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Genesis of the national mosque

Pakistan and the nature of nationalism

The rise of Hindu nationalism during the first decades of the present century aroused increasing disquiet among the Muslim leaders of India. For the first time they began to speak of a Muslim nation (*qawm*) and a separate Muslim state. There was, however, a great deal of uncertainty as to the nature of nationalism in this case.

A resolution confirmed by the first congress of the Indian Communist party in 1943 stated:

"Every section of the Indian people which has a continuous territory as its homeland, common historical tradition, common language, culture, psychological make-up and common economic life would be recognized as a distinct nationality with the right to exist as an autonomous state within the free Indian union or federation, and will have the right to secede from it if it may so desire..." "Thus Free India of tomorrow would be a federation or union of autonomous states of the various nationalities such as Pathans, Western Punjabis (pre-dominantly Muslims), Sikhs, Sindhis..."

The state of Pakistan that came into being in 1947 did not have a structure in harmony with this concept. The areas cut out of the Indian sub-continent to form the geography of the new country were heterogenous in almost every respect. The tribal areas of the North West Frontier, Baluchistan and Sind, were all dependent on very different conditions and traditions. Punjab, which had up till then been an ethnical unity, was parted, and East Bengal separated from the rest of the country by almost 1 000 miles of Indian territory.

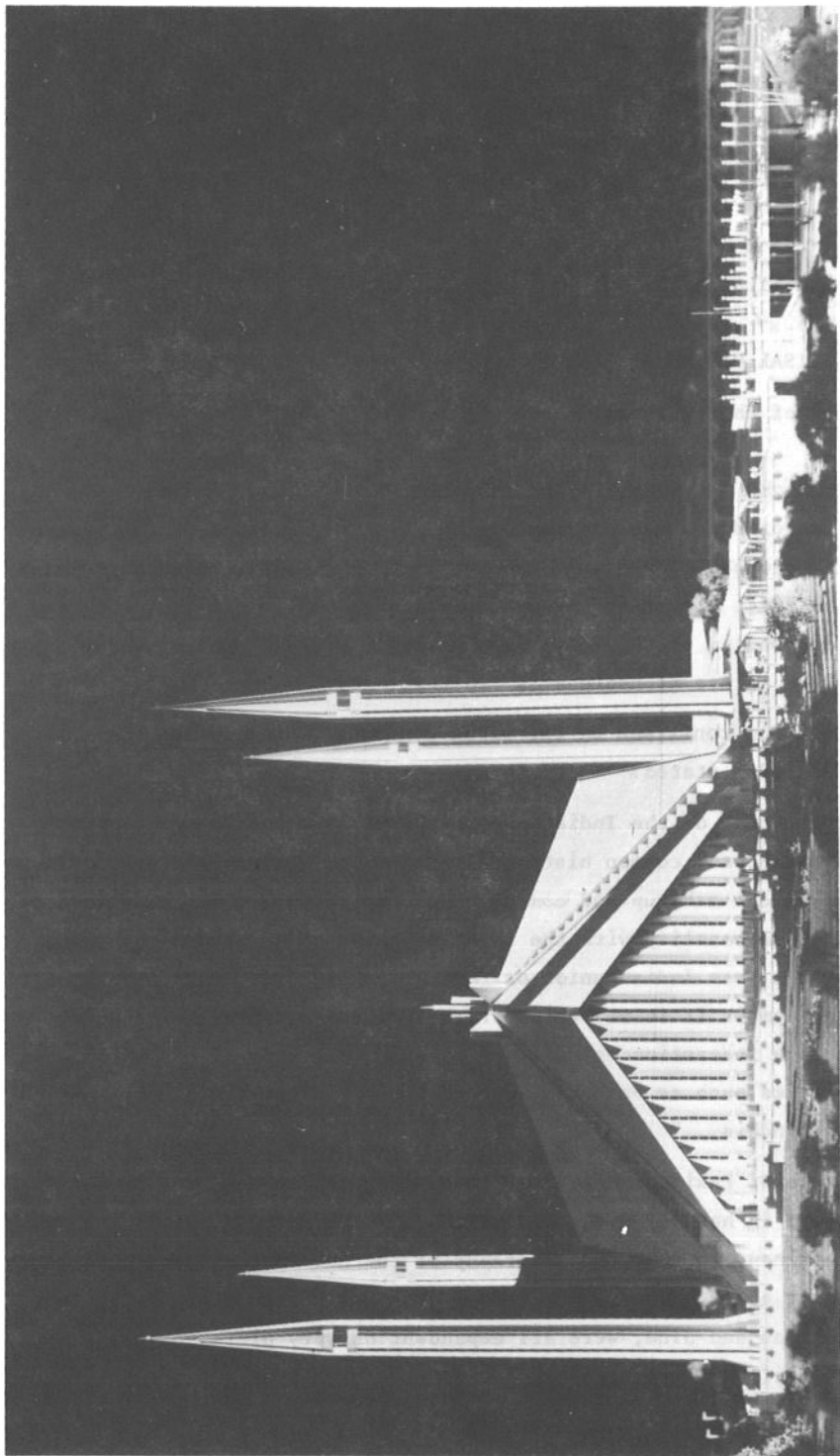


Figure 1: Shah Faisal Masjid

The only unifying factor, the whole *raison d'être* of Pakistan, was the religion of Islam and its cultural parameters. Historians of religion have characterized the rôle of Islam in South Asia before and after Partition in 1947; Wilfred Cantwell Smith put it:

