

# The Effects of Ornaments in the Interior Space of Mosque on the Level of Concentration of its Congregations

*by Dhini Dewiyanti*

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## The Effects of Ornaments in the Interior Space of Mosque on the Level of Concentration of its Congregations

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### Abstract

The two main religious texts of Islam, *Qur'an* and *hadith*, do not provide a clear guidelines concerning the architectural design principles of mosque. Hence architects tends to take the liberty of developing their own subjective interpretation, and in some cases fall into an extreme in term of architectural design articulation, such as heavy use of ornamentation in the exterior as well as the interior parts of the mosque. This research paper examines the effects of ornaments applied in the interior parts of the mosque on the level of concentration of the congregations (*jemaah*) during the praying times. Qualitative methodological approach is adopted as the research strategy to attain a deeper understanding on the experiential responses of the congregations. The research findings are expected to give substantial contribution to the canon of designing appropriate ornaments for the interior space of mosque in general.

**Key Words:** Ornaments, mosque, interior space, concentration, *Qur'an*, *hadith*,

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Mosque is a holy place where the muslims pray and practice various rituals to worship God and to socialize with other members of the congregation. Architectural quality of the mosque can incite distinctive meanings to the worshippers, either physically, emotionally or spiritually. Solemnity is an ambience mostly expected to be present in the prayer hall, so that the worshippers can deliberately concentrate on their prayers. One of the architectural elements that can distract their level of concentration is the occurrence of ornaments in the interior part of the main hall, which are generally installed as aesthetic and symbolic components. As a matter of fact, the application of ornaments in the mosque remains a controversial issue, as there is no clear reference in Islamic teachings that ornament are to be prohibited or recommended. It is not surprising that the architects tends to take the liberty of developing their own subjective interpretation, and consequently heavy use of ornamentation in the main hall of the mosque in some cases cannot be avoided.

The purpose of this reseach study is to gain an understanding on the effects of ornaments in the interior space of mosque on the level of concentration of its congregation. Several research questions are proposed: (1) What kind of ornaments generally occurred in the main hall of the mosque, (2) Which ornaments tend to distract concentration of the congregation the most, (3) Why they were considered as distraction instead of attraction.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### a. Decorative Arts in Islam

During the time of Prophet Muhammad, mosque was still a very simple building made of bricks, palm leaves and trunks. Such simplicity has evoked the idea among the companions and followers, that the Prophet apparently forbid them to establish an ornated mosque building, even only the use of colours (Saheeh Al-Bukhari # 446; Mu'allaq: Fat-h al-Bari I/53; Fat-h al-Bari III/107). The prophet stated that he was not commanded to build an ornated and magnificent mosque. Some chapters in Al'Quran and Hadist also indicate that the use decorations on mosques are basically discouraged, including setting up high walls and painting the building with red and yellow colours. Apparently there is a general agreement that mosque building has to represent simplicity rather than monumentality, bearing in mind that monumentality may distracts the concentration of the worshippers, it may also lead to unwarranted pride that may undermine the religious spirit. In conclusion, the architecture of mosque should not be considered as an expression of art, but rather as a setting of religious ritual and worship.

After the renovation of Nabawi Mosque, the Prophet's close friend Umar declared: "Let us construct a building to protect people from rain, do not paint it with red or yellow colour, so that it does not cause *fitnah* to them". This particular statement invites various contradictory interpretations, because the Nabawi Mosque was considered as indicator of sea change in the way mosque was defined functionally, physically and socially. The controversy escalated after the Kaaba was covered with black silk which is considered as luxurious material. Hence, the desires to beautify the architecture of mosque lingers with cautious attention to the limits put forward by Islamic teachings.

