

Possibilities of Modern Architecture

INOUE Shōichi

Abstract

The 19th Century Rokumeikan and the former World Trade Center of the 20th Century transcend time and space to resonate with one another. Both use elements of Islamic designs. I aim to explore whether there is an architectural meaning by digging deeper into this topic.

Rokumeikan

Many are familiar with the Rokumeikan, which was built in 1883. It is described in high school and middle school history classes as a place for social exchange that symbolizes the Westernization policies of the Meiji government. It is well known that balls were held there for men in tailcoats and women in dresses.

The presence of Indo-Islamic elements in the Rokumeikan's design, however, is not very well known. Many researchers largely overlook this aspect.

The Rokumeikan was designed by Josiah Conder, who was invited by the Japanese government to contribute to architectural planning. He was a so-called *oyatoi gaikokujin* (a “foreign advisor” hired by the government to assist in Westernization). He taught at the Imperial College of Engineering, the precursor to the Department of Engineering at the University of Tokyo.

He trained in architecture in the 1870s in Great Britain. He was a student at a time when there was still enthusiasm for the Gothic Revival style.

It was also a time when there was great interest in the Orient in Western thought; Middle Eastern and Indian architecture drew much attention. Architects mainly experimented with Oriental styles when designing leisure facilities. This was the kind of era in which Conder lived.

Furthermore, Conder studied at the South Kensington Royal College of Art. His aspirations in architecture grew at this school, which was the foundation of the Gothic Revival movement. There were also many people there interested in the Orient.

Conder arrived in Japan in 1877 and began working in architectural planning. His works often displayed Gothic and Islamic influence.

The building features Islamic styling. One can see this, for example, in the pillars on the second story veranda, reminiscent of the neck of a bottle. Here, there is reference to the pillars frequently seen in the palaces of Maharajas. The decorations of the railing are also clearly done in arabesque.

It is unlikely that Conder's Japanese counterparts requested an Indo-Islamic style. They wanted to show Western diplomats that Japan was Westernized; therefore, it is difficult to imagine that they had any other expectations.

The inclusion of an Indo-Islamic style must have been Conder's personal choice. I believe this reflects the fervent interest in the Orient that was slowly gaining ground in Great Britain. Additionally, as a bridge between the West and Japan, it may have made sense to him to use Indo-Islamic style.

These types of designs were frequently seen in leisure facilities in Europe, such as amusement parks, gambling houses, and other entertainment centers. An exotic, Oriental style put people in a good mood in these places of amusement.

This must be the reason that Pierre Loti from France wrote, "It looks like a public bath in our country."

The Japanese government had likely wanted a more formal and sophisticated architectural style. Conder was perhaps too playful, or, to put it bluntly, he may have gone too far with the leisure theme.

However, the Japanese authorities would not have noticed his light, non-serious touch. Instead, they would have accepted it as a European-style site for social exchange. Even today, many historians are unaware of this aspect when discussing the Rokumeikan. History books have generally taken it as a representative example of Westernization, and only a handful of architectural historians appreciate the Islamic touches in the building's style.

World Trade Center

The World Trade Center in New York City was destroyed on September 11, 2001 by an act of terrorism.

The sight of the two skyscrapers was once a symbol of late 20th-century America. I saw it as a sign of American capitalism, whose power was spreading around the world. It is also generally thought that this is why it was targeted by Islamic fundamentalists.

As many architects know, the World Trade Center had Islamic-style arches. The lower portion of the arches forked into two and extended upward as vertical lines along the window frames. The way they were divided closely resembled arches often

seen in the Middle East.

The World Trade Center was built in 1973, designed by Minoru Yamasaki, a Nikkei (second generation) Japanese-American. Behind the beautiful appearance of the buildings was an unusually detail-oriented architect. This is why it has often been looked on lightly, with some saying, "Yamasaki only dressed it up to look pretty."

The design borrows heavily from Gothic and Islamic forms. It stands out in its ability to incorporate these styles into modern design.

Yamasaki was also hired to work in Saudi Arabia. There, the drawings he made of the Dharan Airport were used on the country's paper currency. The king seems to have been pleased with the arabesque design of the walls.

Yamasaki was Japanese, born in the U.S. He must have often thought his family coming to America from Japan. He seems to have sought to express the connection of East and West in his work. This may be one reason his mind was drawn to Islamic forms.

Yamasaki had little in common with Conder. Yet, their interest in Islamic-style designs came from a similar inner attitude; they both wanted to project the story of "East meets West" into architecture.

Architect Laurie Kahn wrote an opinion piece for an online magazine soon after 9-11. In it, she gave a startling reason for the attack on the World Trade Center.

She argued that Yamasaki had dressed up the stronghold of capitalism in Islamic style and that Islamic fundamentalists saw this as blasphemy to Islam. That is why the World Trade Center was attacked.

Her point is known in Japan as well. It was presented in a positive light by Makiko Iizuka to her readers (*9-11 no mokuteki o tsukutta otoko* [The man who created the target for 9-11], 2010).

I am not convinced by her argument. I think it is highly unlikely that this was the case.

The terrorist leader Mohamed Atta had taken lessons in architecture at Cairo University. Thus, he may have recognized the Islamic elements of the World Trade Center. However, the other terrorists did not have such an eye for architecture, and I cannot imagine they would have understood something like this. I disagree with Kahn and Iizuka's interpretation.

Yamasaki also gave an Islamic touch to the North Shore Congregation Israel synagogue. In terms of being an affront to Islam, this would be a more accurate target than the World Trade Center. In this case, I could understand the reasoning that it is disrespectful to Islam. However, the terrorists did not target the synagogue, instead they attacked the enormous square building in New York. The way it stood out

should be understood as a reason it was targeted.

In the cases of both Rokumeikan and the World Trade Center, the architect's addition of Islamic stylistic elements has been ignored. I would like to say that, including this point, the two buildings resonate with each other.