"Ideologically it was not a territorial or an economic or a linguistic or even, strictly, a national community that was seeking a state, but a religious community. The drive for an Islamic state in India was in origin not a process by which a state sought Islamicness but one by which Islam sought a state."

Karachi and 'the forecourt of the nation'

When the borders of Pakistan had been settled the new Islamic state still needed a national centre and focus for the faithful.

At partition, New Delhi had been allotted to India while Pakistan was left without an adequate capital. The only great modern city in the country was Karachi which, by means of its harbour, its airlines and cultural institutions, was linked to the rest of the world.

During the first period Karachi functioned as a temporary capital, and, in 1952, the Greater Karachi Plan was prepared in order to confirm its status. According to the plan the Capital would have a twofold function, one of practical nature, the other ideological:

"It will manifest to the people of Pakistan and to the world the ideal for which the state stands. The vision and fate of the nation will be materialized by artistic and architectural means."

As unifying elements for the new capital, the authors of the plan suggested Bunder Road and a focus comprising a mosque and a square, 'the forecourt of the nation'. A number of buildings for the state authority and cultural institutions encompassed the square, and a monument to Ali Jinnah - Quaid-I-Azam - was planned in its centre. The scheme was on a large scale; the central axis was one mile longer than Raj Path in Delhi, and 'the forecourt of the nation' was planned to hold one million Muslims when they gathered for national celebrations and Eid prayers.

The influence of the Greater Karachi Plan was, however, limited due to later political changes. The monument to Ali Jinnah was built in Karachi, his native place, but 'the forecourt of the nation' took shape in quite another environment.