The conservative view prevalent during the early period of Islam assumed that any kind of replication as decorative art, is in essence an attempt to challenge the perfection of God or an ambition to create a new God. The contemporary view accepted the facts that what can be created by human being is not comparable to God's own creation, or even to God himself. Decorative art should not be viewed simply as replication, but rather as stylization to glorify God as the creator of the universe. This view finds its support in European culture, where decorative art is considered as legitimate part of artistic expression. In Islam, the existence of ornaments remains debatable, likewise is the existence of decorative arts in general.

### b. Ornaments as Decorative Elements in Mosque

Strict rules and prohibitions in iconography of Islam to represent living creatures have so far limited the development of ornaments as decorative elements in mosque only to calligraphies, geometric or foliage (arabesque) patterns, and later on to muqarnas or honeycomb structural and decorative pattern widely used in Persia (Fanani, 2009) but rarely adopted



in Indonesia. However, these basic ornaments are not only added superficially to the building structure to enhance architectural aesthetic and spatial qualities, they also have to function principally as a *tauhid*, a remainder of the existence of Almighty God. Hence, architecture of a mosque, as well as any other Islamic architecture, should ideally express the following messages: (1) Unity (*at-tawhid*), the essence of Islamic teachings, (2) Total devotion to God, and (3) Islamic world-view.

Jones (1995) has observed that in Islamic art ornaments such as calligraphy, geometric and foliage patterns are widely in various building elements as well as artistic objects, including: wall, ceiling, carpet, textile, ceramic, wood and metal works, books and many others. Given the fact that the surface of building elements and artistic objects was generally flat, the Islamic artists had been quite successful in developing two and three dimensional ornamental and colouring techniques, so that they could create magnificent aesthetic quality in their building and works of art.

There are three ornamental decoration forms recognized in Islam since the Umayyad period, which then merged with new classical forms during 'Sunni Revival' period. These three early ornamental forms are represented in Figure 1 to 3.



Figure 1. Geometry



Figure 2. Calligraphy



Figure 3. Arabesque

Source: <http://www.patterninislamicart.com>

#### b.1. Geometry

In Islamic art, geometric shapes are transformed into a circle as its basic form. Through repetition techniques, symmetry and scale, an impressive ornament can be created.



Figure 4.  
Geometric exploration on a



Figure 5.  
Geometric exploration on a

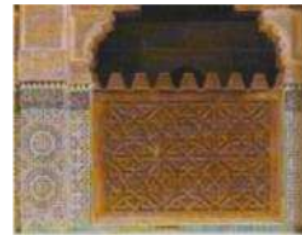


Figure 6.  
A unique geometric exploration on



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flat surface, stucco in  
Madrasa al-Mustansir,  
Baghdad  
Source: Jones, Dalu p.148

curved surface in the minaret,  
Great Mosque of Damghan,  
Iran  
Source: Jones, Dalu p.148

transparent mosaic tiles and wood  
panel stucco, BU-'Ināniyya Madrasa,  
Fez  
Source: Jones, Dalu p.148

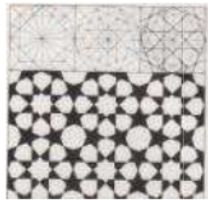


Figure 7.  
Circle as a basic form can generate various compositions expressing solid-void and dark-light effects. If more lines are added, more rich and detailed patterns can be created.

