

The Generational Impact of *Tawhīdic* Practices and Propensities in Architectural Historiography: Linking the Notion of ‘Time’ in *Sūrah al-‘Aṣr* to Architectural Evolvments.

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Abstract

The notion of ‘time’ has been essentially delved upon and repeatedly forwarded in a range of perspectives and dimensions, based on the immutable yet meaningful depth of Surah al-‘Aṣr, the 103rd chapter of the Qur’ān. Rather than discussing its meaning as an individual principle of the undisputable value of time, the meaning of the chapter here is linked to the long-term generational impact of spiritual contact, i.e. tawhīdic paradigm and its propensities, on either the Muslim or non-Muslim civilisation, from the dawn of Islam to the present day. This study argues that the sūrah implicitly sheds light into the impact of tawhīdic and spiritual practices of observant societies upon its generations and its physical form of civilisations. Its art and architecture are inevitably linked as well to the impact of such practices. Furthermore, it has been forwarded that at certain periods of history, there were discernible peaks in the flowering or efflorescence of art and architecture, which were universally acknowledged and recognized. Yet these occur throughout different periods of the civilisational history. The aim of this article, therefore; is to highlight the related generational effects that were propelled by the height and practice of such belief systems which still uphold some notions of tawhīdic values. Certain cases are investigated such as the rise of Islam in Spain which culminated in the magnificence of the Alhambra, the rise of the ‘prairie style’ in United States, and the Arts and Crafts movement and its spin-offs in United Kingdom. It has also been forwarded that the eventual demise of such inventiveness and soulful works is related to a gradual loss in tawhīdic values and religiosity, which became acute after the end of the World Wars. The spiritual emptiness had also brought about the lack of soul and homogeneity in architecture and built form following the rise of modern architectural movements in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS: *architectural historiography, tawhīdic paradigm, Islamisation, Quranic exegesis, history and civilisation*

Introduction

The notion of time has been one of the most fascinating concepts for the circles of Islamic intellectual traditions ranging from philosophers, cosmologists, theologians, theosophists, to poets, jurists and traditionalists. The Arabic lexical corpora, and earlier Islamic texts too, committed several terms that could be perceived as corresponding to the notion of time. Some examples which were employed in the Qur’ān are: *ān* (instant; present moment) (Qur’ān 8:66), *sā‘ah* (with the definite particle *al* refers to the definite appointed moment; sometimes means that hour; also, this hour) (Qur’ān 33:63), *hīn* (the moment; the period) (Qur’ān 5:101), *waqt* (the actual concrete time as opposed to the continual zaman) (Qur’ān 7:187), *ajal* (appointed time, span) (Qur’ān 7:135), *sarmad* (eternity) (Qur’ān 28:71), *abad* (eternity without end) (Qur’ān 18:3), *dahr* (aeon; sempiternity) (Qur’ān 76:1), *yawm* (day) (Qur’ān 2:259), *nahār* (day) (Qur’ān 3:190), *‘aṣr* (afternoon; eventide; declining day; era; time)

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(Qur'ān 103:1), and *qarn* (century; range) (Qur'ān 10:13). Others which are not in the Qur'ān include *zaman* or *zamān* (the ordinary time, the constant flux of time from past to future), *azal* (eternity without beginning), etc.

Subsequently, and throughout ensuring decades and centuries, conversations over the definitive concept of time within the Islamic perspective have brought forward a piazza of multifarious views. Although one is reminded of the two major opposing views in the ancient Greek philosophy, i.e. the Aristotelian motion vs the Plotinian duration, the discourse of time amongst the Muslim scholars seems not only to oscillate between these two, but to integrate them with their original revealed inspiration fostering a distinct form of intellectual evolvement. Ibn Sīnā's modification of Aristotelian time, the Ash'arite's conception of atomistic "moments", and the Ṣūfī's enigmatic formulation of *al-waqt*, *ibn al-waqt* and *ṣāhib al-waqt*, are some evident examples of such enterprise. To quote Gerhard Böwering's conclusion in his *Concept of Time in Islam*:

'The theocentric vision of time in Qur'ān and ḥadīth, the theological atomism of time governed by an eternally active God, and the Ṣūfī paradigm of time coupled with imaginary relativity give expression to the vertical dimension of Islamic thought: the individual's overpowering dependence on the Creator.'