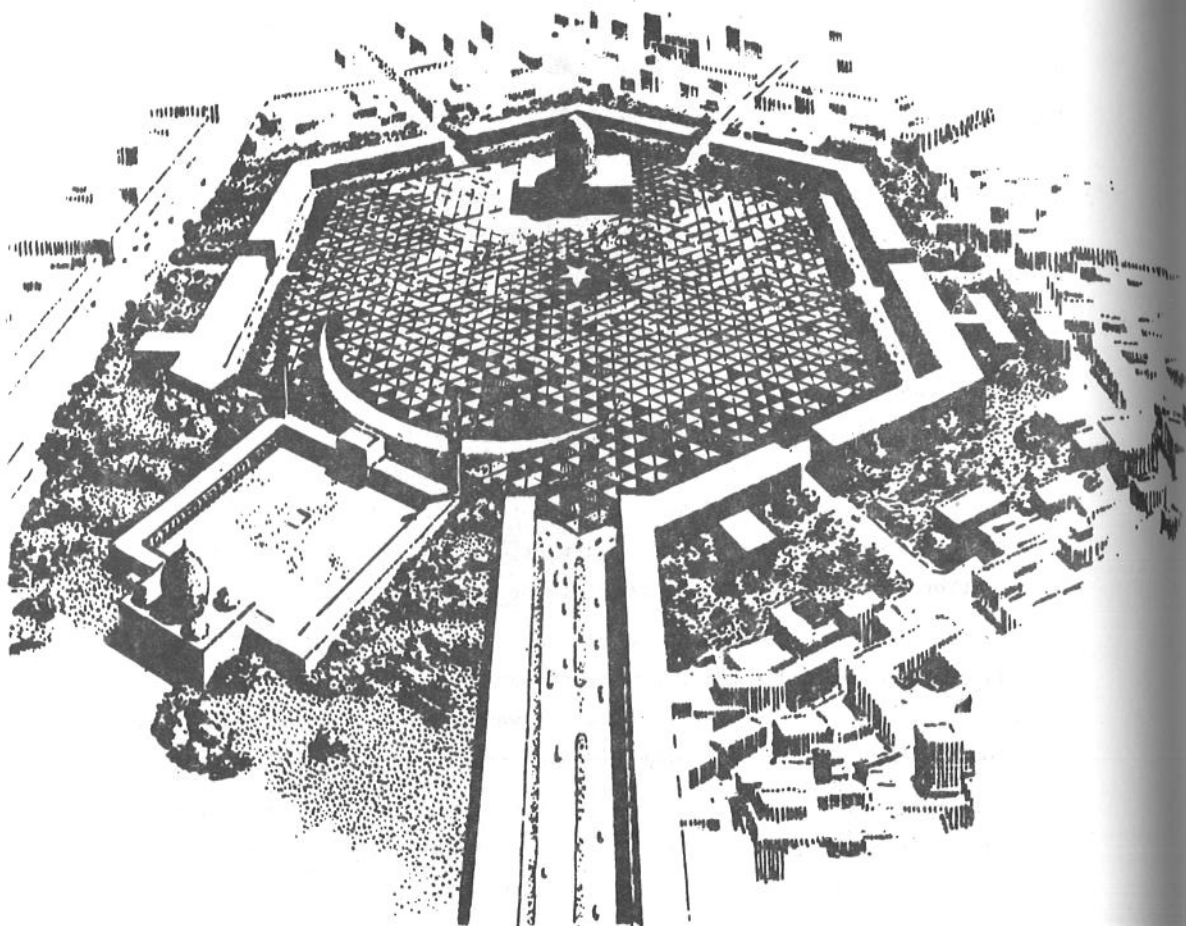


Figure 2. 'The forecourt of the nation'

Rational approach - Islamabad

In October, 1958, field marshal Ayub Khan grasped the reins of power. He held the opinion that contact with business life had a corrupting influence on government servants and that in Karachi these were exposed to political agitation. Consequently he recommended the transfer of the administrative functions to a site where they could be effectively isolated. The locality selected was the Potwar plateau, almost 1400 miles

from Karachi and the Makran coast.

At a cabinet meeting in February, 1960, the new capital was named *Islamabad*. Ayub's regime looked to the bureaucracy and the army for its support. The new capital was located close to the old cantonment city of Rawalpindi. A Greek enterprise, Doxiadis Associates, was asked to prepare the masterplan. The basic idea, which Constantinos A. Doxiadis styled 'dynapolis', was of a city expanding in a linear fanshape. In