Source: Jones, Dalu p.148

## b.2. Calligraphy

In Islamic tradition, calligraphies are generally used as medium to represent religious beliefs and missionary purposes. Calligraphy is an art of beautiful writing of holy verses from the Qur'an using Arabic letters to achieve a desired artistic form. The object of calligraphy are human figures, plants or animals. According to Sakkal (1993), Arabic calligraphy styles can be differentiated into 6 (six) categories, namely: (1) Kufi style, signifies by sharp and rigid lettering, rectangular, and formal. This style later evolved into a more decorative, oftenly combined with floral ornaments (2) Naskhi Style, renowned for its elegant proportional shape, often used to write the Quran. Its simple character, almost without frills, make it easy to write and read. (3) Thuluth style, highly ornamental with lots of frills, easy to shape into a specific composition to be adjusted to the writing space available. This style can be written in curve form, with sharp head and occasionally in continuous style with strong intersection, generally used as mosques architectural ornament, book cover, and interior decoration. (4) Deewani Style, signifies by structured cursive letters, with less points incorporated into the conventional style. The beauty of this writing is represented by the dynamic of contour which undulates exceeding the standard horizontal line. (5) Riq'a Style, using a very simple letter without *harakat*, so that it can be written very fast. (6) Pharisees style, developed by the Persians, strongly emphasizes on line element and written without *harkat*. The skill of the writer is determined by the agility in controlling the thick-thin letters adequately.



Figure 8.

Kufi Style    Naskhi Style    Thuluth Style    Deewani Style    Riq'a Style    Pharisees Style

Source: <http://majlisdzikrullahpekojan.org>, retrieved January 20, 2012

The application of calligraphy in the mosque architecture can be exemplified as follows:



Figure 9.  
 Application of linear calligraphy indicating the existence of God. Mosque of al-Aqmar, Cairo



Figure 10.  
 Application of circular calligraphy, featuring verses of the Quran. Mosque of al-Aqmar, Cairo



Figure 11.  
 Application of encrypted calligraphy, featuring verses of the Qur'an on the columns and walls, combined with floral motives. Mosque of Qutb Minar, New Delhi.

Source: Jones, Dalu p.150



Figure 12.  
 Elements of calligraphy in the interior of Masjid Tanah Abang, Jakarta  
 Source: <http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 13.  
 Application of carved calligraphy on marble with a chisel technique. Designed by Divani at Masjid At-Taqwa, Johar Baru Central Jakarta.  
 Source: <http://www.kaskus.us>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 14.  
 Application of calligraphy in Mosque of Al Ukuwwah Islamiyah, the University of Indonesia campus, Depok  
 Source: <http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012

### b.3. Foliage

*Foliage* is an artistic motive derived from the nature, it can take naturalistic form such as plantation or more abstract form such as arabesque. The dynamic motives of foliage in wood and stone carvings, ceramics and carpets symbolize the greatness of God as the creator of the universe. The arabesque motive tends to have unique character, as it is strongly related to the local cultural context.



Figure 11.  
 Naturalistic forms of foliage. Great mosque of Damascus (left) and Taj Mahal (right)

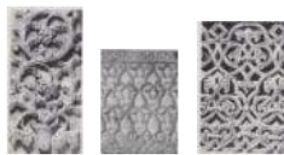


Figure 12.  
 Arabesque on wood panels from Umayyad mosque period. Stucco dado in Sammara.  
 Source: Jones, Dalu p.154



Figure 13.  
 Repetition of beautiful foliage on mihrab. Great mosque of Cordoba.





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Figure 14.  
Arabesque on the ceiling.  
Mosque of Yeni Valide,  
Uskudar

Source:<http://wn.com/calligraphy>  
retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 15.  
Arabesque composition on  
ceiling and column  
Source:<http://qmark.wordpress.com>,  
retrieved January 20  
2012



Figure 16.  
Animal and flora motifs. Sitora  
Mosque, Dhaka  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>,  
retrieved January 20 2012

### c. Application of ornaments

Ornaments in Islamic Architecture are typically applied to certain elements of the building, including: walls, openings, columns, floors, consoles, ceilings, and other relevant elements. Ideally, the use of ornaments has to serve certain functional and symbolic purposes. But it is quite often that its application is only for the sake of beautification, without due regard to any specific functional or symbolic meaning.

The architectural ornaments applied in the interior part of the mosque are generally selected to enhance the aesthetic appearance of the main hall in line with the Islamic rules, making reference to basic traditional motives and their symbolic meanings which are developed in the country of origin such as Syria, Egypt, Iran, North African countries and Asia Minor.