Nevertheless, time remains ironically an attractive conundrum for Muslim scholars, in the similar way love, which is the crux of that vertical dimension, can never be absolutely fathomed or defined in the precise terms. Having said the above, this study of *sūrah* al-'Aṣr explains not the concept of time and its significance in the overall Quranic structure, rather it communicates the indications made by the internal structure of the *sūrah* to the effect of time and *tawḥīdic* paradigm in terms of 'practice' and spiritual 'propensity'. By propensity, one means an inclination or tendency to hold a particular attitude, or act in a particular way. Manifestations of propensity include the commitment towards the true knowledge coupled with a kind of perseverance and endurance that will determine the degree of excellence in human civilisational endeavour -and certainly their architectural evolvements.

History of Civilisation and Architectural Evolvments

The problem that often stems from architectural historiographies and that of modern civilisation is that their evolution is generally described and assessed based on their material and technological prowess and abilities. To shift the focus from the conventional materialistic position found in a range of historiographical literature of Western evolution, the flowering of arts and architecture in particular periods of regional history must be observed not merely from the physical peaks of technological and material advancement, but a more holistic viewpoint so as to see humanity in its other side; its achievement of humanity in the form of spiritual apotheosis. Although spirituality and religiosity exemplify in many forms, it is observed that mankind has the tendency to judge and assess spirituality in terms of the outwards forms and outward appearances of human beings. Hence, throughout the journey of history and civilisations, there are generally underlying spiritual themes. The way certain unique episodes and achievements is linked to spiritual hallmarks requires much further deliberation. Nevertheless, the proposition that the nature of the human soul and its formative years are the great contributors to their civilisational form and expression parallels with the Islamic philosophy of arts and architecture that argues that spiritual values constitute the seed of creativity, art and architectural innovation.

It is contended that behind some of the production of great and novel forms and treatments of architecture and the arts lie a certain position or outlook in the human maker or creative artist or artisan; and hence the challenge is to find a link between the two. The ultimate aim is to highlight such propensities as universal tendencies in the human being, and thereupon connecting them to the

archetypal ideas and forces behind the formation of art, architecture and built artefacts. The eventual forms somehow reflect the spiritual outlook of its makers. These are then linked to theoretical ideas extracted and sourced from a range of selected cultures, artists, architects and theorists.

Art and architecture, regardless of time and space, conceptualisation, execution and construction, are the product of human conception, emotion and thought. Architecture is additionally, and subsequently collaborations, cooperation, and a multitude of inputs from multitudinous parties and persons. Yet highlighting, observing and identifying the threads of influences -including the spiritual and the *tawhīdic* one- are perhaps the crucial key to the understanding of amongst others; What creates evergreen architecture and design? How to document its history and theoretical ideas? and what are the forces at work? All those can be learned from the designer, the artist, the craftsmen, the historian or cultural geographer.

Throughout history, the development of the peaks and the epitome of refinement in architecture almost resemble the highs and lows of history of mankind in its pendulum-like trends which swings from one extreme to the other. As the ages echo the changes in tendencies and predisposition of such architectural movements and attainments of excellence, the basis of principles in the built environment had been generally linked with physical factors, such as the discovery of new materials, technological tools and techniques, and trends in design, rather than the universal values of religiosity and belief. Each trend of architecture and design has changed from one extreme to the other in various eras. Yet there is a certain consistency in their underlying causes which result in a certain physical manifestation throughout the ages. Architecture is not only a trend of the whims and fancies of a select privileged few, but it is a general phenomenon, brought to surface by forces beyond its particular time. These forces are the underlying current which spurs a certain burst of human ability and capacity, unearthing hidden talents and spiralling the economy and wealth. Yet, in the main stream education of art and architecture, these forces are not linked to those current, and are thought to be mainly broadly based on Western sources and theories deployed as the philosophical framework of history, precedent studies, critiques, debate and eventual conceptualising through process of critical thinking and synthesis of education. However, in reconstructing theories and values based on more universal principles, there is a need to relook at the historiography of civilisation itself, including what has taken place in the Western world, and to review the essential foundations of history and how it related to the trends and notions and limitations of its time. Through such a review, the integration into both design and history curriculum can be more meaningful and encompasses the religious basis of such movements and efflorescence, since history must represent a value system which not only expounds such values but embraces principles and practices that is ethical and 'good' in this world. Islam too, must see history as a path or framework of how certain individuals and communities struggled to propagate that one should not be subjected to powers other than God – and history is a timeline infused with such beliefs, thus correlating with the essential axis of belief in the conscious declaration of 'There is no God but One God'.