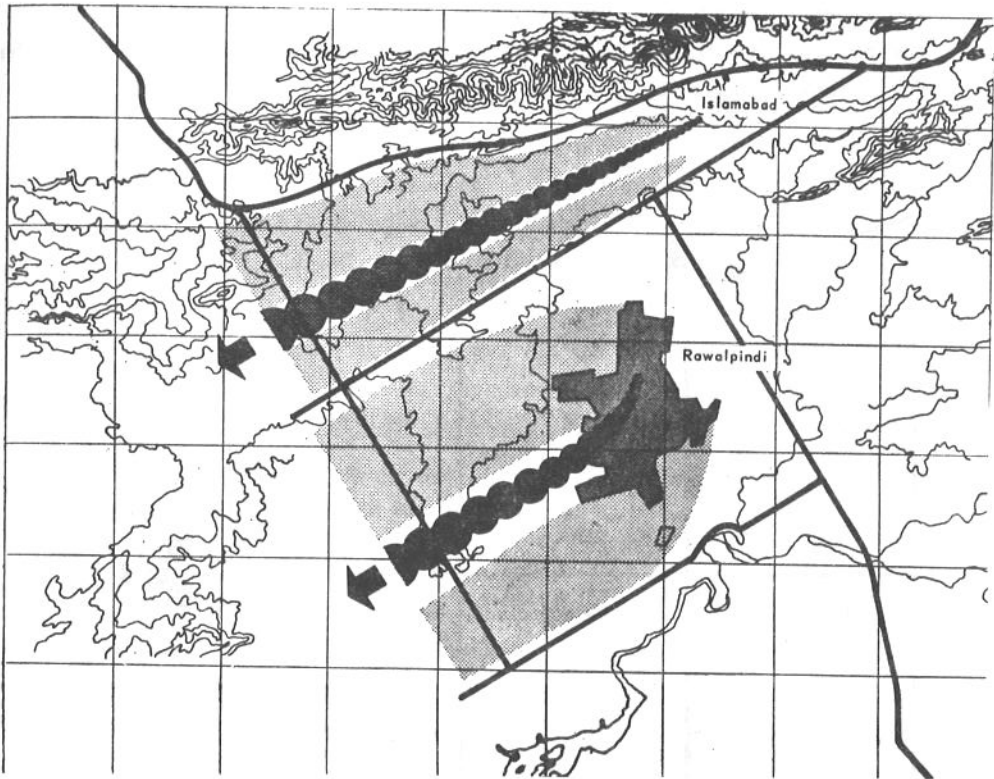


Figure 3: Islamabad-Rawalpindi, 'dynapolis'

one major respect, however, he compromised. Whereas the buildings for local government were planned to expand gradually, the buildings for national government were treated as a fixed focus on the point of the fan.

The national group of buildings included the foreign office and the assembly, and was dominated by the presidential palace. The great mosque - once the rallying point of 'the forecourt of the nation' - was no longer part of the ensemble. It had been placed on the northern fringe of the city, on its own axis. In its hilly terrain it will stand out as an isolated monument. Thus the unity of the Karachi scheme is lost. The siting of the main buildings of Islamabad can be read in accordance with the constitution of 1962, that proclaimed Pakistan a secularized state. The general layout of Islamabad comprised a hierarchy of squares from the sector, calculated for 30 - 40.000 people, Community Class I, to the family unit, Community Class V.

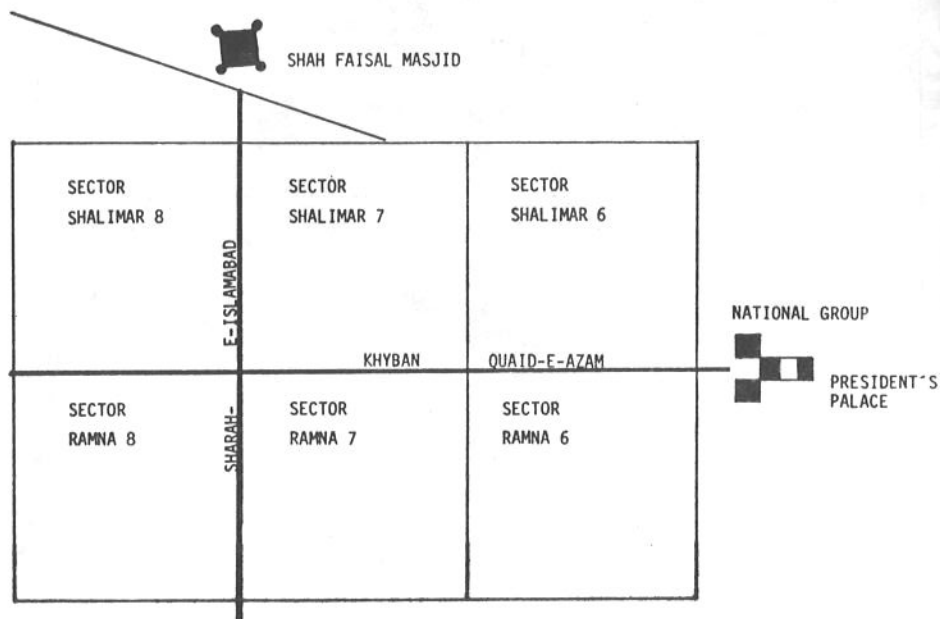


Figure 4: Diagram of Islamabad, sectors 6-8, main axis and main buildings.