#### c.1. Wall and Opening

Ornaments used on walls and openings can be seen at the following illustrations:



Figure 17.  
Window at Suleymaniye  
Mosque, Istanbul, an  
Arabesque geometric motives  
to provide natural lighting  
Source: Jones, Dalu p.154



Figure 18.  
Windows and doors of Masjid  
Natuna, with Arabesque  
motives on top part of arches  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>,  
retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 19.  
Wall with calligraphic  
ornaments in soft and gold  
colours. Great Mosque of  
Bulgaria  
Source:  
[www.centerislamique.com](http://www.centerislamique.com),  
retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 20.  
Plasticity of walls to create depth of field effect. Masjid Nurul Amin, Pagaruyung  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 21.  
Geometric arbesque motives to provide natural lighting. Masjid At-Tin, Jakarta  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 22.  
Red brick decorated with floral arbesque motives in gold colour. Masjid Merah Panjunan, Cirebon  
Source:  
[www.centerislamique.com](http://www.centerislamique.com),  
retrieved January 20 2012

### c.2. *Mihrab* and pulpit



Figure 23.  
Lighting fixtures and geometric ornaments on mihrab and pulpit. Masjid At-Tin, Jakarta  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 24.  
Intricate ornaments and dominant colour on mihrab and pulpit. Masjid Jami New Delhi  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 25.  
Calligraphic ornaments on pulpit. Masjid Suriansyah, Banjarmasin  
Source:  
[www.centerislamique.com](http://www.centerislamique.com),  
retrieved January 20 2012

### c.3. Column



Figure 26.  
Ornaments on the column of Masjid Giri Mosque, showing tripartite division: head, body and foot. Green colour scheme which gives a sense of tranquility is widely adopted in mosques in Indonesia.  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 27.  
Geometric lighting ornaments on simple marble column which give sense of coolness. Masjid At-Tin, Jakarta.  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 28.  
Geometric ornaments dominated by red colour, strongly influenced by Chinese culture. Masjid Cheng Ho, Surabaya  
Source:  
[www.centerislamique.com](http://www.centerislamique.com),  
retrieved January 20 2012

### c.4. Floor





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Figure 29.  
Floral motives are widely used in mosque for carpets  
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Figure 30.  
Geometric motives are widely used in mosque for floors made of marbel, ceramics, and other low maintenance materials.



Figure 31.  
Persian carpet in Ottoman style, made of best wool and cotton from Yaman, sized 70 x 60 meter, took 4 years to finish it. Great Mosque of Sultan Qaboos, Oman.

Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012

### c.5. Ceiling



Figure 32.  
Purlins form a brilliant geometric pattern on the ceiling. Masjid Agung, Central Java.



Figure 33.  
Geometric pattern on the ceiling of Masjid At-Tin, Jakarta.

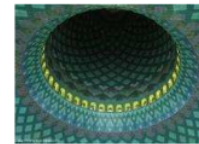


Figure 34.  
Color and geometric pattern on the ceiling of Masjid Al Akbar, Surabaya.

Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012

### c.6. Lighting Effects.



Figure 35.  
Fixtures on ceiling of the dome, dominated by white lights. Masjid Nurul Amin, Pagaruyung

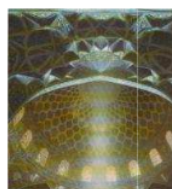


Figure 36.  
Simple ceiling with decorative lighting fixtures. Masjid Cipaganti, Bandung



Figure 37.  
Ceiling ornaments and lighting fixtures. Masjid Cheng Ho, Surabaya

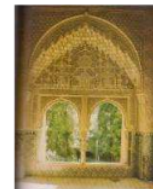
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com>, retrieved January 20 2012



Gambar 35  
Complex reflection and refraction of



Gambar 36  
Lighting effects on wall panel.



Gambar 37  
Natural lighting reflected on



light on the ceiling of the dome.  
Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah,  
Isfahan.

