Metamorphosis of mosque semiotics
From sacred to secular power metaphorism – the case of state mosques

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Abstract
Purpose – Compared with its status in Islamic history, the mosque today has become a distinctive phenomenon, perceived as an identity vessel of contemporary Islamic architecture that conveys sacred metaphysical meanings. Since the advent of modernity Muslim societies has become increasingly secularized; the relationships of the sacred–secular and the divine-based demythologized knowledge have been deformed. The mosque was glossed over as the sole contemporary sacred edifice that bears metaphysical/Islamic connotations with cultural continuity. Its architecture, meanings and function have gone through a process of metamorphosis, particularly the state mosques. The contemporary mosque as such is facing a “semiological deterioration.” State mosques today are symbolic statements and communicative messages of their rulers’ power and national sovereignty, with a subsidiary role for worship, i.e., the sacred has turned into a secular power metaphor. This led to a state semantic confusion accompanied by a loss in the deeply rooted collective cultural codes of the sacred. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the metamorphosis of the semiological connotation of the contemporary mosque, with a special focus on grand state mosques, and its effects on the architecture of the contemporary mosque.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is theoretical research (no case studies included).

Findings – The metamorphosis that the contemporary mosque is experiencing today as a religious edifice with symbolic connotations and architectural iconicity is but an effect of the changes that occurred in the concept of the sacred and its relationship to the secular in contemporary Muslim communities, as a result of modernity. Such conceptual changes led to altering the deeply rooted cultural codes to be replaced by new intentional codes, used today as vehicles of communication in mosque architecture, especially in grand state mosques. Contemporary state mosques with its new symbolism and semantic meanings have contributed to redefining the concept of the contemporary mosque in general.

Originality/value – Mosque architecture today receives a significant importance. Many conferences and awards are dedicated to celebrating this phenomenon. Attempts to define the criteria and style of the contemporary mosque architecture are mounting. However, rarely there are studies that defy such attempts in a critical manner. This research seeks to criticize such approaches by highlighting the essence of the transformation in mosque architecture and its relationship to the concepts of the sacred and the secular, from a semiological perspective.

Keywords Semiotics, Power metaphor, Sacred–secular, State mosque, Symbol

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
 Compared with its status in Islamic history as portrayed by early Muslim historians, the contemporary mosque has witnessed substantial metamorphosis, especially in its role, function, meaning, architecture and style. It has become today a distinctive architectural phenomenon of remarkable significance and value, perceived as a visual symbol and identity vessel that conveys metaphysical meanings. This is related, as this paper argues, to changing the perception of the “sacred” in Muslim societies and its relationship with the secular. Many grand mosques have been built accordingly with iconic architecture,
particularly state mosques. Such a metamorphosis altered mosque’s semiology and, consequently, people’s related collective memory.

This paper investigates the metamorphosis that took place in the concept of the sacred and its impact on changing the status of the mosque, its semiological connotation, and expressive forms, with a special focus on contemporary grand state mosques in general. The paper is based on an intellectual and logical argumentation (contextualization and problematization) of the metamorphosis of state mosque semiotics without focusing on any specific case studies; however, it will draw on some examples from the Arab countries specifically.

2. Metamorphosis of the contemporary mosque
Starting from the Prophet’s mosque in Medina, the importance of the mosque, as revealed in early Islamic history books, was attributable to its function and role as a place of worship and a political, social and economic center. It was used as shelter, an educational institution, a health care facility and even as a prison (Rasdi, 2002). Adoption and conversion of pre-Islamic temples into mosques such as the Umayyad mosques in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo indicate that mosques existed to accommodate certain uses and functions with no special value given to its architecture. This fact is evident in many early Islamic manuscripts such as “Albayan fi Ahkam Albunyan” (Insight on Building Regulations) and Al Zarkashi’s manuscript of “Ilam Alsajid bi Ahkam Al Masajid” (Informing the Worshiper with Mosque Regulations) which did not address the mosque architecture but rather its building regulations as derived from Shari’a. Likewise, several historical and geographical records of Muslim cities referred to mosques with regard to their function and the events they hosted, and not to their architecture or building style. Al-Istakhri (d. 957 AD), for example, in his book Masalik Almamalik, described Istakhar city as: “one of the oldest and most famous cities in Faris; it is the seat of Faris’s king, and it has a mosque […]” The mosque in this case existed in a major city; however, it was mentioned in a flat manner as one of the city’s components, with no specific portrayal of its architecture. This implies that it was an ordinary building with no iconic distinctiveness.