Hierarchy of mosques - Shah Faisal Masjid

The strict grid of Doxiadis' masterplan was considered to be in accordance with Islam:

"Every large and important synthesis of Islamic culture is based on pure geometry..."

In every sector and sub-sector a mosque on an adequate scale supports this interpretation. A sector mosque is a rather large affair but it is, to be sure, surpassed by the national mosque for about 120.000 people.

International competition

In April, 1966, the late King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, during a visit to Islamabad, was shown the site of the grand mosque and offered to defray the total expenditure to be incurred by its construction. In October next year the Capital Development Authority (CDA) was still uncertain as to the choice of the architect: A letter from N.A.Faruqi, then acting chairman of the board, stated:

"... the best thing would be to hold a competition ... from among architects in Pakistan only. This would incidentally remove the main complaint of our architects that they are not being given an opportunity to design better buildings in Islamabad ... If this competition fails to produce a worthwhile design, we should be justified in going to non-Pakistani Muslim architects."

The board of the CDA decided,

"... that for a project of such importance and this magnitude it would be best to hold an international competition. At the same time it was felt essential that the competition should be restricted to Muslim architects of the world."

In March, 1969, the competition was declared open. The regulations were announced to be in accordance with those formed by the Union Internationale des Architectes (UIA) in Paris. The jury was composed of five members. Besides K.M. Sheikh, chairman of the CIA at this instance, the following architects participated: Samir Abu Bakar Ba Ghaffar of Saudi Arabia, Muzharul Islam of Pakistan, Abtullah Kuran of Turkey, and Pierre El Khory of Lebanon; Melie Birsell of Turkey and Anwar Said of Pakistan

were appointed assistant members. 38 projects from 12 different countries appeared, and in November 1969, the members of the jury gathered in Rawalpindi to examine the material sent in.

Jury's report

The report of the Rawalpindi meetings is rather detailed and provides a fair idea of how the jury arrived at the final verdict. A discussion on the procedure opened the first day's meeting, followed by the elimination of 13 projects "which did not come up to the minimum acceptable level". After further consideration another 9 projects were excluded, "since they could not carry the basic design ideas to their logical structural and architectural conclusions", or "did not fit the contemporary planning and design ideals of the modern city of Islamabad".

The second day the jury, after a lengthy discussion put up the following set of criteria:

- a site development and landscaping
- b plan organization and circulation
- c structure
- d design elements

It is evident from this list that to the jury space and space organization were paramount, and that the structure and its detailing in this case were considered of secondary importance.

The second day ended with the elimination of 9 projects "which did not satisfy the requirements".

The third day the remaining 7 projects were scrutinized. After the elimination of two "less successful than the others", the members of the jury voted and no. 27 was declared winner by four votes to one, "It was felt that this design would be suitable as a mosque and a national monument for Islamabad."

The second prize was unanimously awarded to project no.17, in true harmony with the criteria put up the second day:

"Its handling of the structural concept and the organization of spaces was highly appreciated."

The structure comprised a translucent polyester skin mounted on turbulent

steel masts. The sole minaret, of concrete, would have looked rather like the minaret of the great mosque of Samarra. The second prize winners were architects Eren Cengiz, Bülent Özer and Öner Töcan of Istanbul.

The last session of the jury ended on the 20th of November, 1969, and the agreement with the first prize winner, Vedat Dalokay, was finalized on the 17th of April, 1970.

Historical perspective

The verdict of the jury was to a great extent dependent on cultural factors and semiotics. When Islamabad was first considered N.A. Faruqi, future chairman of the CDA, published a note on the project and its historical perspective:

"Though a new country we, as a people, are an old nation, with a rich heritage. Inspired by a historical past... (we are) eager to build a new city which, in addition to being an adequate and ideal seat of government, should also reflect our cultural identity and national aspirations..."

Faruqi later on expressed his view on the architecture of Islamabad:

"... the buildings should look native to the soil ... Since we have lost the best specimens of our architecture in Delhi and Agra we are anxious to have some semblance of our architectural treasure here."