Fatehpur Sikri Mosque, India

the muqarnas above the  
window arch. Mosque of  
Alhambra, Granada

Source: Jones, Dalu p.152

#### d. Visual Sensory and Concentration

5 Visual sensory is of prime importance in experiencing architectural space of the mosque. Visual quality of the mainhall can give significant effects to the ambiance and level of concentration of the prayers. Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jauziyah advises the prayers to keep their eyes open while performing the prayers or *shalat*, and only close their eyes if their immediate surroundings distract their concentration. Therefore, Al-Qaradawi Yusuf in his book "Guide to the Mosque Building" strongly urged that the ornaments applied the mainhall, including color, pattern, decoration and calligraphy should not give visual distraction to the prayers. The images presented in the ornaments should be placed properly and do not allure the prayers into wild imagination.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

11 male and 16 female respondents were selected based on the following criteria: currently engaged in an occupation as university lecturer, have previous worshipping experiences in different mosques, and able to express his or her opinion orally. Research was conducted in the city of Bandung in January 2011. Qualitative methodological approach is adopted as the research strategy to attain a deeper understanding on the experiential responses of the respondents. Open in-depth interview technique was conducted, supported by sound recording facilities.

The respondents were requested to describe their architectural experiences while they perform their religious activity in the mosques, in particular during their praying time. The questions comprise (1) the intensity of their religious worshipping activities, (2) their concern on ornamental elements occurred in the main hall, (3) ornamental elements that potentially distract their concentration during praying time.

Responses given by each respondent were transliterated into a coherent text to facilitate coding process. Initial coding was then conducted by grouping keywords into relevant categories and themes. Subsequently, axial coding was carried out to look for causal relationships among categories and themes that emerged. At the end, selective coding was done to sort and reselect the coding results and to draw conclusion of the research findings.

### 4. DISCUSSION

Research study has resulted the following conclusions :

#### 4.1 Intensity of Religious Worshipping Activities.

The intensity of religious worshipping activity has significant correlation with the sensitivity of the respondents in appreciating the architectural features of the mosque. Routine and frequent visits to the mosque tend to reduce respondents' concern on the architectural quality of the mosque. The respondents who visit



less frequently tend to be more attentive to the architectural features of the mosque, including the existence of ornaments at its mainhall.

Exterior quality of the mosque to some extent influences perception of the respondents in appreciating the interior. Monumentality and dimension of the mosque give a first impression to them on architectural quality of the building as a whole. The almighty and greatness of God can easily be perceived by the respondents in a grand mosque compared to smaller mosque and mushala. Hence, respondents prefer to worship in certain mosques which are considered to have unique or distinctive characters. Masjidil Haram in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina occupies the first and second positions in their preference list, followed by Masjid Baitulrahman in Aceh which prevailed the the tsunami. Prominent mosques always attract attention of the people and their architectural features are given higher appreciation.

#### **4.2 Interior elements.**

The respondents gave their judgement on the importance of interior elements in the mainhall of the mosque as follows:

- a. Floor  
78% of the respondents mentioned floor as the first element to be considered, as it related to the sacredness and legitimation of their prayers. Parquet is the most preferred material, because it is easy to clean, gives a warm impression, and does not smell. The second preference for floor material is carpet, particularly the thick and good quality one, as it is comfortable and also gives a warm impression.
- b. Chandelier  
47% of the respondents mentioned chandelier as their concern. Grand chandelier made of crystal with many lightbulbs easily attracts their eyes and compel them to look up. If floor element attracts their attention when they begin with prayer session, chandelier tends to attract their attention after their finish with their prayers or when they perform additional prayers or *dzikir*. Chandelier in particular attract their attention at the night praying sessions.
- c. *Hijab*  
83% of female respondents and 42% male respondents mentioned the hijab as part of their concern. The hijab which is situated right in front of female praying space unavoidable became their focus of attention, especially if the hijab is relatively high.
- d. Column  
12% of respondents admitted that columns located in the middle of the room sometimes become part of their concern, in particular if the existence of the columns breaks the regular distancing among the worshippers.
- e. *Mihrab*



