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Simon O'Meara

House First: The Quranic Figure of the Kaʿba

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SIMON O'MEARA*

House First**

The Quranic Figure of the Kaʿba

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Quranic figuration of the Meccan sanctuary as a house (*bayt*). It reviews the Quran's use of architectural figures, above all the domestic house, and argues that its figuration of the Kaʿba as a house should only secondarily be understood as symbolic. The argument draws upon architectural theory derived from Derridean deconstruction and is supported by an historical analysis of the contemporarily perceived Kaʿba-like construction that the Umayyads built to immure monumentally the house (*bayt*, *ḥuǧra*) of the Prophet's wife, ʿĀʾiša, in Medina, allegedly the Prophet's final resting place and tomb.

Keywords: architecture, cosmology, deconstruction, gender studies, Mecca, Medina (*al-ḥaramāyn*), tomb of the Prophet (*al-ḥuǧra*)

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✦ RÉSUMÉ

La maison d'abord : la figure coranique de la Kaʿba

Cet article explore la figuration coranique du sanctuaire mecquois en tant que maison (*bayt*). Il examine l'utilisation par le Coran de figures architecturales, en particulier celle de la maison domestique, et soutient que sa représentation de la Kaʿba en tant que maison ne doit être comprise que secondairement comme symbolique. L'argument s'appuie sur une théorie architecturale dérivée de la déconstruction derridienne et est soutenu par une analyse historique de la perception contemporaine de la construction de type Kaʿba que les Omeyyades ont édifiée pour enfermer de manière monumentale la maison (*bayt*, *ḥuǧra*) de l'épouse du Prophète, ʿĀʾiša, à Médine, prétendument lieu de repos final et tombeau du Prophète.

Mots-clés : architecture, cosmologie, déconstruction, études de genre, La Mecque, Médine (*al-ḥaramāyn*), tombeau du Prophète (*al-ḥuǧra*)

✦ ملخص

البيت أولًا: الصورة القرآنية للكعبة

يستكشف هذا المقال تَصَوُّر القرآن الكريم للحرم المكي باعتباره بيتًا. كما يبحث في استخدام القرآن للصور المعمارية، لا سيّما صورة المنزل، ويؤكّد أنّ تصوير الكعبة كبيت ينبغي أن يُفهم على أنه تصوير رمزي بشكل ثانوي فقط. تستند الحجة إلى نظرية معمارية مستمدة من التفكيكية لدى دريدا، ويدعمها تحليل تاريخي للرؤية المعاصرة لبناء شيده الأمويون على غرار الكعبة ليحيط بشكل ضخم بمنزل (بيت، حجرة) السيدة عائشة زوجة النبي في المدينة المنوّرة، وهو المكان الذي يُزعم أنه موضع الراحة الأخير وقبر النبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عمارة، علم الكون، تفكيكية، الدراسات الجنسانية، مكة، المدينة المنورة (الحرمين)، قبر النبي (الحجرة)

* * *

1. Introduction

> Verily, the first house set down for humankind was the one at Mecca.
> Quran, III, 96

Writing in the mid-20th century, the influential architectural historian Siegfried Giedion asserted that "people desire buildings that represent their social, ceremonial, and community life. […] They seek the expression of their aspirations in monumentality." This desire, he explained,

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"springs from the eternal need of people to create symbols for their activities and for their fate or destiny, for their religious beliefs and for their social convictions".[1]

S. Giedion's assertion rings true today, being effectively a commonplace in architectural studies, both then and now. It echoes, for example, in Robert Nelson and Margaret Olin's art historical treatment of monuments and memory, when they speak of a monument's "symbolic communication", its "rhetoric", and how a "monument expresses the power and sense of the society that gives it meaning".[2] It echoes, too, in the words of Francesco Vitale, a philosopher of aesthetics: "The political imperative to which architecture has always been called to respond [is] the construction of symbols of the collective identity bound to endure over time."[3]

The Meccan sanctuary can fairly be said to exemplify this commonplace, as the publications of primary sources have revealed and contributions to this special issue show.[4] Far from disputing the merit of engaging with the sanctuary as a symbolically communicative monument, the present contribution nevertheless takes a different approach, a non-symbolic one. The reasons for this are two. First, without getting embroiled in the revisionist debate about whether the Kaʿba is the same site that the Quran most commonly figures as a house (*bayt*), God's (e.g. Quran, II, 125), it is not certain that the Quranic references to this house should be read symbolically.[5] Rather, as will be explained, a house is precisely what the Quran intends by the term *bayt*: a domestic space, a dwelling. As will be demonstrated, the figure of the house is foundational in the Quran, and as will be argued, primary for the revelations it comprises. Hence, as the figure is used for the Kaʿba in the Quran, it is only secondarily symbolic. Second, in keeping with a Derridean deconstructivist turn in the study and practice of architecture towards the end of the 20th century, architecture only superficially fits the widespread and familiar notion that it is a non-representational, symbolically expressive art.[6] Rather, as will also be argued, architecture is more critically understood as what Jacques Derrida calls the "last fortress of metaphysics"—the metaphysics of presence, or the logocentric determination of being as presence—whose model is the domestic house.[7]