The Message of *Sūrah al-ʿAṣr*

The perennial message underlying the *Sūrah al-ʿAṣr* is generally linked with a constant and primal reminder into the consciousness of the human being, or humanity in general, and believers in particular, on the value of time as a resource, commodity and endowment. Yet its specific directive and calling of attention to mankind, using the word '*insān*' points to a deeper meaning and serves to enable one to understand the intrinsic and recurring condition of the human being and their civilisations.

As far as the meaning of the whole *sūrah* is concerned, the English translations of the Qurʾān differed slightly in their renditions of the first verse. From over thirty translations, five translated it

as 'by the time' and three added the phrase 'I swear'. Seven translations indicated the notion of ages or passages of time, while more than seven others pointed towards the exact afternoon, late afternoon, last part of the day, eventide and more symbolically the notion of decline through the phrase 'by the declining day.' One translator opted for a non-immediate meaning making it a swear 'by the advent of Islam' which consequently challenges the common perception that the *sūrah* is addressing the concept of time. A translation that may be of high relevance to this article would be the one by Muhammad Asad where he invited the reader to 'consider the flight of time'. Nevertheless, when compared to the classical exegeses, one will find that exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī had already pointed out major differences in the interpretation of the verse. Some opined that the word refers to a specific moment of the day while others maintained that it alludes to the afternoon. For al-Ṭabarī, the word *aṣr* is a generic noun which can denote both *al-dahr* (aeon) and any part of it.

Regardless of any elaboration that may develop from a particular interpretation, the rest of the verses concurrently reflect the notion of events. We note that over time, efforts bear its result whether it's a gain or loss. We can only form a belief, practise good deeds, exhort one another to the truth and perseverance as advocated in the *sūrah* by the virtue of time. Time, therefore; implies events and ultimately the rise and fall of civilisations. We can furthermore conclude without much difficulties that the emphasis on spiritual and *tawḥīdic* paradigm in the *sūrah* acts as a reminder for the whole mankind that the right exploitation of time with the adoption of this paradigm shields an individual or a society from any sort of entropy, tragedy and deterioration. It is through this overarching reading of the *sūrah* that we can appreciate both: the *sūrah's* indication of the constant rise and decline of human civilisation, and the *sūrah's* assertion of the spiritual atmosphere and internalisation as the key to generational development.

To illustrate the generational impact of such propensities, three eras are linked in this paper with specific events and individuals. These are the Islamic Spain, the Modernity and the Prairie Style in United States, and the Modernism in Europe.

Islamic Beginnings and the Alhambra

The Islamic civilisation in Spain did not proceed from merely acts of conquest. As written by Fletcher (1992), there was a gradual change rather than any force occurring in the multireligious society. Fletcher remarked: *In these circumstances, conversion to Islam would come about not by means of missionary pressure, but through the nudging of other social forces of a kind which tend to be inconspicuous to the historian.* Yet by 11th century, Cordoba had 113 000 homes, 21 suburbs, 70 libraries and numerous bookshops and mosques. After sunset, a man might walk in a straight line for 10 miles of solid pavement and by the light of public lamps. Though there was a time of instability, by the 11th century, under the Caliph patronage, both arts and architecture flowered to its zenith in the 14th century.