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Mihrab is the last interior element mentioned by the respondents as part of their concern. Mihrab particularly becomes the focus attention during the Friday prayers or *taraaweeh* in the month of Ramadan, because the congregations have to listen to the lectures given by the speaker who stands in the pulpit. They pay full attention to the lectures and fixed their eyes to the front part, including mihrab. Unfortunately only less than 10% of the female congregations have the opportunity to see the mihrab. The rest do not give any attention to the existence of mihrab, which is anyway out of their view, especially if the *hijab* is relatively high.

Other interior elements such as ceilings, doors, walls and windows were rarely mentioned by the respondents as their objects of concern. Only 5 % of the respondents includes these elements in their responses.

#### **4.3 Gender**

Research findings showed that female respondents are more concerned with the existence of interior elements compared to male respondents. The presence of women as member of congregations in the mosque is not compulsory, hence they rarely visit the mosque. When they have a chance to visit it, they tend to pay more attention to the atmosphere and interior quality of the mosque compared to the male congregations.

#### **4.4. Time**

Praying sessions have a significant influence on the quality of prayers conducted by respondents. Morning prayer (Fajr) and evening prayer (Maghrib and Isha) give the congregations more opportunity to appreciate the interior quality of the mosque, as they are not in the rush and have ample time to perform their ritual, while darkness of the night strengthens the religious atmosphere within the building, hence motivates the congregations to spend longer time for their prayers.

#### **4.5. Interior Ornaments that Distract the Concentration**

The interior ornaments that potentially distract concentration of the respondents can be listed as follows:

a. **Color**

Contrasted colors have profound impact on the level of concentration of the respondents. Red color is the mostly disliked, as it tends to give impression of higher and hence reduces the concentration. Dark colors are also disliked, as they give impression of scary feeling. Green gives a sense of coolness, but if the gradation is too dark, it can turn the room into a frightening atmosphere.

b. **Motives of Ornament**

Geometric and arabesque motives on the carpets, although they were designed in accordance with Islamic rules, tend to incite certain fantasies



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and distract the concentration of female respondents. Non motive and single coloured carpets are more preferable. Stained on carpets should be immediately cleaned, as they might also incite certain fantasies on female member congregations.

c. **Hijab Height**

The hijab tend to block the visual field of female respondents, in particular if it is made of opaque materials and relatively high. Female respondents prefer that the hijab is made of perforated material and half transparent, so that they can still observe the gesture of the imam.

d. **Calligraphy**

For respondents who are literate in Arabic, the existence of calligraphy can be quite disturbing, as they are tempted to read it over and over, especially if it is placed on the mihrab. They have an opinion that calligraphy should be presented on the Quran only.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Respondents who already have deeper understanding of Islamic religion considered that ornaments are not of prime important. As a matter of fact, they tend to give little attention to the presence of ornaments in the main hall of the mosque, therefore they do not fell distracted. For them, the mosque is a place for prayer, not a place to appreciate architectural aesthetics. Ornament is an element whose presence in the mosque is not a necessity, but an optional factor to glorify the greatness of a mosque.

Research findings showed that ornaments do not have significant influence on the level of concentration of the congregations. Instead, more attention should be paid to: (1) room temperature (2) air circulation (3) continuity of view both inside and outside the mainhall, and (4) lighting quality, for the assurance of thermal and visual comfort of the main hall in the mosque.

It is too early to claim the findings as a conclusion, because the research study was still limited in scope and methodology. A deeper and thorough study still has to be carry out in order to achieve more satisfactory and valid results.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Special thanks to all respondents who have given positive responses and willingness to cooperate in this research study.

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