In historical perspective the move from Karachi to Islamabad was momentous. Karachi was a product of British colonialism, the last heavy link in a chain that stretched from Gibraltar to Hong Kong. The selection of the Potwar-plateau represented quite another tradition. For a state founded on Islam the location had a very special meaning. The Grand Trunk Road connected the new capital with the old centres of Istanbul, Tehran, Kabul, Agra and Dacca. This was the route of the Muslim conquerors into the heartland of India. The architectural prototypes were thus established: the classical monuments of Turkey and Iran, and the Mughal buildings of India.

Semiotics

In India as in most parts of the Muslim world today the dome and the minaret constitute the mosque even if its function has changed. In a modern mosque the *muezzin* does not climb the minaret to announce the hours of prayer. The minaret carries one or several loud-speakers and could

be designed to fit this purpose only, one thinks, but it is not. A good example is provided by the first big mosque in Islamabad, built by Khwaja-Zaheer-ud Din in Sector G 6; the minarets are of solid concrete and too thin to allow a staircase within their shells anyway. Each of them has three fake balconies. The minarets are nevertheless essential since they help the Pakistanis to identify the building as a mosque. They are essential as architectural signs. They denote the possibility of climbing the building, and they connote the innermost aspirations of the faithful, to reach Heaven.

At first glance the Shah Faisal Masjid with its four extremely high, slender minarets reminds you of Hagia Sophia and the great Ottoman mosques of Istanbul and Edirne. The Turkish structures have relevance in this context because of the nationality of the architect.

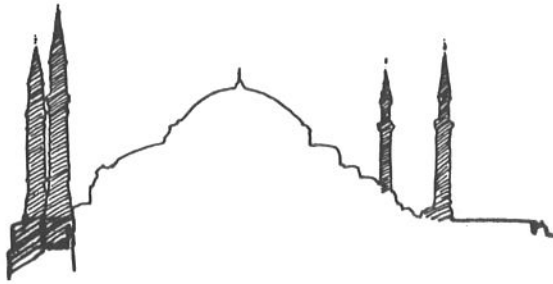


Figure 5: Hagia Sophia

If, on the other hand, we consider the form of the Shah Faisal Masjid within the tradition of the Indian sub-continent, there is another prototype of significance: the Mughal mausoleum. The mausoleum as a building type was, of course, of Persian and Central Asian origin, but in India new emphases were added by the turrets or kiosks at the corners of the structure.

The proportions of the main body to the ancillary turrets changed in course of time, as can be seen by comparing the tomb of I'timad-ud-daula (a) to Jahangir's mausoleum (b). The turrets finally took the shape of real mosque minarets, released from the main structure. The classical

example of this last concept is the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, i.e. the Taj (c):

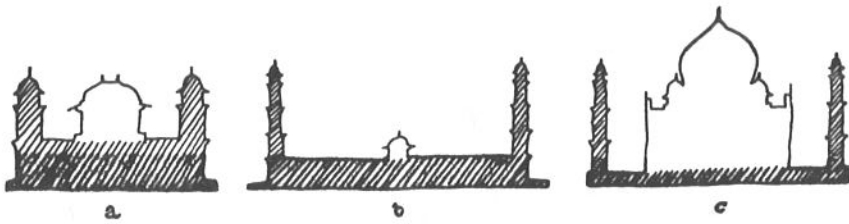


Figure 6: (a) The tomb of I'timad-ud-daula, (b) Jahangir's mausoleum, (c) Taj Mahal

The minarets of the Shah Faisal Masjid, like those of the Taj, are pure architectural signs. They contribute to the domination of the main structure. They define and consecrate the space around it. The image of the mausoleum is important since it serves to integrate the specific Turkish mosque model into a Muslim Indian context. Moreover the nationality of the architect and the national aspirations of the client merge on the higher semiotic levels; in the historical perspective the great Ottoman mosques - and the converted Hagia Sophia - make a superlative prefiguration.

There is one more matter to consider: the proportion of covered prayer hall to open courtyard. The Ottoman mosques are surrounded by vast precincts, additional buildings for ablution, medreses, etc., but the open space is rather limited; the faithful gather under the domes. The prayer hall of the Shah Faisal Masjid will accommodate 20,000 persons while the courtyard is planned for another 100,000. Thus the proportion of covered to open space is about the same as in the Mughal masjids of Lahore - the Badshahi - and Delhi. Considering the importance of the courtyard element in Indian mosque design one might wonder why the members of the jury did not recommend entry no.17 of the competition, the one resembling Frei Otto's designs for suspended roofs and inflated plastic structures. One of the members of the jury has told me that the faithful of Pakistan would not have recognized this building as a mosque. They expect a masonry enclosure, a pronounced space frame, rather than a tent and a 'tower of victory'. To quote the verdict of the jury once

more, the substantial body was felt essential to get the building recognized as a mosque "and a national monument for Islamabad."