During the Umayyad era, the mosque experienced progressive reduction in its status as a prominent public and political facility in the city. It lost most of its political value and became merely a sacred worshipping and social place. This was due to the emergence of the palace in the Umayyad era as a secular political center which dispossessed the mosque of its earlier political role. Through the Abbasid era, a new phenomenon transpired in the role and status of the mosque; that is, the emergence of the state mosque in the newly built capital cities that is particularly built by and for the ruler (Caliph) and his soldiers, as explained below. However, as the new city as a whole was the symbol of the ruler’s power at that time, the mosque, despite its remarkable architecture, did not acquire great political significance. It was one component in the planning of the new city.

During the Ayyubid era, the status of the mosque was transformed when the mosque became associated with restoring the Sunni rite. The mosque was established with a newly added function as a madrasa; therefore, to facilitate its role it was moved from the private royal zone into the public urban fabric where it restored its social function. The four Iwans mosque type emerged to accommodate the four Islamic Sunni rites. Throughout time, the madrasa and the other utilities contained within the mosque complex (such as the mausoleum) took over the mosque’s main function, as in Sultan Qalawoon and in Sultan Qaytbay Mosques in Cairo.

Most of the transformations that took place in mosque architecture were concomitant to the major political turns that occurred throughout the Islamic history. However, as the scope of the current paper is centered on the metamorphosis of the state mosque in contemporary times, the changes in the role, function and meaning of the mosque throughout the Islamic history are the subject of a forthcoming study by the author.
With the advent of the modern era and the adoption of capitalism, a new political turn took place that had its effect on the status of the mosque. Compared with its status in early Islamic history, the contemporary mosque on the one hand lost its political and social role completely to become merely a sacred worshiping place; its architecture, on the other hand, became remarkably prominent. It turned into a contemporary iconic building type that connotes visual symbolism thus became a center of attraction (Plate 1). Many international conferences and seminars were organized around the subject of mosque architecture, and lately, in 2011, Abdallatif Al Fozan Award for Mosque Architecture was established with the aim of delineating the future of mosque architecture. It stresses “the importance of the twenty first century mosque architecture that perceives and re-produces the soul of the traditional mosque ideas,” yet, with innovative/new designs. It addresses “new ideas for mosque design around the world and encourages the innovations in planning, design and technology that can form the identity of mosque architecture in the twenty first century” (http://alfozanaward.org) (Plates 2 and 3). But why is there that much concern with

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**Plate 1.**
King Abdullah Financial District grand mosque (KAFD), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (2017)

**Sources:** Photograph courtesy of Faisal Bin Zarah/Omrania. https://omrania.com/project/kafd-grand-mosque/

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**Plate 2.**
Al Fateh Grand Mosque, Manama, Bahrain (1988)

**Note:** Shortlisted in the second cycle of Al Fozan Award for Mosque Architecture (2017)

**Source:** URL1
mosque architecture? Why did such contemporary mosque metamorphosis occur? How did it affect people’s perception and collective memory of contemporary mosques? And does this metamorphosis yield to establishing a futurist heritage of mosque architecture and semiotics? To answer these questions we will first turn to exploring the causes of such metamorphosis in mosque architecture and its quintessence.

