
Urban Mosque Architecture in Post-Independence Pakistan: Symbolism, Community Identity, and the Rejection of Colonial Aesthetics

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of urban mosque architecture in Pakistan from 1947 to the present, focusing on how post-independence designers and communities articulated national and religious identity through built form. In the wake of colonial rule, Pakistani architects and patrons consciously distanced themselves from Indo-Saracenic and British civic styles, seeking instead to anchor mosque design in indigenous Islamic traditions—particularly Mughal, Persian, and regional vernacular idioms. This architectural turn was not merely aesthetic but deeply symbolic: mosques became sites of cultural reclamation, spiritual sovereignty, and communal cohesion in rapidly urbanizing cities. Drawing on architectural analysis, archival records, and field observations in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, this study demonstrates how urban mosques function as both sacred spaces and socio-political statements. The article argues that the rejection of colonial aesthetics was accompanied by a selective revival of pre-colonial forms, reinterpreted through modern materials and urban constraints. In doing so, it contributes to broader

discourses on decolonial architecture, religious urbanism, and the role of sacred space in nation-building.

Keywords: Mosque Architecture, Post-Colonial Pakistan, Islamic Identity, Urban Design, Decolonial Aesthetics, Mughal Revival

Introduction

The partition of British India in 1947 did not merely redraw political boundaries; it initiated a profound cultural reorientation in the newly formed state of Pakistan. Among the most visible manifestations of this transformation was the reimagining of religious architecture—particularly the urban mosque. Freed from colonial oversight and eager to assert a distinct Islamic identity, Pakistani architects, religious leaders, and community patrons embarked on a deliberate project of architectural decolonization.¹

This entailed not only rejecting the hybrid Indo-Saracenic style favored by the British but also reasserting visual and spatial links to pre-colonial Islamic empires, especially the Mughals.²

Urban mosques in post-independence Pakistan thus became more than places of worship; they emerged as potent symbols of national sovereignty, communal belonging, and spiritual authenticity.³

In cities swelling with refugees and migrants, these structures offered both physical sanctuary and ideological anchorage. Their domes, minarets, courtyards, and calligraphic ornamentation communicated a vision of Pakistan as the inheritor of a glorious Islamic civilization—not a colonial appendage.⁴

This article explores how urban mosque architecture in Pakistan evolved from 1947 to the early 2020s, analyzing three interrelated dimensions: (1) the symbolic rejection of colonial aesthetics; (2) the revival and reinterpretation of indigenous Islamic architectural forms; and (3) the role of mosques in shaping community identity within dense urban environments. The study focuses on representative

examples from Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad—cities that embody distinct phases of Pakistan’s architectural and urban development.

Colonial Legacies and the Indo-Saracenic Dilemma

Under British rule, mosque architecture in South Asia was often subsumed into the Indo-Saracenic style—a synthetic aesthetic that blended Mughal domes and arches with Gothic spires, Victorian ornamentation, and European planning principles.⁵

While visually striking, this hybrid form was deeply entangled with colonial ideology. The British employed Indo-Saracenic architecture not to honor Islamic tradition but to appropriate and domesticate it, positioning themselves as enlightened custodians of India’s “oriental” heritage.⁶

Post-independence Pakistani elites viewed this style with suspicion. To build a mosque in the Indo-Saracenic manner was to perpetuate a visual language of subjugation—one that obscured the spiritual purity of Islamic architecture beneath imperial ornament.⁷

Consequently, early state-sponsored and community-led mosque projects deliberately avoided colonial motifs. The iconic Shah Faisal Mosque in Islamabad (completed 1986), though modernist in form, explicitly rejected domes and arches not out of secularism but as a break from both colonial and classical conventions, signaling a forward-looking Islamic identity.⁸

Yet the rejection was not absolute. Some post-1947 mosques in Karachi and Lahore retained simplified arches or courtyards reminiscent of colonial-era designs, reflecting pragmatic constraints or generational continuity among builders.⁹

Nevertheless, the dominant trend was toward purification—stripping away colonial accretions to recover what was perceived as an authentic Islamic architectural grammar.

The Mughal Revival and the Search for Authenticity

In the absence of a unified national architectural style, Pakistan turned to the Mughal Empire as a source of legitimacy and inspiration. The Mughals—Muslim rulers of South Asia from the 16th to 19th centuries—left an enduring architectural legacy, epitomized by the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore and the Jama Masjid in Delhi.¹⁰

These structures, with their red sandstone facades, bulbous domes, towering minarets, and expansive courtyards, became archetypes for post-independence mosque design.¹¹

The Wazir Khan Mosque restoration project (initiated in the 1960s) and the construction of the Grand Jamia Mosque in Bahria Town Lahore (completed 2014) exemplify this revivalist impulse.¹²

The latter, though built with modern concrete and steel, meticulously replicates Mughal proportions, tilework (kashi kari), and spatial hierarchy. Its four towering minarets and central dome echo the Badshahi Mosque, creating a visual continuity that asserts Lahore's place within an unbroken Islamic lineage.¹³

This Mughal revival was not mere nostalgia. It served a nation-building function: by invoking a pre-colonial golden age, Pakistan positioned itself as the rightful heir to South Asian Islamic civilization.¹⁴

Moreover, Mughal aesthetics resonated with public sentiment; their grandeur conveyed dignity, piety, and permanence—qualities desired in a young nation navigating political instability.¹⁵

