wilmette House of Worship.

In nearly every way the Wilmette House of Worship is symmetrical. This was a key architectural concept during the Renaissance. The dome exhibits a Renaissance shape that could be found only in Italy. The carved ribs on the domes can be compared to "Gothic ribbing of early Renaissance domes" that are prevalent in the cathedrals of Florence and Rome.[20]I have been inside this splendid dome and stood under the light-filled canopy. One is transformed to another place and time, where there is only symmetry, peace, and balance. The Temple is filled with a myriad of designs and symbolic representations from many cultures. However, there is not a cluttered or crowded feeling inside or out. On the contrary, many people have remarked on the austere purity and simple clarity of design which Bourgeois was able to create. His design has formed a kind of universal language which expresses the similarities of many beliefs and traditions in a simple and sacred manner.[21]

The symbolism of the circle is very strong in depictions of the founders of the world's great religions.[22]For example, the Vairocana Buddha, the supreme Buddha in Japan, is encircled by both head and body haloes. Similarly, in Christian descriptions of Jesus, Christ is often seen with a glowing halo around his head. This same type of circular imagery is seen in paintings of Buddha in meditation. The sites of Bahá'í Houses of Worship around the world are all topped with a round dome and are surrounded by either circular pathways or low walls. Each one of the eight domed buildings commemorates tolerance and

understanding, which is an integral concept of the Bahá'í Faith.

Other religions also associate the circle with the heavenly realm. Often believers going on pilgrimage will travel a circular route around a sacred object or site. The Muslims circumnavigate the Ka'aba in Mecca; Tibetans make a circular path around the Potala, the Dalai Lama's residence; and in ancient China, burial mounds were encircled by family members paying their respects.

Not only can the building itself create a meditative mood, but the surrounding grounds may also afford a feeling of sacredness. Each Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is encompassed by gardens which have been symbols of the heavens for thousands of years. Gardens filled with blossoms and trees are universal metaphors for new life, new beginnings, and spiritual growth. The Bahá'í Houses of Worship are a symbolic way for the faith to express its teachings to others. Jeanette Mirsky writes that holy buildings are: ...proof of man's abiding effort to explain the mysteries of birth and life and death, increase and immortality. Each place of worship can be seen as an attempt to translate myth and symbol, dogma and ritual into earth, stone and wood.[23]

A great deal of effort is exerted by the creators of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár to include limitless and timeless decorations and to exhibit reverence for tradition. Yet their most important goal is to create the feeling of a sacred place for Bahá'ís, and for the whole world. In a truly hallowed site, there is no sense of direction, because all paths lead to God. Thick walls with large gates were often used in ancient Egypt and also in Christian architecture to signify the barrier between the real world and a new place of sacredness. Similarly, in Japan, Shinto temples are set aside by the symbol of the torii gate.[24] Once the believer enters, it is understood that he is now in a holy place. In Bahá'í Temples there is often a circular boundary signifying the entrance into a divine area. By including this idea of sacred borders, the Houses have become welcoming places where all can be directed towards God in a safe haven. As stated in the Qu'rán, "The East and the West are God's: therefore whichever way ye turn, there is the face of God..."[25]

The success of Bahá'í architecture in including the elements of spirituality, artistry, and cultural heritage within the Houses of Worship can be measured by several criteria. First, the Temples are enduring structures that meet the architectural requirements of beauty, strength, and grace. The comments from visitors around the world are amazing and attest to the universal appeal of these buildings. Thousands of people come to pray and meditate; some come as tourists or just to enjoy the artistry. With the exception of the Wilmette edifice, very little information is available about the Temples, either to the general public or in architectural journals. Perhaps the visitors speak best to this issue. Their comments are interesting and amusing. They range from severe criticism, such as the Wilmette temple looks like an "overgrown, moth-eaten artichoke" to remarks comparing it to a "sublime journey into the realm of paradise." [26]The building does not appeal to everyone, but Justice William O. Douglas sent this message to the Chicago press, "...the House is a structure of great beauty, but perhaps not many realize that it teaches the essential unity

of mankind under one God." [27]