3. Causes of metamorphosis

3.1 Historiography of Islamic architecture: Eurocentric model

Historiography can be defined as “the art of writing history,” or “history of history.” It refers to “the study of the way history has been and is written – the history of historical writing.” It is “the study of history and methodology of the discipline of history” (Kippen, 2017). The field of historiography has developed in the West in the nineteenth century into a mature, authoritative and dignified field. However, disregarding all sources of Islamic historiography as those exemplified by Ibn Khaldoun, Orientalists in their studies of Islamic history (in the nineteenth c.) employed the Europocentric paradigm of historiography, a matter that impacted such studies to be profoundly modeled after their western counter-studies epistemologically; in terms of the approaches followed, themes discussed and methodologies adopted (Allahham, 2004). Islamic history as such was identified as following a linear chronological progression, divided according to the western concept of historical periodization into successive rigid dynasties (e.g. Caliphs, Umayyad, Abbasid, etc.). Likewise, “Islamic Architecture” (as orientalists named it) was perceived as a non-western, culturally specific architecture with religious self-identification. As an architecture associated with Islam, and in analogy with the western historiography of architecture, mosques as absolutely religious/sacred buildings related to Islam corresponding to churches in western architecture received special significance; they are the archetypal of Islamic architecture.

Architecture historiography, as distinguished by Leach (2010), has several approaches of reading history: style and period, biography, geography and culture, type, technique, theme and analogy. Complied with the same sequential periodization of Islamic history, orientalists classified Islamic architecture according to the western-centered “style and period” approach.
with reference to the successive Islamic political dynasties. They set forth the today widely accepted terms of style/period-related architecture such as the Umayyad architecture, Mamluk architecture, Ottoman architecture and so on, where each term refers to a distinct architectural style within a linear chronology. In that respect, mosques were studied following the “building type” approach as an architectural building-type (sacred) marked by dynasty (period)-related style (Mamluk mosque, Fatimid mosque, etc.). They were examined as having conceptually comparable attributes of western architecture. Despite their traditional settings as entirely intermeshed within Muslim cities and societies, mosques were studied as architectural objects detached from their surrounding environments; their genealogy, formation, elements, geometry, ornaments were extensively scrutinized.

In his book *Arabic Architecture and Monuments of Cairo*, Pascal Coste (1818–1826) documented a selection of monuments from Cairo focusing on mosque architecture from the Mamluk period. Later on he designed two mosques in the style of Mamluk architecture in Cairo and Alexandria which were never built; however, they might be considered as setting a new exemplar of historicizing Islamic architecture in the modern times. Coste borrowed some distinctive elements from Mamluk architecture which he employed in his designs (Rabbat, 2010). Ar-Rifai mosque in Cairo was built following the same perspective by the Hungarian architect Max Herz between 1869 and 1912 in the style of the Mamluk Sultan Hasan mosque-madrasa in Cairo.

3.2 Modernity: divine-based knowledge vs rationality
Since the advent of modernity in the Islamic world with its supremacy of rationality and renunciation of the metaphysical, Muslim societies became increasingly secularized; hence, their understanding of the inherited meaning of Islam as a religion has changed, a matter that impacted the relationship between Muslims and their places of worship (mosques). The once absolute authorities of religion are no longer, in most cases, the prime sources for one’s self-identity. The so-called “end of history” or the “end of grand meta-narratives” initiated by modernity have disturbed the deeply rooted traditional relationship of the sacred–secular, bringing about new critical formations. Several factors have led to such metamorphosis.

Two types of knowledge that prevailed in Muslim societies can be discerned in that respect; the “divine-based” knowledge that existed in Islamic history based on Islamic divine principles and value-system, and the desacralized knowledge, namely, “rationality,” which emerged in the modern era, based on scientific reasoning and repudiation of religion (anti-traditional, secular). With the prevalence of the divine-based knowledge in early Muslim societies, the sacred (holy) quality or value was an innate part of society’s nature, it pervades all dimensions of life. It was accepted and practiced by Muslims instinctively as part of the religion. Hence, the power of the sacred was the dominant component of the cognitive map of Muslim community. Art (and architecture) in that context, as Nasr (2006) contends, were related to the necessities of life and spiritual needs of the user; art was produced not for art’s sake but for the sake of life itself. “Art in fact is none other than life, integrated into the very rhythm of daily existence and not confined to the segregated space of museums or rare moments of the annual calendar [...] In a traditional civilization, [...] there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane both of which are embraced by the unifying principles and share the symbols of the tradition in question” (p. 178).