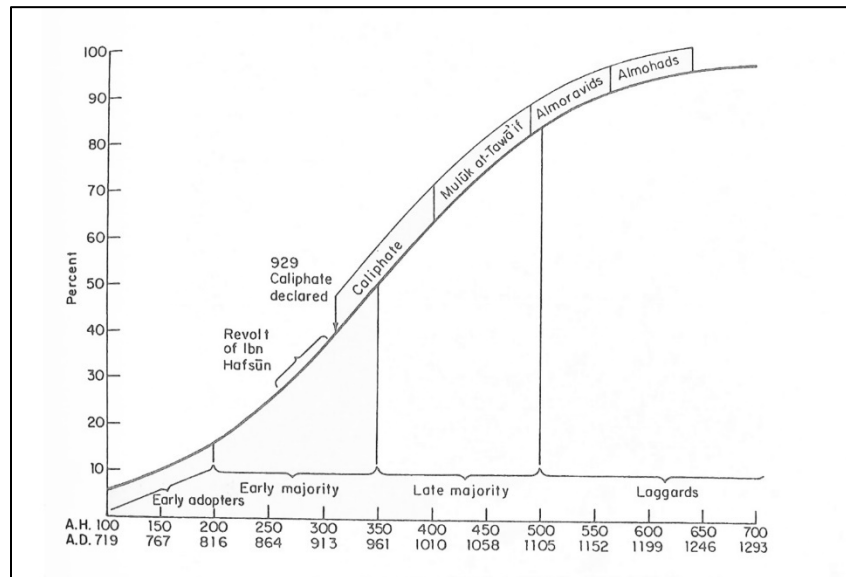


Figure 1. The 'curve' of conversion - Islamic Spain (Fletcher, 1992)

Reflections on the Spirit of Modernity According to Lloyd Wright

Frank Lloyd Wright was known to have single-handedly conceived and materialised an ideal or a vision into a consistent body of work that seem to embody the reflections and concerns of his times. Particularly known was his signature spatial mastery of interpenetrating horizontal and vertical planes and abstract masses. These new abstracted forms are compelling as they managed to give a whole new life to American architecture. Yet these forms came from a set of ideas, ideas which can be traced to a resolute spirit and personality, which have resulted, historically, in creating an architecture that indelibly, until today, excites the imagination and stirs the emotion in its fusion and natural fit, with its surroundings.

The spirit of a 'new world' is seen through the methods in which his forms embraced technology and a modern industrialisation of construction method. Yet inherent in him was a prevalence of values which uphold a tradition of the past, couched within a romanticist, pioneering spirit. He is attributed as an architect who was truly successful in realising the progressive vision of the age in a sustained manner. Wright instinctively rejected to modernity, clinging to an unabashed preference for an older romantic and spiritual tradition. Throughout his life, he remained faithful to the good, true and beautiful. That this is somehow linked to a belief in Unity is suggested by Mumford:

'... that Wright's passion for unity sometime led to excesses like seizing on certain motifs such as hexagon and triangle and applying it relentlessly, yet his whole architecture enforces A sense of unity - an implementation of one essential idea throughout everything...' (Formative years)

Wright was born in 1867, in a community earlier known as the Arminian congregation and later known as the Unitarians, who were known for the singularity of their belief. Wright basically grew up within a village and congregation who believed and fought the belief that humanity must fight for their right to choose. This is a trait that runs through his ancestors and became a way of thinking in a consistent approach in design reminiscent of the trait of his ancestors including his grandparents; who were known, as Mycrest summates '....as people could *'never be accused to desert*

their principles. His grandfather, Richard Lloyd Jones, who was born in Wales before the turn of the 19th century. Around 1800, Wright's grandparents emigrated to the new country of Wisconsin, United States. Secrest (1998) describes these pioneering group of settlers from Wales; and the values and beliefs which they had ingrained within them:

Historically, they were from Wales, England and they were known as the non-conformists, challenging the authority of the establishment Church –based belief at the time. Within such non-confirming movements, Radical religious thought, political rebellion, emerging nationalism were intricately intertwined. Theirs were a group which faced persecution in their own home country due to their beliefs and consistence, stubborn insistence on their own opinions.

Lloyd Jenkin was Richard's son and Anna's brother. Later he became a famous member from the Unitarian branch and became a well-known Unitarian minister in Chicago. Theirs was a community who had emigrated due to the tenacity of their beliefs and had held to their belief tenaciously and was prepared to face alienation odds. As Secrest (1998) further describes:

One finds in the story of the Lloyd Joneses a consistent, stubborn insistence on their renegade opinions and a melancholic pride in being persecuted for them. As far back as 1696, one can find in their family a personage like Thomas David Rees, a farmer, who was prepared to be disowned by his Church as long as he could worship according to his conscience.

Theirs was a belief that was a radical departure from the mainstream. There was a resounding proclamation of a simple belief in One God, in which they had placed an emphasis to the importance of free will and human intervention. Again Secrest (1998) elucidates:

As far back as one cares to look, in the family background of Richard and Mallie, one finds educators, and preachers, literate men and women prepared to challenge authority of any kind and particularly the established church. ... the tiny Arminian, later Unitarian congregation, ... is the proper starting point from which to consider the emigration of Richard and Mallie Lloyd Jones a century and a half later.