Combined, these two reasons open a door for future feminist deconstructivist engagements with the Kaʿba (due to space limitations, they cannot be commenced here); for as this contribution will finally provisionally contend, the Kaʿba acts as a guarantor of patriarchal domestic space. This preliminary claim will be made with reference to the Prophet's tomb, or *ḥuǧra* (literally,

1. Giedion 1958, pp. 27–28.
2. Nelson, Olin (eds.) 2003, p. 7.
3. Vitale 2018, p. 39.
4. See most recently Gillon 2024, pp. 319 ff., 384 ff.
5. *Pace* Nicolai Sinai's reservations about a literal understanding of the term in Sinai 2023, pp. 145–146. On the revisionist debate, see most recently Hawting 2019. For a discussion of the usage and occurrences in the Quran of the term *bayt* meaning "the Kaʿba", see Campo 1991, pp. 9–13.
6. For an overview of this turn in architecture, see Coyne 2011. For analyses of it, see especially Wigley 1993; Goetz 2011, pp. 153–204; Vitale 2018.
7. Jacques Derrida (1986b, p. 69) coins this definition of architecture ; see *infra* for discussion of it. On the metaphysics of presence as it pertains to J. Derrida's philosophy, see e.g. Vitale 2018, pp. xiii–xix. As it pertains to both J. Derrida's philosophy and Islamic art, see Gonzalez 2021, pp. 13–14.

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"room" or "chamber") in Medina. Commonly called *al-ḥuǧra al-šarīfa*, "the Noble Chamber", the tomb is an Umayyad monumentalisation of the house (*ḥuǧra*, *bayt*) of the Prophet's wife, ʿĀʾiša, wherein he allegedly died and was lain to rest. According to contemporary accounts and a later eyewitness, the resulting construction resembled the Kaʿba and was perceived as such, being cuboid, closed, and black.

2. The figure of the house in the Quran

As Juan Campo showed over thirty years ago in his pioneering book *The Other Sides of Paradise*, the Quran extensively employs various figures of domestic architectural space, not just the aforementioned *bayt*.[8] As he demonstrates, these figures "act as key metaphors for discussing important concepts: God's house, emigration, belief, and disbelief, not to mention notions about the afterlife". The Quran, he adds, "makes simple human dwellings and customs pertaining to privacy, visitation, and hospitality part of a universal pattern of order and salvation".[9]

Importantly, J. Campo does not presume that the sole Quranic domestic figure for the Kaʿba, the aforementioned *bayt*, is to be understood symbolically. For example, with reference to the figure's usage in the verse "Verily, the first house *[awwala baytin]* set down for humankind was the one at Mecca" (Quran, III, 96), he observes: "Most Muslim commentators have agreed that it means a place of worship. Nevertheless, it is ambiguous enough to allow some people to see in God's house the prototype for all human dwellings. Even today, artists use this verse in Egyptian hajj murals to establish a symbolic linkage between the pilgrim's house and God's house in Mecca."[10] In a later publication, he additionally observes parallels between God's house and the houses of the early Muslims. "Muḥammad and his followers", he writes, "recognized a linkage between the house, the body and sexual relations—all were immured by ritual taboos, not unlike God's sacred house".[11]

Although Jacqueline Chabbi and Devin Stewart have separately argued that "house" is not a fitting translation of *bayt* when it comes to the Kaʿba but either "betyl" (J. Chabbi) or "temple" (D. Stewart), doubts have been thrown on both.[12] An additional doubt is the problem one would then confront when translating the many other Quranic uses of the term where a domestic house is the obvious referent. Are temples intended here, for example, where the plural of *bayt* is used? "If any of your women commit a lewd act, call four witnesses from among you, then, if they testify, confine them to houses *[al-buyūt]* until death takes them" (Quran, IV, 15).

8. A summary of the figures and their appearances in the Quran is provided in Campo 1991, pp. 10–11.
9. Campo 1991, p. 27.
10. Campo 1991, p. 13. For an early example of an exegete interpreting the term symbolically as a place of worship (*masǧid*), see Ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, I, p. 182 (about Quran, III, 96).
11. Campo, "House, Domestic and Divine", *EQ*, 2002, p. 460.
12. Chabbi 1997 (ed. 2010), pp. 36–40, 51; Stewart 2021, pp. 30–31. Regarding the doubts: for Jacqueline Chabbi, see Stewart 2021, pp. 31–32; and for Devin Stewart, see Sinai 2023, pp. 147–148.