With the dominance of modern rationality promoted by capitalism and colonization over the past divine-based knowledge in Muslim societies, the dichotomy of the sacred–secular emerged, leading to normalizing the secular (anti-traditional) on the account of the sacred which lost its authorities in Muslim societies and withdrew to the private domain to reside in the worshiping places only (mosques). This resulted in diminishing the power of the sacred and the preeminence of the power of the secular, causing a loss of the deeply rooted cultural codes and creating a semantic confusion in the perception of the sacred, thus reshaping
Muslim community’s collective memory following the new secular-based system of semiotics. Such a disturbed relationship between the sacred and the secular became, since the first quarter of the twentieth century, a subject of interest in the academic comparative study of religions (Streng, 2016).

In view of that, religious architecture was identified, in opposite to “non-religious” architecture of the modern times, as a building type that serves religious purposes such as the churches and cathedrals in the western world and the mosque in the Islamic world. The mosque today became the sole contemporary sacred Islamic edifice that bears metaphysical/religious connotations with cultural continuity. However, employing such a modern expression of “religious architecture” to describe contemporary mosques has its limitations. It is appropriate as a category only in the context of modernism where architecture of everyday life is produced based on desacralized knowledge of rationality and is considered part of the secular. This very term embodies a declaration of the eclipse and confinement of religion into limited domains where it can be practiced and celebrated. This disturbed sacred-secular relationship had its reflection on the mosque’s architecture, function, uses and meaning in Muslim societies. It has gone through a process of metamorphosis; from a key public edifice into merely a worshipping place that has no substantial role in people’s lives except for performing prayers. Whereas traditional mosques maintained a central role in Muslim societies, they function today as sacred places detached from their secular surroundings. Nasr (2006) in that respect differentiates between contemporary mosques’ non-traditional religious architecture and “sacred architecture” of traditional times. This affected the semiological connotation of the contemporary mosque as well as its people’s cognitive perception of the concept of the sacred per se. That is particularly epitomized in contemporary grand mosques, specifically the state mosques.

3.3 Metamorphosis of the sacred-secular relationship

The metamorphosis that occurred in the mosque conception and architecture in that respect can be divided into three stages as follows.

3.3.1 The prevalence of the sacred. Early mosques, beginning from Prophet Mohammad’s mosque in Medina, were built in a very simple form: prayer hall with adjacent court built, as in later mosques, in the same ordinary architectural style and building materials prevalent in society (Elkhateeb et al., 2018); however, they embodied a transcendent sacred character that was accepted and shared by all members of the Muslim community. In a sacred-based society, the sacredness of the mosque was but a part of the intrinsic concept of the sacred prevailed in the Muslim society and contributed to shaping its solidarity and collective memory. Authentically, sacred places ought to have had the power to evoke an effective response, and many sacred places do precisely that. The sacred then maintained its authority and power over the secular in Muslim societies where all aspects of life were governed by sacred principles; however, the sacred was in many cases manifested in a secular guise such as ideas, symbols and edifices. The mosque, as a manifestation of the sacred, became sanctified over time, gaining special sacred significance, not because of its architectural style or form, but because of the many functions it delivered for believers. The sacred action of prayer and worship in the mosque establishes the relationship between the sacred (divine) and the secular (human world). As Otto and van der Leeuw contend, the forms (part of which is the mosque) through which the sacred is expressed are secondary and are simply reactions to the sacred (Streng, 2016). Mosque architecture as such can be viewed as a secondary secular expressive physical form of the metaphysical quality of the sacred; therefore not much attention at early Islamic times was paid to its aesthetic qualities and style. At the time when Muslims attempted to establish their distinctive identity, differentiated from people of other religions, they used in building their mosques many
architectural elements from previous civilizations, a matter that indicates that early mosques' architectural style was of a marginal importance. This connotes that the sacredness of a place is related to the religious functions it performs and not because of the peculiar physical or aesthetic qualities it possesses.