A tradition has been established. And the family heritage inextricably linked, with men who fought for their right to think as they chose, no matter how heretical their notions, a trait that was to have some significance in the life of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Anna, Wright's mother, was thus, an heir to such a tradition of religious belief. She was known to be like her forebears, a woman with a strong personality. She was also known to be concerned about the cultivation of moral attributes. It seems Anna would always write about the past tribulations of her family and would remind the young Wright of the role of faith in sustaining them throughout the difficult times. Anna, later Wright, would recall the valley which Wright grew up as a holy place, or 'a consecrated ground'. To this day, her children including Wright himself, recalls Anna's love of nature where she would always instil a love of plants, animals and flowers. She would link these with religion and with her own belief rooted in Welsh and Celtic traditions, As Secrest (1998) observes:

The Welsh concept of nature as one's fortress in adversity and a salve to the soul, is evident here.

She became a central figure in the formative years of Wright and exhorted her son to study the natural world and can concepts of Truth, Beauty, Simplicity and Nature be related where she likened this

with her idea of a perfect home, or a wonderful room. She taught the almost sacred importance of the role of the architect. As Secret (1998) summarised:

To her preaching of truth and the building edifices is the same.

Some have debated that as his family settled for generations within a particular part within the Wisconsin valley, and this would greatly influence his ideas and vocabulary of the Prairie house. One cannot divert this as an important outcome of the formative period. The same predisposition in expression is discerned in how his stonewalls were constructed. The intention was somehow to reflect and identify with the natural strata of the region's rock formation. Some even relate such language of stratification in the regular courses on brick or horizontal wood siding which is a signature of Wright's works. In Wright's own writing and words:

'The Long low lines of colourful windswept terrain, the ineffable dotted line, the richly textured plain, greatly striated, stratified masses in a noble and quiet rising in majesty.'

Curtis observes (1981) how Wright's architecture represents an 'outward expression of a belief', that architecture and *society must have their roots in the natural order*. These had strengthened and consolidate into Wright's signature style which came from the 'Prairie' school of thought. The low and projecting overhanging roofs, the use of timber frame and the interspersing of connected, open spaces became the hallmarks of a singular style characteristic of its era and was totally opposed to neo Classical predispositions of putting up walls around box-like rooms. This idea would mature and consolidate into the seminal Robie House, where his other houses, he would arrange circulation inside the house so as to give the owner or occupant constantly changing kaleidoscope of views. The result, as Curtis (1981) usefully observes, was to produce:

'... a kind of 'pinwheel' rotation experienced in three dimensions as a spatial tension which varies as one moves through the interior spaces... To Wright this dynamism was perhaps equivalent to the life force he sensed in nature; it gave his dwellings something of the quality of a spatial music in which, rhythm movement, repetition, and variation of similar elements achieved moods and emotions of different pitch and intensity.

To Wright, the earth itself was a source of 'form-language'. He had, like Ruskin, kept intact the belief that the most vital aspect of the human in producing architecture, is both their imaginative and spiritual nature and hence responsiveness. Beneath the achievements and observed from his formative years, were values and principles that influenced his outlook of life and consequently his architecture.

Voysey in Europe and the Advent of Modernism

Voysey is known, until today as one of the most prolific and pre-eminent pattern designers of his era. Rather than copying nature directly, he abstracted them and always attempting to capture its character with clear authoritative lines and coherent ideas. It was a simple outlook and ethic which govern simple forms and production of wall paper patterns and which, also underpins the design of his houses. C. F. A Voysey was born in 1857. His early years was spent primarily in London and Yorkshire. He studied at the Dulwich College in London for 18 months, and later would work in the architectural offices of John Pollard Seddon and George Devey. One can trace his ideas to his father, who is similarly well known but for his beliefs. The Anglican minister Charles Voysey was expelled from the church in 1869 after a celebrated trial for heresy, Voysey was an outspoken man of faith with a strong reformist bent, Reverend Voysey '*was known to argue against the divinity of Christ, and the need for clergy as intermediaries between God and his people. He soon founded a new faith, Theism*

– which he called *The Religion of Common Sense... which embraced scientific approach which was gaining ground during the Victorian age.*

O Donell (2011) relates in her seminal book on Voysey how the drama surrounding the trial of his father must have dominated his childhood. His father, Reverend Voysey, due to his personal convictions, had refused to abandon them until he was expelled from the clergy. This, O Donell (2011) had left a lasting impression on Voysey as a boy.