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3. The Quranic cosmic house

The Quran's reliance on figures of architecture, above all the house, runs deeper even than J. Campo demonstrates. Arguably, the figure of the house is integral to a Quranic modality of revelation, *tanzīl* (literally, "sending down"), which it structures. This argument commences with the seemingly banal observation that the creation of the cosmos, as represented in the Quran, is extensively an architectural affair, with the terrestrial world, intended for the habitation of humans and jinn, being a vast, domestic space. Because this is a subject that has been well covered by others, only a summary exposition of it is provided here.[13]

The sky or firmament (*samāʾ*)—the Quran does not distinguish between them[14]—is represented as either a canopy or edifice (*binā*ʾ) (e.g. Quran, II, 22), the Quran again not distinguishing between the two.[15] God has built (*banā*) this sky or firmament (e.g. Quran, L, 6) and elevated (*rafaʿ*) it into position (e.g. Quran, XIII, 2), where it acts as a barrier to demons seeking to traverse it (e.g. Quran, XXXVII, 6–7). It is stronger (*ašadd*) than humans (Quran, LXXIX, 27) and twice called a roof (*saqf*, *samk*) (Quran, XXI, 32; XXXIX, 28), the first of these occurrences specifying that it is a secure (*maḥfūẓ*) roof, which God can nevertheless cause to fall in pieces to earth (Quran, XVII, 92).[16]

Although the sequence of creation is inconsistent in the Quran, in two suras the earth (*arḍ*) is created before this roof (Quran, II, 29; XLI, 9–11), with the second of these suras implying that the earth is stabilised with "firmly implanted mountains" (*rawāsī*) (Quran, XLI, 10).[17] Plausibly, therefore, the earth is the celestial roof's foundation. This conjecture loses traction, however, in the light of two verses that talk of the firmament being suspended "without columns *[ʿamad]* you see" (Quran, XIII, 2; XXXI, 10). Although exegetes and scholars have taken this phrase to mean that invisible columns support the firmament, recent research into pre-Islamic, Syriac depictions of a "sky without columns" has cast significant doubt on it.[18] Even so, the fact that the Quran employs this fundamental architectural figure, roof-supporting columns, if only to discard it as irrelevant to God's needs, is not without importance in the present paper and will be reprised below.

The "roof" is the lowest of the seven heavens (*sabaʿ samāwātin*) (e.g. Quran, II, 29), the others being layered in storeys (*ṭibāqan*) above it (e.g. Quran, LXVII, 3). This multistorey construction completed, God then ascends the throne (*ṯumma istawā ʿalā al-ʿarš*) (e.g. Quran, VII, 54), which rests upon the seventh storey, supported by all of them.[19] As for the first storey, the firmament,

13. For prior coverage of the subject, see especially Tabatabaʾi, Mirsadri 2016. Most recently, see Decharneux 2023.

14. See Decharneux 2023, p. 182.

15. Tent-related vocabulary forms part of the Quran's cosmogonic lexicon, although curiously and perhaps tellingly never *qubba* ("dome", "tent"). See Tabatabaʾi, Mirsadri 2016, pp. 219–222.

16. See the nuanced discussion of "roof" in Decharneux 2023, pp. 197–198.

17. See e.g. Quran, XVI, 15. See Sinai 2023, p. 41.

18. Decharneux 2023, pp. 147–148.

19. Janos 2012, pp. 216–220.

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God has decorated (*zayyana*) it with astral constellations (*burūǧ*) (e.g. Quran, XXXVII, 6) and lamps (*maṣābīḥ*) (e.g. Quran, LXVII, 5), and set within it "a radiant light and a luminous moon" (Quran, XXV, 61). Beneath it is the earth, which God has made an abode (*qarār*) (e.g. Quran, XXVII, 61) for humankind (Quran, XL, 64). Befitting a residence, the earth is alluded to as an outspread carpet (*al-arḍa biṣāṭan*) (Quran, LXXI, 19) or mattress (*al-arḍa farašnāhā*) (Quran, LI, 48) and also a bed (*al-arḍa mahdan*) (Quran, XX, 53).

Referencing a number of the foregoing verses and phrases, al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111) provides a fitting summary of the Quranic cosmos-as-house:

> Know that when you contemplate this world with your mind, you will find it like a built house *[ka'l-bayt al-mabnī]*, with all that is needed ready inside. The sky is raised like a roof *[al-samā' marfū'a ka'l-saqf]*, the earth is spread like a carpet *[al-arḍ mamdūda ka'l-biṣāṭ]*, the stars are set up like lamps *[al-nuǧūm manṣūba ka'l-maṣābīḥ]*, and the precious minerals are cached like provisions. All of this is ready and prepared for man's *[al-insān]* affairs. Man is like the house's owner, permitted what is in it.[20]

Of course, the Quran is far from unique in representing the world as a dwelling; the Bible uses the image of a tent, for example, and similar representation is common to many cultures.[21] The point of the foregoing exposition was not to argue for Quranic originality. It was, rather, to add to J. Campo's aforementioned treatment of figures of domestic architectural space in the Quran, including his discussion of a term whose full genealogical significance would be realised only after revelation had ended, namely *ahl al-bayt*, "the people of the [Prophet's] house" (e.g. Quran, XXXIII, 33).[22] When the exposition is added there, a picture emerges of a scripture indebted to the figure of the house. After all, to figure the cosmos as a house where all a believer's needs are met is to have a very certain view of the world. "A house", writes Benoît Goetz, a philosopher of architecture who has explored the figure in certain modern philosophies, "is not an image (no more than a face is an image). On the contrary, it is from the house that the world offers itself to be potentially contemplated in a vision. But it is not the house which is in view, it is the house which is an instrument of vision."[23]

In the light of al-Ġazālī's vivid homily about the Quranic cosmic house, the world view instrumentalised by this same house is plausibly more than just generically religious but specifically Quranic. In that respect, it is germane to reference Angelika Neuwirth's incisive comparison of the Quranic view of earthly space with that in pre-Islamic poetry. She writes:

20. Al-Ġazālī, *Ḥikma*, p. 15. I owe this reference to a presently unpublished lecture: Kapitaikin 2024. I thank Péter Nagy for noting the reference and bringing it to my attention.
21. See Decharneux 2023, pp. 198–199.
22. Campo 1991, pp. 18–19.
23. Goetz 2011, p. 50.