3.3.2 Amalgamation of the sacred–secular. The middle and late Islamic times have passed through political periods in which the sacred dimension was lessened at the account of the secular. At certain periods it was an amalgamation of both, however, at others the secular dominated. According to Ibn Khaldoun (n.d., d. 1406 AD) in his “Introduction”, Islamic political history has passed through several phases associated with the prevailing type of political rule. Ibn Khaldoun classified these phases into “Caliphate mode,” “Political Monarchy mode” and the “Natural Political Monarchy mode.” The Political Monarchy mode, according to Ibn Khaldoun, transpired during the reign of Abd-al-Malik bin Marwan’s sons in the Umayyad dynasty and of Al-Rashid’s sons in the Abbasid dynasty. Islamic states then tended to embrace the sacred principles derived from Shari’a with the secular ones, however, gradually the secular tendency dominated over the sacred, turning the ruling system into a “Natural Political Monarchy.” This change in the political ruling mode has its effect on architecture. To clarify this, the architecture found during these periods can be classified according to its mechanisms of production and the type of knowledge governing it into two types: first, popular architecture produced by the population themselves using their sacred knowledge derived from the Islamic law, and second, the authoritarian architecture produced by the different political modes prevailed during this period. This type of architecture did not adhere to the Islamic mechanisms of built environment production as derived from Shari’a, but was governed by secular rules dictated by the power holders (the caliphate, governors and royalties). A phenomenon of establishing royal cities associated with the names of their rulers occurred during the late Umayyad and Abbasid periods such as Wasit city of Al-Hajjaj, Ar-Ramleh of Suleiman bin Abdul Malik, Samarra of Al-Mu’tasim and Al-Mutawakiliyyah of Al-Mutawakkil to name some. For security purposes, rulers in these new cities isolated their palaces in private “royal” zones where mosques were exclusively used by the ruler and his soldiers, such as Samarra Mosque and Abu Dulaf Mosque in Al Mutawakliyah (Plate 4). They were rather fort mosques that belong to the ruler and not to the public who had their own mosques, i.e., they were mosques of the

Plate 4. Abu-Al Duluf Mosque in Al Mutawakiliya City, Iraq (848–851 AD)

Source: URL2
authorities thus were impressive in their architecture. Such royal mosques were distinguished from the popular mosques in that while the former tends to incline more toward the secular, the latter reflect the sacred dimension of its society as existed in the early Islamic eras. It can be said that popular mosques formed a continuation of mosque architecture through Islamic history whereas the architecture of the authoritarian mosques constitutes a break and transformation in mosque architecture.

With the decline of the phenomenon of establishing new royal cities, a new phenomenon began to occur in the authoritarian architecture. Rulers (in the Fatimid and Mamluk dynasties) started to build “Sultani” mosques that are associated with their names such as Al Azhar, Al Hakim and Sultan Hassan mosques. Moreover, the mosque was used since the Fatimid era, especially in the capital city of Cairo, as a political tool, either as an Islamic symbol that reflects the Islamic faith of the ruling system so as to stimulate people’s loyalty, or as a community-related center to promote the Islamic rite of the ruling system (the Sunni rite in the Ayyubid era). Since the Ayyubid era, mosques were mostly directed to the general public and not to the rulers; they were located in the public areas and used by the public. However, being associated with their names, rules were preoccupied with their architecture; they used lavish materials and built them with remarkable architecture and details. This was very much apparent in most Mamluki Sultans’ mosques. This phenomenon continued throughout the Ottoman era as in Sultanahmet mosque in Istanbul. However, although these mosques retained their social dimension and cohesion with the public, they did not follow the Islamic mechanisms of built environment production. They are part of the authoritarian architecture produced by the power holders following their own secular mechanisms. These mosques established a new secular model of mosque architecture in terms of their splendor architecture and deep implicit connotations and societal codes.