‘Voysey’s sense of the matter is that he owes everything to his father...’ That all his beliefs... are part and parcel of the fabric of his father’s thought and teaching.’

John Betjeman spoke of the impact of his father’s belief that translated as a material embodiment of the free spirit when he wrote: *‘What his father preached ... Voysey interpreted in stone and color...’*

Hitchmough (1996) traced four key figures that had exerted an influence on Voysey and that is Ruskin, Pugin and two architects in which office Voysey trained, Seddon and Devey. early entrenchment with a complete system of ideals and precepts explains much of the obstinate firmness and tenacity of Voysey to the principles he stands for. It was said that every house, every pattern he drafted, every chair he had designed, had reflected this conviction. One of the consistent principles of Voyseys’ works is how he relied on simple, expressive forms and materials. It was said “no aspect of a house was too small to merit the architect’s attention”. ... *from the shape of a clothes hook, to the sweep of a roofline.* ‘According to Voysey’s ideas and theories, the union of emotion and affections, must be governed by the restraining factors of self-control and reason. In his lectures and writings, he has often mentioned an underlying condemnation of materialism and his insistence on the importance of *‘ideas in things’ and of ‘thought and feeling’*. To him, this fundamental to all creative activity. These were repeated again and again in his writings and lectures. Hitchmough (1996) observes the origins of these values in his compositions and how there was an *underlying instinct for the righteousness of martyrdom and poverty, recalling his father’s trials.*

For an informed appreciation of his work, his work must be looked upon as a combination of both coded messages interlaced with light-heartedness and even humour.

Voysey was later hailed as a precursor to Modernism, yet his predisposed austerity in design language can be linked to a singular bravery to depart from the language of the norm became identified with the beginnings of the Modern movement. Yet it may have nothing to do with the Movement at all. Movements and avant-garde beginnings in design and stylistic trends always begins with those who are ‘brave’ enough to throw away the shackles of convention. His range of works is symbolic of an innovative and pioneering spirit as he opens the way for new ideas that would later converge and coalesce into the ideas of Modernism. Hitchmough, page 206, asserts the same conclusions:

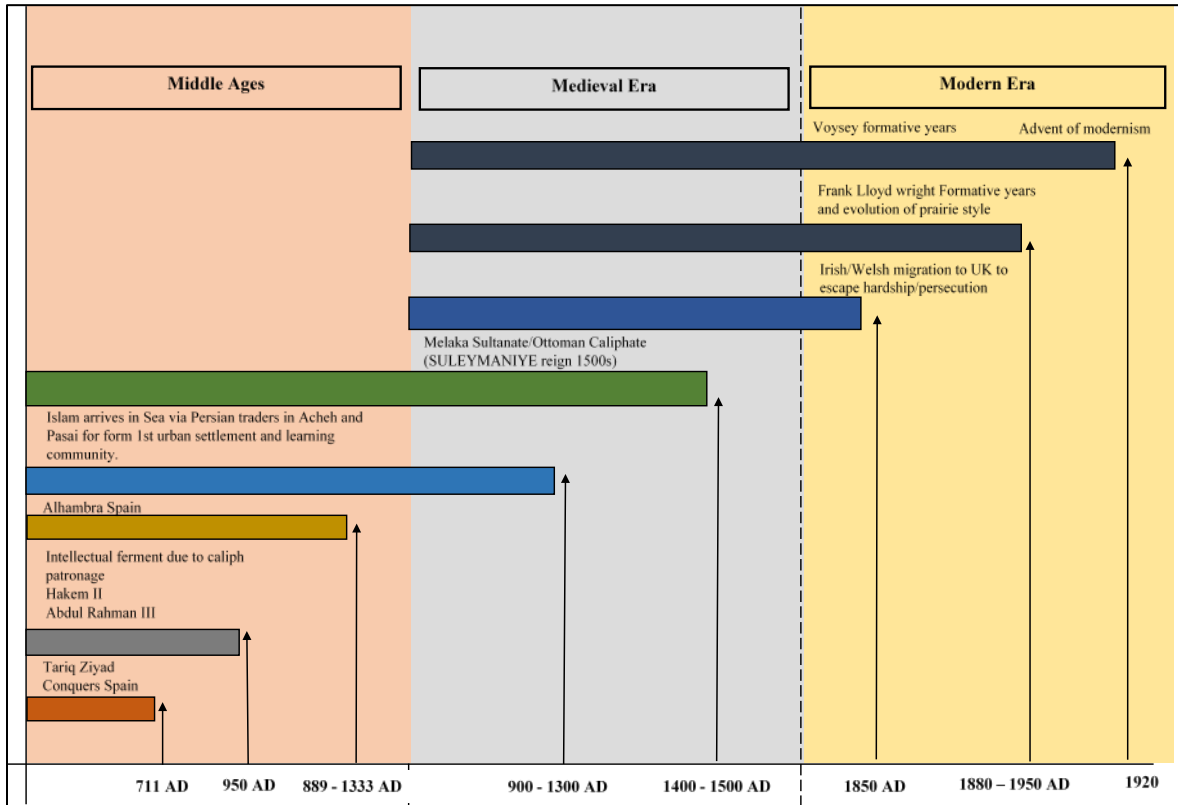
There can be little doubt that Voysey re-enacted the martyrdom of his father, in the same way, that he had translated his father’s teaching into a rational design philosophy.

