Identity, Authenticity and Power: the Mosque of Hassan II

Cultural identity can be expressed in many ways; perhaps most apparent is its manifestation in architecture. The contemporary mosque as a building type not only expresses its identity but also symbolizes piety and is emblematic of how communities present themselves to the outside world. In general, contemporary mosques from the 1950s to the 1980s revealed a concern for projecting the ‘modern Muslim’. However, since the 1980s, mosques commissioned by national governments and institutions seem to be more architecturally conservative and tradition-bound, and refer to past models that are seen as manifestations of political and religious authority. A case in point is the Mosque of Hassan II in Casablanca, Morocco, completed in 1993.

King Hassan II, who ascended the throne in 1961, continuing in the line of the Alawid dynasty established in 1666, commissioned the grand complex. The King, often referred to in Morocco as Amr Al-Moumine, the Munificent, the Saviour and the Reassurer (in the sense of ‘Leader of the Faithful, the Unifier, the Saviour and the Builder’), is an active patron of the arts and seems to have been conscious of the power of buildings and places to impart a sense of stability and legitimacy. In 1968, the King announced his decision to build a grand mosque in Casablanca, the economic centre of the country, which lacked a focal monument. It has been said that the siting of the mosque was inspired by the Quranic verse describing the Creation of the World: ‘and His throne was over the waters’ (Sura XI:7). Casablanca, on the sea, was also seen as having a natural advantage from which to signify the presence of Islam. This intention is clearly manifested in the form of the massive 200 metre-tall minaret, a landmark with a laser light-beam shining towards Mecca for a distance of 30 kilometres. The building itself is the largest mosque built in the modern world. The issue of scale, of representation and dimensionality are key to this new type of monument. It has been said that the siting of the mosque was inspired by the Quranic verse describing the Creation of the World: ‘and His throne was over the waters’ (Sura XI:7). Casablanca, on the sea, was also seen as having a natural advantage from which to signify the presence of Islam. This intention is clearly manifested in the form of the massive 200 metre-tall minaret, a landmark with a laser light-beam shining towards Mecca for a distance of 30 kilometres. The building itself is the largest mosque built in the modern world.

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After seven years in construction, the building was finally inaugurated in August 1993, on the eleventh day of the month of Rabi’ al-Awwal (the eve of the anniversary of the Prophet Mohammed’s birth) in the year 1414 AH. This was exactly four hundred years after al-Mansur inaugurated his Baadi Hassan II Mosque, see Renata Holod and Hasan-Uddin Khan’s (eds.), Architecture and Space.

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