3.3.3 Prevalence of the secular over the sacred

Today, amid a secular culture and the confinement of the sacred within particular spaces and symbols, the distinctiveness of the mosque as a sacred space and its reference to the ultimate context of culture are often expressed in the conviction that sacred space is not arbitrary. It is, as Brereton asserts, objectively “different from the surrounding area, for it is not a place of wholly human creation or choice. Rather, its significance is grounded in its unique character, a character that no purely human action can confer on it” (Brereton, 2005). This shift in modern consciousness regarding the sacred, represented in Brereton and some other scholars’ viewpoint, establishes what might be considered as, in contrast to its traditional perception, the modern perception of the mosque as a distinctive sacred space, separated from its living surrounding. It embodies a metamorphosis in the meaning of the sacred per se. The tradition articulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher and developed by Rudolf Otto links the perception of holiness to religious emotions. This view of the sacred space as a lens for meaning led to exploiting the architecture of the mosque to convey certain (political in many cases) connotations and symbols as the case in many contemporary grand state mosques. The contemporary mosque as such is facing what can be depicted, using Arkoun’s (1994) words, a “semiological deterioration.”

4. Grand (state) mosques

4.1 Changing semiotics from the sacred to secular power metaphor

Starting from the Umayyad era, the relationship between politics and architecture has been evident. Powerful leaders and ruling regimes have used the built environment as an expressive form of power and authority. However, since the divine-based knowledge dominated the Muslim society, manifestations of such acts were directed toward secular buildings, therefore the concept of the ruler’s palace, as a secular building, emerged, followed by erecting new cities holding the names of their rulers, as mentioned above.
This trend has come to an end with the decline of the sacredness of the culture. In the new secular-oriented culture, expressions of power and identity transpired within sacred buildings, mainly mosques. Put differently, we can think of the Islamic culture, as transpired through history, as having two layers, sacred and secular; if one layer is strong, power as a secular entity is manifested in the built environment through the other layer. As such, the sacred–secular inclination of Islamic culture has a converse relationship with the sacred–secular type of edifice that acts as a physical sign vehicle for expressing power. This is today very clear in grand state mosques.

Building mosques with impressive monumental architectural images (e.g. Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi (Plate 5), and King Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca (Plate 6)) to demonstrate, as a prime purpose, the power of their rulers and to support their regime through revealing a representative image of a national identity of an Islamic stance, with a subsidiary role for worship has become a prevalent phenomenon in many countries today. State mosques are grand structures commissioned by government authorities to express the

Plate 5.
Sheikh Zayed grand mosque in Abu Dhabi

Source: URL3

Plate 6.
King Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca

Source: URL4
state’s commitment to Islam or to stand as a symbol of national purposes (Serageldin, 1990). Architectural iconism and monumentality is being sought by their patrons to distinguish them from the surrounding built environment. This (modern) approach to mosque architecture started in the nineteenth century when the sacred was subjugated by the secular. In the 1830s Mohammad Ali of Egypt sought to show his power through building a mosque in Cairo as prestigious as those of Ottoman sultans (Arkoun, 1994, p. 270). Mosques in this category have been exploited for certain political ends. These mosques are defiled of their true purpose; they in effect constitute symbolic statements of power and communicative messages of their rulers’ power and national sovereignty rather than signs of piety. The state mosque can be seen, as Holod and Khan (1997) maintain, as one of the means by which legitimization of political authority occurs through reference to Islamic symbols. Although believers who perform prayers in such mosques are not in many cases aware of the real political message embodied in those mosques, it unconsciously affects their perception of the sacred (e.g. the study of Mina Najafi and Mohd Shariff, 2011). By evoking the nationalistic (Islamic) emotions of the masses and maneuvering their sentiments, governments aim to maintain their status and position in society. In that respect, Lefebvre (1997) contends that societies, namely, the hegemonic class, produce their social spaces through which they practice power. He states that social space “becomes the metaphorical and quasi metaphysical underpinning of a society, this by virtue of a play of substitutions in which the religious and political realms symbolically (and ceremonially) exchange attributes – the attributes of power; in this way the authority of the sacred and the sacred aspect of authority are transferred back and forth” (Lefebvre, 1997, p. 143).