As to whether or not the Houses of Worship embody the surrounding culture, it is necessary to determine what traditional symbols and designs have been used, and if they have been used appropriately. The Temples have been built in North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Australia, Asia, and the Pacific Islands. As mentioned before, the following cultural influences included within the designs of the Temples are: Renaissance, Romanesque, Native American traditions, Occidental, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Egyptian, Mayan, Toltec, pre-Columbian, Aztec, Samoan, Panamanian, Bauhaus, European post-war, traditional African folklore, Aboriginal, Muslim, Persian, Turkish, and Eastern Indian culture. The people of these continents and islands have continuously voiced their appreciation and approval of these designs. It remains to be seen whether or not the Temples of the future can also blend in with the surrounding traditions.

The evaluation of artistry and spirituality are both very subjective assessments. Although artists and architects from around the word have publicly praised the Houses of Worship, the greatest support for the beauty and skill put into the Temples has come from the local people and visitors who continue to come again and again. This is also a testimonial to the tranquility and sanctity, which emanate from these spiritual places. The domes, gardens, circular pathways, ornamentation, nine doors, textures, colors, geometric designs, and interior decorations all affirm the Bahá'í principles of the unity of the human race and the oneness of the world's great religious traditions.

ENDNOTES

[1] Julie Badiee. An Earthly Paradise, Bahá'í Houses of Worship around the World. (Oxford: George Ronald Press, 1992.) p.11

[2] Louis B. Walker. Personal interview. 2 May 1999

[3] Badiee. p.14

[4] Vicki Marx. "A Tale of Two Growing Synagogues." Washington Jewish Week. 25 Sept. 1999. p.5

[5] 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Promulgation of Universal Peace. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.) p.85

[6] Bahá'í World: An International Record. (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre. Vol. XIII, 1954 -1963.) p.713

[7] John Julius Norwich. Great Architecture of the World. (New York: Mitchell Beazley Publishers Unlimited, 1975.) p.212

[8] Francis Zaworzinksy. "Who Built the Temple of Panama?" Bahá'í News. #42 (June 1972.) p.9

[9] Bahá'í World. p.585

[10] Zaworzinksy, p.5

[11] Bruce W. Whitmore. The Dawning Place. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984.) p.77

[12] Badiee, p.21

[13] Whitmore, p.13

[14] Fariburz Sabha. "The Lotus of Bahápur, Bahá'í House of Worship, India." (Architecture Services, Bahá'í World Center, 1998.) Online.

[15] "Bahá'í house of Worship." (Brochure: Sydney, Australia, 1975.)

[16] Zaworzinksy, p.6

[17] William Sears. "The Dedication of the Sydney Temple." Bahá'í News. #369, Dec. 1961. p.1

[18] Badiee, p.20

[19] Whitmore, p.77

[20] Ibid., p.84

[21] Badiee, p.34

[22] Ibid., p.85

[23] Ibid., p.27

[24] Ibid., p.37

[25] Muhammad. Qu'rán. London: Everyman's Library. 1983. 2:115

[26] Chicago Examiner. 18 May 1909. p.19

[27] Douglas, William O. Justice. "Messages of Greetings Received for Temple Dedication." Jubilee Celebration. p.12

Articles-unpublished
Audio
Bibliographies
BIC
Biographies
Books
Chronologies
Compilations
Compilations-NSA
Compilations-personal
Documents
East-asia
Encyclopedia
Essays
Etc
Excerpts
Fiction
Glossaries
Guardian
Histories
Introductory
Letters
Maps
Music
Newspapers
NSA-documents
NSA-letters
Personal
Pilgrims
Poetry
Presentations
Resources
Reviews
Scripts
Software
Statistics
Study
Talks
Theses
Transcripts
Translations
UHJ-documents
UHJ-letters
Video
Visual
Writings

— Sacred Baha'i Architecture (Used by permission of the curator)