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> As against the heroic attitude of man towards space as displayed in poetry, the early qurʾānic revelations present earthly space as particularly inspiring of confidence. They present it as a locus of pleasure and enjoyment, as a venue for the reception of divine bounty and as a site of ethically charged social interaction. […] Be it the image of the firm land or the image of the sea, humankind is taught to rejoice in a divinely adorned cosmos. […] Haphazard fate and all-consuming time have ceded their power to a just divine agent. Space has regained a meaningful historical dimension.[24]

As A. Neuwirth implies here and others have argued, in the Quranic world view no distinction is made between sacred and profane earthly space, because no space is seen to lie beyond God's precincts, which is to say no space is *profanus*, to employ the Latin term.[25] Thus, a binary that has proved so instrumental to Eurocentric conceptions of religion is rendered irrelevant, if not inappropriate, for the study of Islam.

The importance of the Quranic figuration of the cosmos as a house does not end there, however. The hierarchically ordered universe—the earth, then the firmament, then the six remaining heavens, then the throne—is essentially the cosmic house plus the realm its roof simultaneously defines and makes spatially possible, namely, the empyrean above.[26] This vertically arranged universe facilitates the Quranic revelation or at least the part pertaining to the second of the Quran's two modalities of revelation, namely *tanzīl*, "sending down", a term the Quran uses to describe itself (Quran, XXVI, 192) and especially its content (e.g. Quran, LVI, 80).[27] Without the cosmic house defining the above and below of the Quranic universe, *tanzīl* would neither make sense as a descriptor of the Quran nor could excerpts from the celestial scripture (*al-kitāb*) be said by the Quran to come down. As Stefan Wild says of the term and its cognates *nuzūl* and *inzāl*: "[They] are at the very heart of the divine origin of Islamic religion [and] only make sense in a space in which there is an above and a below."[28]

4. The figure of architecture in the Quran

If the foregoing sections have focused on the generic figure of the house and its parts in the Quran, this section and the subsection appended to it broaden the discussion to consider the generic figure of architecture as a whole in the Quran.[29] This is because the Quran uses this figure in ways that other institutional texts and discourses—for example, philosophy in the Enlightenment period—have used the figure for millennia: for stability and solidity. Having used it that way, they commonly thereafter discard and/or subordinate it, because of

24. Neuwirth, "Geography", *EQ*, 2002, pp. 302–308.
25. See most recently O'Meara 2022.
26. See Tabataba'i, Mirsadri 2016, p. 227.
27. On these two modalities, see Loynes 2021.
28. Wild 1996, pp. 140–141.
29. The emphasis on generic is intentional; the following discussion does not involve specific architectural sites named in the Quran, e.g. Solomon's palace (Quran, XXVII, 44).

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the figure's origin in the base materiality of literal architecture.[30] As already seen, the Quran does the same: it presents and simultaneously discards as irrelevant to God's needs columns for the firmament's elevation and support. Then, in another verse, it subordinates any form of sky-supporting architecture to God's will alone: "He keeps the sky from falling down on the earth except by His permission" (Quran, XXII, 65). This usage is significant and exploring it further will demonstrate how an architectural theory derived from Derridean deconstruction is fitting for an engagement with the Quran's domestic figure of the Kaʿba, not a perversion of the Quran. The alignment makes a Derridean deconstructivist engagement with this domestic figure not just conceivable but appropriate.

As evidenced earlier, the Quranic cosmic house is a secure structure that supports the heavens and God's throne. An encapsulation of this occurs in the following verses, in which both tent-related and tectonic constructions are referenced: "Did we not make the earth as a bed, and the mountains as pegs *[awṭād]*?[31] Did we not create you in pairs, give you sleep for rest, make the night as a cloak and the day for livelihood, and build above you seven strong [heavens] and place there a blazing lamp *[sirājan wahhājan]*?" (Quran, LXXVIII, 6-12). Stable and strong though the dweller of this cosmic house might feel their world to be, ultimately, however, it is nothing but flimsiness. At the end of time, God will "lift up and crush with a single blow" the earth and the mountains (Quran, LXIX, 14) and "roll up the firmament like a scroll" (Quran, XXI, 104). Something similar is reported of the civilisation, figured as a building (*bunyān*), of an unspecified wrongdoing people: "Those who went before them also schemed, but God came at their building from the foundations *[al-qawāʿid]*. The roof collapsed upon them from above them: punishment came on them from unimagined directions" (Quran, XVI, 26). In both examples, the generic figure of architecture is used to represent tranquil security and quotidian stability, and simultaneously to deny both in the face of God's greater strength. The figure acts as a human measure of God's measureless power. A similar measure are the columns that God does not need to raise and keep suspended the heavens. Yet build God does, "with might" (literally, "with hands"): "We built the firmament with might *[banaynāhā bi-aydin]*" (Quran, LI, 47).

