

BODY, SOUL, AND ARCHITECTURE

A Study of the Premodern Islamic and Western Traditions

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, the conception of architecture has, in one form or another, always been related to the human body. In the Western tradition, this can be traced back to the writings of Vitruvius as well as a chain of thinkers who followed in his footsteps. In several non-Western traditions, however, the relationship is not as clearly traceable. The Islamic tradition is one conspicuous example. Although Muslim scholars seem to have been familiar with Vitruvius' representation of the human body as a measure for architecture, the developments of their thought on the topic have remained rather ambiguous. This thesis aims to investigate these developments and to explore new terrains of Islamic thought on this topic in parallel with those of the Western tradition.

The thesis presents a fresh reading of the intertwined history of body and architecture based on a selected range of philosophical, mystical, and historical texts of key Western and Muslim figures, such as Plato, Vitruvius, St. Augustine, Alberti, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīna, al-Ghazālī, al-Suhrawardī, and Ibn ʿArabī. It shows how the enduring idea of body and building was conceived, detailed, and developed consistently in both traditions, and how the lack of canonical architectural sources in the Islamic tradition does not mean an absence of sustained thinking on the topic, which can be found richly illustrated in non-architectural sources.

The thesis focuses on the concept of “measure,” that is, the way in which the human body was conceived to be a reference point for the act of making. In the Western traditions, the foundations of this conception reach back to Pythagoras, who reduced the body to a set of mathematical ratios to be used in the act of building. In being a reflection of a cosmic model, these mathematical ratios of the body became the *measure* through which both the body and its constructed images (a building, a settlement, or a city) became microcosms. This conception extends to the Islamic tradition, which laid an additional emphasis on the role of the soul as an intangible ruler of the body.

The study shows how in the premodern world man was seen to represent, in an abbreviated fashion, the measure of the entire cosmos, how this human measure, in turn, played a central role in informing the theories and practices of architecture, how the human body became a divine model for the architecture of both the cosmos and built environment, and how the macrocosmic-microcosmic relationship that once bound the body to both architecture and the universe has been irrecoverably lost in modern times.

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Unless otherwise stated I have used Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the *Qur'ān* and *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* for Biblical references.

I have used the author-date system for referencing throughout except for a selection of well-known primary texts where I have retained the original title in its transliterated form and the numbering following the original text.