The mainstay of his philosophy and position remain constant throughout his career. He wrote clearly of his principles that his writing of a volume called ‘Individuality’, published in 1915 where key principles were outlined in an introduction and opening statement which were central to provide a key to understanding his life and work;

‘Let us assume that there is a beneficent and omnipotent controlling power that is perfectly good and perfectly loving; and that our existence here, is for the purpose of growing individual characters.’

O Donnell highlights how Voysey believed essentially in:

'...that humankind's spiritual growth hinged on qualities such as love, reverence, humility, self-sacrifice, simplicity and truthfulness ...and that these were far from abstract, they could and must be given concrete form. In the humblest articles of daily life as well as in homes



and public buildings.'

Conclusion

The paper attempts to link the message of *Sūrah al-Aṣr* with the rise and fall of certain civilisational achievements, including architectural expression and creativity. Though communities are brought together by a set of beliefs and the link between the 'spiritual' and the 'civilisational' is not immediately apparent, a theoretical framework of history, architecture and philosophy must link such practices to any eventual position that give rise to certain significant artistic expression and creativity, which may lie behind certain architectural design. There seem to be underlying themes and threads which can be seamed into a certain pattern throughout time, that can recall the central message and insight of the *sūrah*. What is initially conceived as spiritual and transcendental practices can be related into concrete manifestations and outward forms that depart from the agencies of human personalities and their works. but linked to both the social, religious and even political forces along with the contemporaneous. One recalls the insights of L. Peter Kollar, a professor of architectural theory in his seminal book, *Form: 'Beyond the physical and human plane there is a vast realm that contains man's deeply rooted desire to reach higher than himself... When architectural thought is focussed upon this plane, it unveils some aspect or part of the perennial Truth, recognisable beyond its own time and context with Universal validity. This is the hallmark of architectural masterpieces that thus become endowed with everlasting significance.'* One is also reminded of the award-winning works of M Egyptian architect, Abdel El Wakil, who had absorbed the message and struggles of his mentor, Hassan Fathy, who advocated that the springboard of new forms and expression of a time must come from a recognition of the creative Force underlying creation, and this fuels the energy to withstand the loneliness of departing from the norm, and breed an honesty and idealism that can cement a propensity for truth and for creating the 'new' out of the old. These drivers became generative principles, creating a new sequential structure to the design, including a keener observation and empathy with nature, a formative phase, a moment of inspiration, a relook at functions and its spatial expression, Further work must relook into a restructuring of the history and historiographies of architecture, to take into account, spiritual agencies, and other formative influences and may even answer on why does some personalities translate into revolutionary architecture yet some do not? A relook into such history may uncover the perfect concoction of events, factors and influences, and background relations events, not excluding raw talent, patronage, and at times, even pure luck and the right kind of projects. It is perhaps a certain combination within a certain era will create possibilities and achievement. which can be related to what Gladwell (2002) so famously calls 'the tipping point'. History that is grounded a value-laden and more ethical outlook can unearth how belief, outlooks, practices, circumstances and intentions collide and collude to produce an architecture which are constantly representative of such values and of its eras.

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