



Photos by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez

These arched twin windows in Acámbaro, Michoacán, could well be found in the famous Alhambra in Córdoba, Spain.

## THE ISLAMIC INFLUENCE ON MEXICAN ARCHITECTURE

*Pedro Ramírez Vázquez\**

### The Cultural Contribution of Islam to the World And the Americas

While the fall of the Roman Empire splintered medieval Europe,

the realm of Islam seemed to have no borders and spread to the most diverse and important points of the known world. The peoples who received the message and the revelation of Allah were glowing.

For centuries Muslim culture inspired many of the contribu-

tions and discoveries that fueled humanity's heritage. Arithmetic and geometry, astronomy and medicine were all enriched; different languages broadened their vocabularies and acquired new terminology for naming concepts and things.

The world's art incorporated several elements and topics which emphasized sensibility. Philosophy found new veins of thought and paths for reflection. In short, knowledge of all kinds reached new heights in a relatively short period and, at the same time, new and broader courses were plotted.

When Islam came to the Iberian Peninsula, no one imagined the influence it would have over the next eight centuries of domination and even after. The great cultural symbiosis of East and West took place there because of Spain's location at the western-most point of the territory conquered by Islam and thanks to the Arab domination of the Mediterranean. Within a short time, Córdoba became the Arab world's most important cultural center, and the most advanced city of Europe. The arts and sciences flourished and the development of architecture was unprecedented.

Spain was the channel through which, several centuries later, the peoples of the Americas would receive the Muslim heritage. Many forms of Islamic architecture were born there; the most prominent was the Mudéjar style, which in Mexico endured a surprisingly long

\* Mexican architect.

time and attained unusual development.

The Spanish language and innumerable customs were enriched by the cultural development spawned by Islam. When they arrived in the Americas, language and customs were again subjected to a mixture of different cultural roots until they were refined into new ways of life in which the Muslim essence persisted.

It is common knowledge that the discovery of America coincided with the loss of Islam's last bastion in Spain. However, this very event signalled the beginning of a new era of influence of the creativity of the Islamic world. This can be seen in the cultural heritage that took root in the New World, transmitted through Spain, a pioneer in cultural assimilation in the Americas; the cultural assimilation both of the New World's indigenous peoples and of the Europeans themselves in previously unimagined circumstances.

The Spanish conquistadors sometimes described the buildings and customs of the peoples of Mesoamerica drawing the similarities with Muslim buildings and customs. Similarly, they applied analogous architectural solutions to build the first religious edifications, like open-air chapels, adjacent to the main church which in both form and function are similar to the ramparts or *sarias* noted by Torres Balbás.

### Islamic Sensibility in Mexico

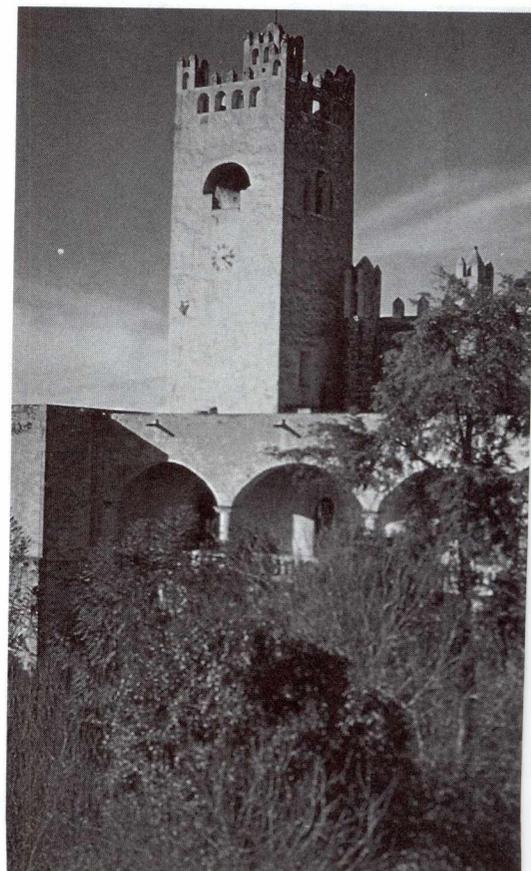
The Islamic sense of space in architecture produces intense feelings of surprise since, to a certain extent, it is a dynamic art which expresses movement and breaks visually with its own physical limits through the continuity of its surfaces and the dematerialization of the structure.