However, the revival was selective. While domes and minarets were enthusiastically adopted, the Mughal emphasis on monumental scale and imperial patronage was often tempered by the realities of urban density and community funding. Many neighborhood mosques in Karachi, for instance, feature Mughal-

inspired facades but modest footprints, adapting imperial forms to middle-class contexts.¹⁶

Modernism, Innovation, and the Shah Faisal Paradigm

Not all post-independence mosques embraced historicism. The Shah Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, designed by Turkish architect Vedat Dalokay and funded by Saudi Arabia, represents a radical departure from traditional forms.¹⁷

Rejecting the dome entirely, its design draws inspiration from a Bedouin tent—a symbol of primordial Islamic simplicity—and incorporates geometric minimalism aligned with 20th-century modernism.¹⁸

Initially controversial, the mosque gradually gained acceptance as a symbol of Pakistan's forward-looking Islamic identity. Its location at the foot of the Margalla Hills, aligned with the city's modernist grid, reinforced its role as a national monument.¹⁹

Unlike colonial-era mosques that mimicked the past, Shah Faisal projected an Islamic future—technologically adept, globally connected, yet spiritually grounded.²⁰

This modernist strand influenced subsequent projects. The Faisal Mosque in Karachi (unrelated to the Islamabad structure) and the Islamic International University Mosque in Islamabad adopt angular forms, exposed concrete, and abstract calligraphy, blending Islamic symbolism with contemporary aesthetics.²¹ These designs reflect a growing confidence among Pakistani architects to innovate within Islamic parameters, rather than merely replicate historical models.

Yet even in modernist mosques, traditional elements persist in subtle ways: qibla walls oriented precisely toward Mecca, ablution areas designed for ritual purity, and acoustic engineering that amplifies the adhan (call to prayer).²²

Thus, innovation coexists with functional continuity, ensuring that even the most avant-garde mosques remain recognizably Islamic.

Urban Constraints and Community Agency

In Pakistan's rapidly urbanizing cities, mosque architecture is shaped as much by spatial constraints as by ideology. Karachi, with its population exceeding 20 million, exemplifies the challenges of vertical growth, land scarcity, and informal settlement.²³

Here, mosques often occupy upper floors of commercial buildings, rooftops, or repurposed homes—spaces dubbed “vertical mosques” or “apartment masjids.”²⁴

Despite their modest scale, these urban mosques assert Islamic presence through symbolic markers: green neon signs with “Masjid” in Urdu, small minarets affixed to rooftops, and loudspeakers for the adhan.²⁵

Their interiors prioritize functionality—prayer halls with minimal ornamentation, gender-segregated spaces, and efficient ablution facilities—yet they remain vital nodes of community life, hosting not only prayers but also Quran classes, charity drives, and social gatherings.²⁶

Community agency is central to this process. Unlike state-sponsored monuments, neighborhood mosques are typically funded through local donations (chanda), designed in consultation with residents, and maintained by volunteer committees.²⁷

This grassroots model ensures that mosque architecture reflects the needs and aspirations of its users, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging.²⁸

In Lahore's walled city, historic mosques like the Sunehri Masjid have been preserved not by state decree but by community vigilance, with local shopkeepers and elders resisting commercial encroachment.²⁹

Such efforts underscore the mosque's role as a custodian of collective memory in urban landscapes undergoing rapid transformation.

Symbolism and National Identity

Urban mosques in Pakistan function as visual declarations of Islamic identity in the public sphere. Their minarets punctuate skylines; their domes dominate neighborhood vistas; their green flags signal sacred space.³⁰

In a nation founded on the Two-Nation Theory—which posited Muslims as a distinct civilizational community—mosques serve as architectural affirmations of that distinction.³¹

This symbolism intensified during periods of national crisis. Following the 1971 war, mosque construction surged as a means of reasserting Islamic unity.³²

In the 1980s, under General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization policies, state support for mosque building increased, linking religious architecture to national ideology.³³ Even today, new mosques often bear names like “Masjid-e-Pakistan” or “Faisal Masjid,” embedding national narratives into sacred space.³⁴

Critically, this symbolism is non-sectarian. Whether Sunni, Barelvi, or Ahl-e-Hadith, most urban mosques in Pakistan share a common architectural vocabulary—domes, minarets, mihrabs—avoiding visual markers that might signal theological difference.³⁵

This visual consensus reinforces a unified Islamic identity, crucial in a diverse and often fragmented society.

Conclusion

Urban mosque architecture in post-independence Pakistan reflects a complex interplay of decolonization, cultural revival, modernist innovation, and community resilience. By rejecting colonial aesthetics and re-engaging with indigenous Islamic traditions—particularly the Mughal legacy—Pakistani architects and patrons have crafted a built environment that affirms national and religious identity.

Yet this architecture is not static. From the historicist grandeur of Lahore’s Grand Jamia Mosque to the minimalist geometry of Islamabad’s Shah Faisal Mosque and

the adaptive pragmatism of Karachi's vertical masjids, Pakistani mosque design demonstrates remarkable versatility. It balances symbolic ambition with urban reality, spiritual tradition with contemporary needs.

As Pakistan continues to urbanize, the mosque will remain a central institution—not only as a place of worship but as a spatial anchor for community, memory, and identity. Future architectural practice must therefore navigate the tension between monumentality and accessibility, heritage and innovation, ensuring that urban mosques continue to serve as inclusive, spiritually resonant spaces for all citizens.

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