There are parallels here with what Oleg Grabar called a pre-Islamic "myth of a grandiose secular architecture", which José Miguel Puerta Vílchez has since explored at length.[32] At the risk of appearing tangential to the present article's focus on the Quran, these parallels merit elaboration. They help highlight the Quran's use of the generic figure of architecture.

30. Wigley 1993, pp. 1–34, 216–217.

31. On this term as well as for a discussion of tent-related imagery in the Quran, see Pietruschka, "Tents and Tent Pegs", *EQ*, 2005.

32. Grabar 1973, p. 79; Puerta Vílchez 2017, pp. 29–47.

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A literary discourse about ideal and remarkable architecture

Citing the following verse from ʿAlqama, "Every fortress *[ḥiṣn]*, long safe on great pillars, will one day be razed to the ground", J.M. Puerta Vílchez rightly observes that it would not be out of place in the Islamic period, quoted by pious moralists.[33] In fact, as just evidenced, it would not be out of place in the Quran itself. Developing his observation, J.M. Puerta Vílchez writes: "From simple evocations of the domains of rulers of the time, such as we find in al-Nābigha, Ṭarafa, and ʿAdī, [there grew] a rich discourse about ideal and remarkable architecture: high, shining, mobile, paradisal, composed of wondrous gardens, water, and precious materials—but which will still be subject to the threat of destiny."[34] This discourse was especially developed during the Abbasid dynasty.[35] Referring to images in panegyrics of the dynasty's palaces at Samarra, Julie Scott Meisami writes: "They testify to the cosmic dimensions of caliphal rule. But beneath their magnificence and their cosmic significations there lurks the ever-present threat of mortality and of decay."[36]

The threat of decay notwithstanding, medieval Muslim rulers were expected to build. "It is a duty of the king", writes al-Ṯaʿālibī (d. 429/1037) in his *Mirror for Princes* (*Ādāb al-mulūk*), "to spend [on buildings] with moderation, to make the buildings large enough, to know well what he is founding, to heighten what he builds, and be sure to make it stand for eternity rather than as ephemeral ornamentation".[37] The poet ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm (d. 248/863) implies that this duty was religious, because great buildings enhanced the faith of Muslims: "You built, as a proof for the Muslims against their apostates and unbelievers, / Marvels not seen by any Persian, nor by Byzantines, in all their lives."[38] According to al-Maqdisī (d. 380/991), the Umayyad ruler ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 66–86/685–705) constructed Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock for similar reasons: "Seeing the greatness of the martyrium of the Holy Sepulchre and its magnificence, he was moved lest it should dazzle the minds of the Muslims, and hence erected above the Rock the dome which is now seen there."[39]

Political legacy alone motivated the constructions of Cordoban Caliph ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III (r. 317–349/929–961), who is alleged to have said in verse:

> When kings want their lofty endeavours *[himam]* remembered after them, it is by the tongues of buildings *[alsun al-bunyān]*.

33. Puerta Vílchez 2017, p. 46.
34. Puerta Vílchez 2017, p. 46.
35. See most recently Saba 2022, pp. 83–95.
36. Scott Meisami 2001, p. 70.
37. As cited in translation in Alami 2011, p. 204.
38. As cited in translation in Scott Meisami 2001, p. 75 (modified).
39. As cited in translation in Grabar 1973, p. 55.

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> Have you not seen how the pyramids remain but how many kings are erased by the events of time?
> Truly, a building *[binā']* whose quality is recognised as great *[taʿāẓama šānuhu]* evidences great [royal] rank *[ʿaẓīm al-šān]*.[40]

In these verses, the shared identity of king and building is implicit. Elsewhere in the literary discourse, the identification is explicit, as in the following verse by Ibn al-Ǧahm, in which an unspecified palace in Samarra stands for the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–247/847–861), Imam of the Muslims: "When we see the building of the Imam, we see the caliphate in its abode."[41] The palace's dome even elicits the same response from foreign dignitaries as their presentation before the caliph himself: "Embassies fall to the ground before it in prostration when it overwhelms their sense of sight."[42] Much later, in the 19th century, poetic inscriptions on Cairo's newly founded Muḥammad ʿAlī mosque personify the building as its eponym, the de facto ruler Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha (d. 1264/1848):

> Whoever brings forth animosity, it angrily shuns away,
> While many a time it pardons the servant, seeking affection.
> It beautifies in both states of tenderness and cruelty;
> To one it's a relief, to the other a constraint.[43]

Doubtless, other building inscriptions do similar; this is a history little written.

In summary of this subsection on the discourse about ideal and remarkable architecture in early Arabic literature and its parallels with the Quranic usage of the generic figure of architecture, we may say that medieval Muslim kings were expected to found and make stand mighty buildings. These buildings were seen to embody aspects of Muslim kingship itself, namely, stability, power, and protection. Nevertheless, similar to the Quranic discourse about the cosmic house founded and erected by the True King (*al-malik al-ḥaqq*) (Quran, XXIII, 116), no foundation so standing was able to withstand destiny, God's almighty decree (*qadar*, *qadr*).