Islamic architecture is a powerful stimulus which speaks to the senses, a product of the particular organization of its architectural space.

We are dealing with a quantum space; the space advances by bounds and knows no escape, while eliminating the possibility of focusing on a point in the distance. Using a series of visual screens, it confounds the eye and any sense of continuity in the use of the axes of composition, thus producing by contrast a perception of multiplicity and change in a single place; it is a space which appears like a magic and bewildering sensation that evokes being enveloped by a grotto. It is, in sum, a space marked by a persistent architectural rhythm which, in the end, dazzles.

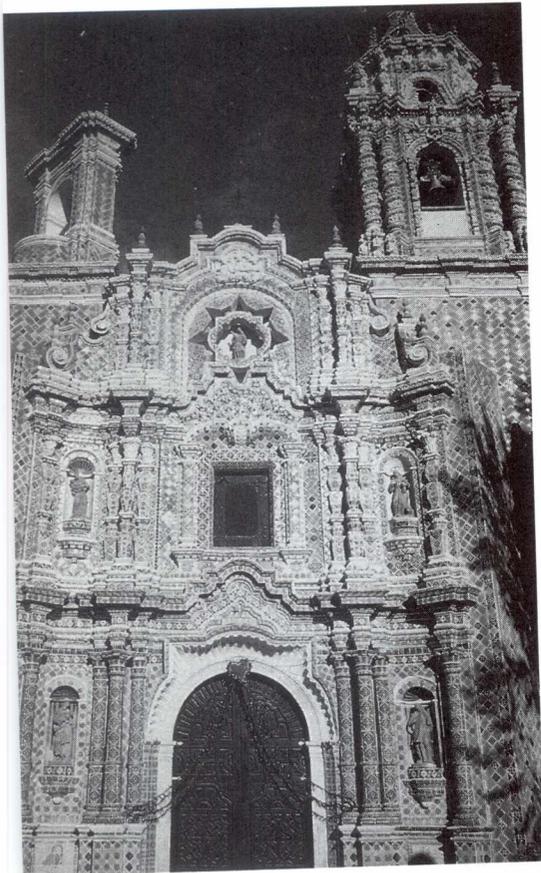
Many technical and aesthetic principles of Islamic architecture took shape in Spain and the Maghreb expressed in different elements: work inlaid with arabesque tiles, plasterwork, wooden friezes, pilasters, lattices, screens, porticos and minarets. The idea was to achieve spacial multiplicity in small places,

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The tower of the Actopan convent is much like Seville's Giralda.

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The door of the church in San Francisco Acatepec is a good example of tile in Mexican architecture.

using a whole gamut of ornaments charged with significance to cause pleasure and surprise.

It was an attempt to create a permanent message in which time and space are linked in succession with tempo: a rhythmic tempo. Volumes denote the spacial concept of "inside" spilling into "outside." It is a clear example of the expressiveness which springs from the internal life and is manifested in external forms.

After the discovery of America the great task of conquest of the New World began. New ways of life, a new language and a new religion had to be imposed on far-away, unknown peoples. Spain arrived in Mexico on the wave of modernity, with the intention of introducing its idea of civilization, based to a great extent on the heritage of Arab domination.

To substitute for the prolific aboriginal ornamentation and its impressive architecture, recourse was given to the exquisiteness of the Mudéjar and the Italian and Spanish Renaissance, which much later would become Spanish Baroque and its particular version developed in the Americas. Thus, the destruction of the great indigenous constructions was followed by the erection of crenelated churches and convents which also reached prodigious heights of architectural creation.