Such a change in the function, connotation and uses of contemporary state mosques reveal evidence of a collapse of the traditionally accepted mosque semiotics, demonstrating a semiological metamorphosis of contemporary mosque architecture. In semiological terms, the traditional mosque’s signified denotative and connotative meanings were consistent; the first pertains to the function of the mosque as a common public and worshiping place, while the latter represents its sacred meaning as the house of Allah. This was reflected in the visual image of the signifier (physical architecture) which was of a secondary significance compared to its signified feature. However, in the contemporary secular-oriented culture the denotative meaning was reduced to the mosque’s role as a worship place in which people can gather only at certain times, thus its denotative meaning has changed from being a place attached to people’s lives uninterruptedly, into an as-needed place with limited role in people’s lives, specifically worship. The degraded denotative meaning of the contemporary mosque was compensated for by intentional new meaning. The mosque’s connotative meaning as a sacred place was expanded and used to symbolize a higher level or “second order” (to use Barthes expression Gottdiener, 1995) secular connotation. The traditionally accepted sacred connotation of the mosque has been exploited as a sign vehicle to express the power of its patron or government and to promote an identity to support and legitimize their rule. This can be regarded as a simulacrum (a sign that refers to other signs), according to Baudrillard (1981). As such, contemporary state mosques have given precedence to the secular (simulacrum) political connotations over the sacred religious ones, where the inherent sacredness in such grand mosques is used as a symbolic tool representing the state power and authority; i.e. the sacred has turned into a meta-cognitive secular power metaphor. The simulacrum connotative layer is expressed through the signifier _per se_ by means of its architecture as a communicative agent. Architecture is used as an advertising sign of the secular politicization of the contemporary state mosque, repetitiously emitting cognitive messages of the patron’s intentions to the worshippers. This metamorphosis in the mosque’s semiology has been intentionally naturalized and normalized in Muslim societies to become part of their cultural recognized codes.
The contemporary mosque, hence, is facing a semantic confusion or what can be described as a “crisis of meaning,” resulted from disturbing the deeply rooted collective cultural codes of the sacred.

Accordingly, the conventional signifier–signified relationship of the mosque has been transformed. Whereas the signifier–signified elements of the traditional mosque had a reverse relationship as pertaining to its sacred–secular character, they have today a positive relationship, where the strength of the first is expressed through the strength of the latter; the more iconic the signifier, the more sacred it is. Grand state mosque in most cases are consciously designed as impressive, identifiable edifices, characterized by massive size and significant location and usually divorced from their urban surroundings (Plates 7 and 8). Hence, with such physical characteristics, state mosques in most cases act as a distinct building type that is not integrated with the community it serves, a matter that leads to a breakdown in the inhabitants’ physical relationship with their mosques. They are basically an expression of hegemony, conveying their patrons’ political power and strength to the subject populace, to consolidate their authority.

Note: Shortlisted in the third cycle of Al Fozan Award for Mosque Architecture (January 2019)
Source: URL5
This metamorphosis has turned the signifier into an untruthful simulacrum, or what some refer to as a mosque of Dirar as opposed to the mosque of piety, as mentioned in Surat Al Tawba [9:107–109]:

And [there are] those [hypocrites] who took for themselves a mosque for causing harm and disbelief and division among the believers and as a station for whoever had warred against Allah and His Messenger before. And they will surely swear, “We intended only the best.” And Allah testifies that indeed they are liars [107] Do not stand [for prayer] within it—ever. A mosque founded on righteousness from the first day is more worthy for you to stand in. Within it are men who love to purify themselves; and Allah loves those who purify themselves [108] Then is one who laid the foundation of his building on righteousness [with fear] from Allah and [seeking] His approval better or one who laid the foundation of his building on the edge of a bank about to collapse, so it collapsed with him into the fire of Hell? And Allah does not guide the wrongdoing people [109].