40. Al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ*, I, p. 575. For the alleged historical context of these verses, see Puerta Vílchez 2017, pp. 81–82; but note the translation there is not especially literal.
41. As cited in translation in Saba 2022, p. 83.
42. As cited in translation in Saba 2022, p. 83. Because the present article is concerned with figurative, not literal architecture, here is not the place to discuss the central premise of Matthew Saba's book (2022, p. 17), namely: "Abbasid palaces were built as impermanent monuments." Nevertheless, as reviewers have already noted, that premise is hard to substantiate; see e.g. Finster 2023, p. 322. One might also object that, *pace* M. Saba (2022, p. 12), by no means can art history as a whole be said to consider architectural monuments works of "durability and solidity". See e.g. the discussion of the destroyed World Trade Center in Nelson, Olin (eds.) 2003, pp. 305–323.
43. As cited in translation in Ghanea Bassiri 2020, p. 341.

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5. Deconstructing the figure of architecture

If the figure of architecture is used as a metaphor for strength, security, and stability in both early Arabic literature and the Quran, this usage is neither unusual nor unexpected but utterly familiar, resulting from the equally familiar sense of a building as secure, stable, and strong. Precisely because of its familiarity, this sense of a building is rarely, if ever probed. Yet as the architect and Derridean deconstruction theorist Mark Wigley has so closely argued:

> The seemingly familiar sense of a building is actually an enormously complicated sense that is the product of a massive tradition, or system of overlapping traditions, which is being constantly and violently enforced in the name of laws supposedly founded on that very sense. This ancient tradition projects building outside itself, isolating buildings from discourse, constructing building as that which comes before discourse, a privileged point of contact with prehistorical, transcultural order.[44]

The efficacity and reach of this ancient tradition is not to be underestimated; after all, when is architecture not commonly understood to be non-representational but presence itself?[45] Wordless, it immediately addresses the viewer, or so it seems, with court poets and unsuspecting academics officiating as its *porte-parole*. Even Martin Heidegger, whose philosophy proved so important to Derridean deconstruction, considered architecture an art "that cannot be ranked as representational".[46] Using the example of a Greek temple, he famously elaborated on this commonplace by saying: "A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley."[47]

Derridean deconstruction breaks with this commonplace and interrogates the familiar idea of a building as secure, stable, and strong. It probes the authority of the figure of architecture, revealing the complex discursive mechanism that enables and maintains this benign idea.[48] The idea, it transpires, is a politically expedient façade; for as M. Wigley has argued, it is "completely dependent on certain unspoken contracts that protect political structures apparently unrelated to it".[49] Architecture does not speak of political authority, wordlessly or otherwise; it *is* political authority.[50] Mistaking architecture for unmediated presence misses this. What a building

44. Wigley 1993, p. 217.
45. The point is not that architecture is incapable of being imagistic; as Robert Venturi et al. (1972) famously explore, a building might well take the form of a duck. The point, rather, is that architecture is commonly taken to be an almost *unmediated* presence, untouched by representational systems, or discursivity. But architecture is completely discursive, as will be discussed below.
46. Heidegger 1971, p. 41.
47. Heidegger 1971, p. 41. See the analysis of this statement in Wigley 1993, pp. 60–66.
48. In J. Derrida's own words (1986a, p. 18): "[Deconstruction] is not simply the technique of an architect who knows how to de-construct what has been constructed, but a probing which touches upon the technique itself, upon the authority of the architectural metaphor."
49. Wigley 1993, p. 217.
50. See Coleman 2020.

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does *not* present is what matters most in deconstructivist analysis: the defects or repressed impurities that a building cannot reveal because they are, in fact, structural.[51]

According to J. Derrida himself, the simultaneously banal and expedient idea of a building as secure, stable, and strong arises and above all thrives because of a societal forgetting of what he calls the architecture of architecture. He writes:

> Let us not forget that there is an architecture of architecture. Down to its archaic foundation, the most fundamental concept of architecture has been *constructed*. This naturalized architecture is bequeathed to us: we inhabit it, it inhabits us, we think it is destined for habitation, and it is no longer an object for us at all. But we must recognize there an *artifact*, a *constructum*, a monument. It did not fall from the sky; it is not natural, even if it informs a specific scheme of relations to *physis*, the sky, the earth, the mortal, and the divine. This architecture of architecture has a history; it is historical through and through. […] It penetrates us to the point that we forget its very historicity: we take it for nature. It is good sense itself.[52]

If, as J. Derrida says, this architecture of architecture, this *constructum*—this "last fortress of metaphysics", as he subsequently calls it—is inhabited, it is because it has been submitted to a specific law of dwelling.[53] This *constructum* is a house.[54]

51. See Wigley 1989, p. 133: "Deconstruction is often misunderstood as the taking apart of constructions. […] Deconstruction is not demolition. While it diagnoses certain structural problems within the apparently stable structures, these flaws do not lead to the structures' collapse. On the contrary, deconstruction gains all its force by challenging the very values of harmony, unity and stability, and proposing a different view of structure: the view that the flaws are intrinsic to the structure and cannot be removed without destroying it; they are indeed structural. The Deconstructive architect is therefore not one who dismantles buildings, but one who locates the inherent dilemmas within buildings—the structural flaws. The Deconstructive architect puts the pure forms of the architectural tradition on the couch and identifies the symptoms of a repressed impurity. The impurity is drawn to the surface by a combination of gentle coaxing and violent torture: the form is literally interrogated." For gender studies, see Agrest 1988, a classic text showcasing this way of proceeding.