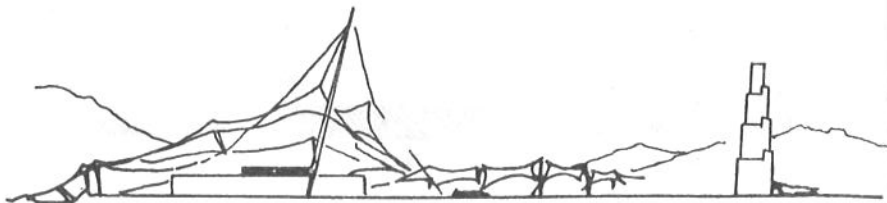


Figure 7: Entry no. 17 of the competition for a National Mosque. Sketch after one of the drawings of Eren Cengiz, Bülent Özer and Öner Tocan of Istanbul

Layman's note

Will the verdict of the people of Pakistan correspond to that of the expert panel? We don't know as yet, but a letter in one of the files of the CDA provides an indication. The note was written in June, 1973, after the design of the Shah Faisal Masjid had been published and commented on by some Pakistani newspapers.

"In the daily Jang of today a photograph has also appeared of the design of the proposed mosque. This design was somewhat disappointing from the point of view of the Muslim culture. If the picture of the design had not carried the caption that it was the proposed Jamia Masjid in Islamabad, one would easily take it as a rocket launching station somewhere in America. The complete absence of the Gumbad gives the impression that the proposed building is anything but a mosque."

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"I realize that the CDA have spent quite a lot of time and money on getting this design prepared but I do feel that 'Gumbad' has always been the symbol of mosque."

The tent-like prayer hall of Shah Faisal Masjid, it is true, does not look like the Dome of the Rock; the minarets on the other hand do look

like rockets. The identity of the national mosque of Islamabad - and the national identity of Pakistan - is still at stake.

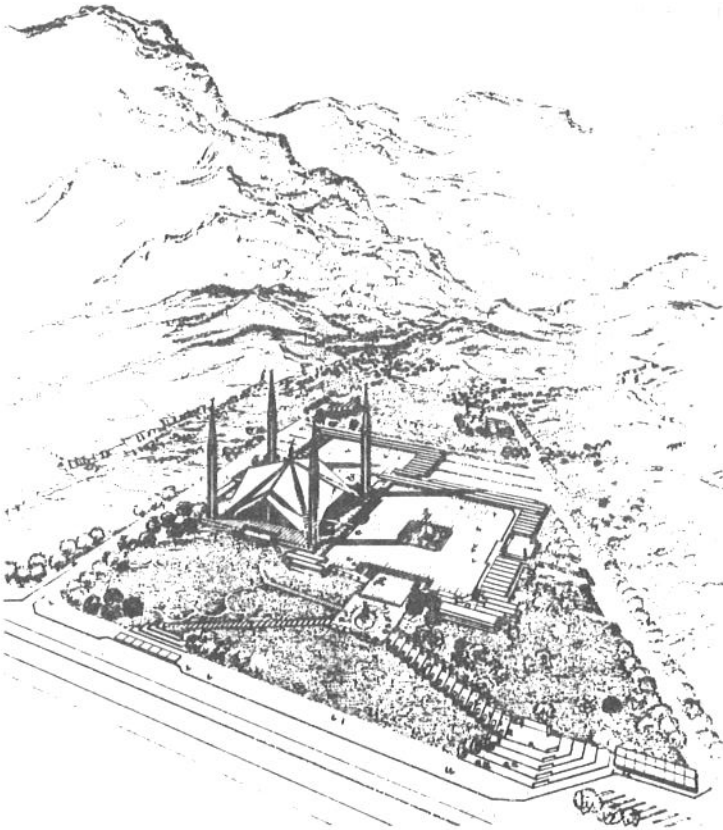


Figure 8: Shah Faisal Masjid

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