In the above verses, two types of mosques are distinguished according to the intention of their patrons, or semiotically, their connotative meaning. As was the case in traditional mosques, the connotative meaning of the mosque should match straightforwardly with its worshiping purpose, i.e., its denotative and connotative meanings should be in line. If the connotative meaning deviates from the denotative meaning and embodies hypocrisy or a tendency to attain good reputation (untruthful simulacrum), as in many contemporary grand state mosques, then, according to many Muslim scholars as Al Qurtubi declared, consider it as Masjid Dirar that is not based on righteousness and piety.

Contemporary state mosques with its new symbolism and semantic meanings have contributed in redefining the concept of the contemporary mosque in general. State mosques with its remarkable, iconic architecture constitute a model for private mosques produced by the public. This led to the transformation in the conception, collective memory and architectural style of the mosque; the more splendor the mosque’s architecture is, the higher the mosque’s status and emotional sacred dimension of its patron. The vast number of conferences held annually and the institutions established throughout the Islamic world that seek to delineate the future of mosque architecture is but a clear evidence of this reality; a reality that reflects a crisis in the semiotics of the contemporary mosque and a transformation in its related societal collective memory.

5. Conclusion

The metamorphosis that the contemporary mosque is experiencing today as a religious edifice with symbolic connotations and architectural iconicism is but an effect of the changes that occurred, as a result of modernity, in the concept of the sacred and its relationship to the secular in contemporary Muslim communities. Such conceptual changes led to altering the deeply rooted cultural codes, to be replaced by new intentional codes used today as a vehicle of communication in mosque architecture, especially in grand state mosques. It is a mutual process; the contemporary mosque is affected by the changing cultural codes as well as it affects them.

In response to the secularization of contemporary Muslim societies, the sacred in many cases, including the connotation of the contemporary mosque, is subjugated to the secular. The mosque today consists of two layers: the manifested layer which represents the visual signifier, and the embodied layer that represents the denotative and connotative meanings. Such a dual composition did not exist in traditional mosques; however, in contemporary mosques the signified (secular) is prioritized to reflect the embodied layer. The sacred part of the latter layer which lies in the denotative meaning is reduced to its function as a worshiping place, whereas the connotative higher order meaning is dedicated to serve as a secular metaphor (of power in state mosques). In that sense, what the audience receives as a sacred sign is a simulacrum, or an untruthful representation.

Based on the above, the question of delineating the future or the new paradigm of mosque architecture that had preoccupied many scholars and institutions today should be reformulated
into how to revive the status of the mosque as existed in the early Islamic history. Most of the contemporary approaches that occurred in that respect tackled the issue from a formalistic standpoint. Rasdi (2002), for example, employs the concept of simplicity and the return to nature in the form of organic architecture. Al Naim (2018a, b) from Al Fozan Award calls for a futuristic approach that embodies a few related concepts such as spatial breadth, flexibility and visibility. These approaches attempt to create a new vision of mosque architecture that fits with the spirit of the age, yet, maintain continuity with Islamic heritage. Al Naim in that respect calls for relinquishing the historicity of mosque architecture and to establishing a “parallel heritage” of mosque architecture that focuses on the adjustments of the historical mosque formations, and releasing substituent hybrid visualizations. “It is an attempt to reach a compromise between a non-cloned historic architecture and displaying conformation to its stakes; reproduce distinct formations rather than the stagnant conventional ones” (Al Naim, 2018c). Such a concern in mosque architecture, as explored in this paper, is but a result of the metamorphosis that occurred in the status of the contemporary mosque. Those contemporary approaches are in fact leading, against the calls, to disruption of the Islamic heritage and yielding to establishing a new (futuristic) mosque heritage. The essence of the issue does not lie in the mosque’s formal appearance or architecture as much as in its sacred–secular essence which has been transformed due to the metamorphosis the mosque went through. The focus should be placed on the status of the mosque and its perception among the Muslim society rather than on its architecture. The mosque status can thus be reestablished only by reviving the sacred–secular relationship as existed in traditional Muslim communities, a matter that necessitates a new metamorphosis in the mosque status in terms of its role, function and meaning, thus its architecture. The extent of this subject matter is beyond the scope of this paper, thus it is open for further debate where there appears to be, at least at this stage, more questions than answers.

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