52. Derrida 1986b, p. 65 (italics as marked in the original).

53. Derrida 1986b, pp. 65, 69 (italics as marked in the original): "The concept of architecture is itself an inhabited *constructum*, a legacy that understands us even before we try to think it. Certain invariants remain through all the mutations of architecture. […] What are these invariants? I will distinguish four […]. They translate one and the same postulate: *architecture must have a meaning*, it must *present* this meaning […]. The experience of meaning must be the *dwelling*, the law of the *oikos*, the economy of men or gods. In its nonrepresentational presence, which, as distinct from the other arts, seems to refer only to itself, the architectural work seems to have been destined for the presence of men and gods."

54. Francesco Vitale (2018, p. 31) summarises J. Derrida's thought in this regard: "According to Derrida, architecture is the last fortress of metaphysics precisely because it sets up a concrete, established, and durable shape for identity, which is conceived of as a familiar and self-enclosed interiority or intimacy, engaged with the defense of itself. This identity has been determined since the origin [of the metaphysics of presence] by the analogy with a specific kind of architectural structure: the house/dwelling."

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The first house

J. Derrida's denial notwithstanding, something like this *constructum*—this house—did indeed fall from the sky: humankind's first house, the Kaʿba. "Verily, the first house set down *[wuḍiʿa]* for humankind was the one at Mecca" (Quran, III, 96). Early Islamic traditions about the celestial origins of the prototypical Kaʿba confirm this; Wahb b. Munabbih (d. *c.*110/728) relates, for example: "When Adam descended to earth, his wailing was extreme, so God set down for him a booth *[waḍaʿa Allah lahu ḫayma]* in Mecca at the site of [the future] Kaʿba."[55]

Like this *constructum*, too, the Kaʿba also informs a scheme of relations to "*physis*, the sky, the earth, the mortal, and the divine", or is said to. This scheme has been covered elsewhere.[56] Suffice it here to cite in evidence the belief related by al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283): "When rain strikes one side of the Kaʿba, abundance is on that side that year. When rain covers all the sides, abundance encompasses all sides."[57]

On account of these similarities with J. Derrida's *constructum* alone, it would seem prudent to keep the Meccan sanctuary's non-symbolic architectural typology somewhere in view when discussing the Kaʿba's symbolism. House first. Add to this reason the preceding discussion of the figure of the house in the Quran, and the basis for keeping it in view deepens. It can be amplified with a discussion of the Umayyad constructions at the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, specifically the Prophet's alleged burial site, the house (*ḥuǧra*, *bayt*) of his wife ʿĀʾiša. The Umayyads reportedly immured this house in what was contemporarily perceived to be a Kaʿba-like structure. A deliberately not-Kaʿba-like but pentagonal wall was hence added about it. The two constructions are treated below; they form the present article's final section.

6. House of the Prophet's tomb

When and where did the Kaʿba and the Prophet's tomb (*ḥuǧra*) first become conceptually paired? One answer suggested by art history is the early to mid-11th/17th century, when visual representations of both sites become paired in copies of the prayerbook *Dalāʾil al-ḫayrāt* (*Proofs of Good Deeds*) by Muḥammad al-Ǧazūlī (d. 870/1465).[58] Architectural history suggests a much earlier date: the 2nd/8th century, when the Umayyad Caliph Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 86–96/705–715) expanded the Mosque of the Prophet. As part of this expansion, his governor in Medina, ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 101/720), reportedly sealed up the Prophet's alleged burial chamber, his wife ʿĀʾiša's house, with a cubic structure made of dressed black

55. Al-Ṭabarī, *Qirā*, p. 653.
56. For a summary, see O'Meara 2020.
57. Al-Qazwīnī, *Kosmographie*, ll. 12–13, p. 77; Wensinck 1916, pp. 34–35. Samer Akkach (2005, p. 183) summarises related beliefs about the Kaʿba: "At the center of the earth the Kaʿba reveals a vertical relationship with the center of heaven. […] The cosmic axis that passes through the Kaʿba connects it to its infraterrestrial, celestial, and supracelestial counterparts."
58. Abid 2021, p. 283; Beyazit 2021, pp. 324–325.