From the foundations, which were sometimes the very same foundations of the demolished Mexican constructions, the new edifications were built using indigenous tech-

niques and labor. The knowledge and skills of these men put their particular seal on the architecture. Their sensibility and culture impregnated not only the structures themselves, but also the ornamentation and character of the new spacial creations.

Thus, the Islamic cultural heritage that the Spaniards brought was assimilated and enriched in a way which yielded new expressions. Architecture dressed up in its own forms, colors and signifiers, specific to the Western Hemisphere, which became styles like Plateresque and Churrigueresque. In this way, the presence of Islam can be felt in lands as far away from its origins as Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

In Mexican architecture, Islam is reflected intensely in the Mudéjar, a style spread throughout the country. It can be seen in some open-air, walled chapels strongly reminiscent of Spanish-Arab mosques; for example, the Royal Chapel of Cholula. There is continuity between the minaret of the mosque of Kairouan in Tunis, the minaret of the Qarawiyn of Fez, the Giralda, in Seville, and the prismatic tower with small windows of the Mexican church in Actopan, in the state of Hidalgo.

Moorish arch panels are to be found all over Mexico, in the open-air, walled chapels like the one in San Juan Atzolcintla and at the con-

<sup>1</sup> This presence was not limited to architecture, but could also be felt in fields like language, the arts and sciences, clothing and furniture.

vent in Tlaxcala. They sometimes predominate in the composition—also quantum—where everything is filled with reliefs and color, now mostly lost in Angahuán,

ufactured in Puebla and decorated such splendid baroque facades as the Hacienda de Cristo near Atlixco, or San Francisco Ecatepec, near the city of Puebla.

be forgotten: it is formed by short spans with shelves between them on which small fountains spray a tiny jet of water. The sides have channels along the top, drains made



The columns in the Royal Chapel in Cholula are reminiscent of the inside of a mosque.

Michoacán. Mudéjar architectural elements also constantly appear in constructions done in other styles: vaults held up by crossed arches, bright polychromatic reliefs, eight-sided pillars, Eastern arches, arched windows with a pillar in the center (twin-windows), carved ceilings and lucanars (coffered ceilings) and ornamented central pieces or anchors.

Islamic decorations were used extensively throughout the country. Tiles, for example, were man-

Mudéjar also influenced Mexican painting and relief carving. In the minor arts, its impact can be seen in the use of eight-pointed stars in window lattices, in shaped baluster grilles and wooden furniture with bone or tortoise-shell inlays.

The appreciation of Islamic peoples for the use of plants and water in architecture is well-known. The wise use of form, sound and aroma in their gardens is notable. How could the fountain of the new terrace of the Generalife

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of Arab clay, where the water flows and, as it falls, it turns the stairway into a delightful cascade.

In Mexico there was also creative use of water, like in the 16th century fountain in Chiapa de Corzo, in the state of Chiapas, which supplied water to the townspeople. In modern times, it was used in the design of the National Museum of Anthropology, where a great cascade falls from a gigantic roof with a single support, thus creating a vestibule that shades a large patio; opposite, a pre-Columbian-snail-shaped pond refreshes the area.

While the Mudéjar style died out in the 15th century in Spain, in the Western Hemisphere it was used as late as the 19th century.



The fountain in Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, is one of Mexico's best examples of the Mudéjar style.

Mexico was the country where the styles and arts derived from the Muslim influence were cultivated the longest. Incorporated into the rich indigenous tradition

and mixed with elements of Spanish culture, the combination gave rise to constructions which still surprise and delight strangers and natives alike. ❧



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**Amistad México-Canadá**  
 Attn.: Mr. Pierre Sved  
 Schiller 529, Col. Rincón del Bosque  
 Mexico, D.F. 11560

Tel: (5)724-7958  
 Fax: (5)724-7980