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stone (*anna al-bayt murabbaʿ mabnī bi-ḥiǧāra sūd wa qaṣṣa*).[59] Whether he first razed the predominantly mudbrick walls of this house, replacing them with the stone structure, or left them *in situ*, encasing them within the structure, is hard to ascertain from the conflicting accounts contained in the sources.[60] As the same sources report, the resulting structure was thought to be potentially confusing to visitors to the mosque, ʿUmar fearing that they might mistake it for the Kaʿba and take it as the *qibla* for their ritual prayers.[61] And so, the sources continue, he ordered the erection of a lopsided curtain wall (*ḥiẓār muzwar*) about it, which would not "resemble the squareness of the Kaʿba".[62] Square at one end but prow shaped (*laḥu ǧuʾǧu*ʾ) at the other, this wall was pentagonal (*muḫammas*).[63]

Although the reason for this pentagonal wall has been questioned as perhaps fanciful by Harry Munt, as he also notes it is accepted as valid in the sources.[64] Leor Halevi, another historian of the Prophet's tomb, harbours no such doubts but is at a loss to explain "why the caliphate decided to cover up the original grave and build a funerary monument in its place".[65] One might reasonably add to this question why dressed black stone was used for the purpose, because as noted by the tomb's principal eyewitness, al-Samhūdī (d. 911/1506), "the stone's colour approximates the colour of the noble Kaʿba's stones *[lawnuhā yaqrubu min lawn aḥǧār al-Kaʿba al-šarīfa]*".[66]

Provisional answers to these questions might be tentatively ascertained by returning to the domestic nature of the Prophet's tomb out of sight behind the pentagonal enclosure. Two observations stand out. First, the space allegedly immured by the cubic structure, ʿĀʾiša's house, was once part of what the earliest exegetes present as the abode of the Mothers of the Believers (*ummahāt al-muʾminīn*). This abode, as Aisha Geissinger has shown, is "an imagined space within which exegetical questions can be authoritatively resolved [and] a normative space within which social, legal, theological, and sectarian boundaries can be negotiated".[67] That part of this abode should be walled up and preserved as the Prophet's tomb is not without significance, especially for gender studies. Second, the Prophet is popularly imagined still to be living in this sealed-up domestic space. As Ǧaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) is alleged to have warned workers when reconstruction work was required at the tomb: "I do not want any one of you to climb up. I am not sure that he would not see something which would take away

59. Al-Samhūdī, *Wafa*ʾ, II, pp. 306, 326.
60. See e.g. al-Samhūdī, *Wafa*ʾ, II, pp. 302, 305.
61. Al-Samhūdī, *Wafa*ʾ, II, pp. 302, 306; Munt 2014, p. 108, n. 48.
62. Al-Samhūdī, *Wafa*ʾ, II, p. 302.
63. Al-Samhūdī, *Wafa*ʾ, II, pp. 306, 326; Halevi 2007, pp. 193–194; Munt 2014, p. 108.
64. Munt 2014, p. 108, n. 48.
65. Halevi 2007, pp. 193–194.
66. Al-Samhūdī, *Wafa*ʾ, II, p. 326. The blackness of the Kaʿba's cover (*kiswa*) is not relevant here, because until the early 7th/13th century, when black became the colour of choice, various uniform hues were used for it; see O'Meara 2020, p. 132.
67. Geissinger 2015, pp. 211, 214.

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his sight or that he would not catch a glimpse of the Prophet performing his prayers or even being together with one of his wives."[68]

In view of these two observations, should it be surprising to find this very particular domestic space monumentalised by, respectively, a Kaʿba-like and not-Kaʿba-like construction? The Kaʿba is *the* house par excellence, the first house. Its form guarantees both the exceptional rank of this particular house and the inviolability of the Quranic order of patriarchal domesticity this house allegedly belonged to and as a tomb preserves.[69]

7. Conclusion

In part, this paper has been an attempt to bring an architectural theory derived from Derridean deconstruction into alignment with the Quran and dialogue with Islamic architecture, specifically the Kaʿba and its Quranic figuration. The task is not obvious, so widespread, familiar, and deeply rooted is the understanding of architecture—any architecture—as non-representational presence and stability. Reprising J. Derrida's encapsulation of this benign understanding, it is "good sense itself"; effectively, it is commonsense. Nevertheless, the benefits of loosening its hold are significant, as this paper has indicated. As M. Wigley writes:

> Architecture is bound to metaphysics because it represents the capacity to domesticate. It is not simply a question of the solidity of its foundations. Rather, it is the apparent solidity of its walls, the security of its enclosure, its definition of space, its production of place. Deconstructive discourse threatens the tradition of metaphysics by disturbing the ability of its constructions to put things in their place.[70]

If the Kaʿba is the preeminent architectural site of the Islamic world, its first house, then interrogating it deconstructively has the potential to reveal what and perhaps who it keeps in place. Poised now for dialogue with the Kaʿba, that interrogation can get properly underway.

In greater but related part, the paper has also investigated the domestic figure of the Kaʿba in the Quran. It has demonstrated that the figure is foundational in the Quran and primary for the revelations it comprises. Without disputing the validity of viewing the Meccan sanctuary as a symbolic structure, this conclusion necessarily follows: as the Kaʿba is domestically figured in the Quran, it is only secondarily symbolic.

68. As cited in translation in Meier 1999, p. 519.
69. On the Quranic order of patriarchal domesticity to which ʿĀʾiša's house allegedly belonged, see Bauer, Hamza 2023, pp. 163–211, 345–401. I thank Aila Santi for bringing this exceptional book to my attention.
70. Wigley 1993, p. 138.

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