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## THE IMAGE OF THE KAABA IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE OF THE MOSQUE: RETURNING TO THE COMPETITION IN KAZAN

**Abstract.** At the recent architectural exhibition “ArchMoscow 2023”, a new project of the Grand Mosque in Kazan was presented, in which the architects propose to erect a huge building in the form of a black cube with a domed prayer hall inscribed in it. This project, allegedly already approved by the leadership of Tatarstan, caused bewilderment and rejection of the participants of last year’s competition. The appeal to the forms of the Kaaba has precedents in the contemporary architecture of the mosque, which does not remove the question – how acceptable and appropriate is the exploitation of the image of the Meccan shrine? The article analyzes aspects of the originality of this project and its compliance with the tasks of the already held competition.

**Key words:** contemporary mosque, architectural competitions, Kaaba, Kazan Cathedral Mosque, АрхМосква .

**Introduction.** The search for an image of a contemporary Tatar mosque in relation to the competition for projects of a new Cathedral Mosque in Kazan has already been written on the pages of our magazine [12]. Let me remind you that this was an event to commemorate the 1100th anniversary of the adoption of Islam in the Volga region, and the participants of the competition were tasked not to reproduce the neo-Ottoman model once again, but to create a modern example that expresses the Tatar and even Kazan architectural style. It was assumed that this building was to become a landmark religious building

for the entire Turkic world. Unfortunately, we had to state that during the competition it was not possible to identify the image of the mosque which at the same time would meet the official aspirations, the needs of the *Ummah* and the choice of the inhabitants of Kazan.

However, a year after the competition, the story received an unexpected continuation. At the “ArchMoscow 2023” competition, another project of a new mosque in Kazan was presented – from the “Tsimailo Lyashenko & Partners” bureau, and they tried to assure the public that this particular project had already been approved by the leadership of Tatarstan.

To quote a press release from the bureau’s website: “The new building should become a symbol of religion in the country and its contemporary sign. This status determined the architectural concept – the Kaaba, the main Muslim shrine, became the prototype of the future mosque. The mosque stands on the water, connecting with the banks of the Volga through a public square. The building is a black cube, in the center of which is a prayer hall. The shape of the dome, traditional for the mosque, refers to the location of the worshipers around the Kaaba <...> The appearance of the building reflects a combination of secular and religious, open and sacred at the same time. The design of the facades develops this idea: the stone blocks are shifted in such a way that gaps form in the masonry. So the dome of the hall can be seen from a great distance and from ships sailing along the river. The scale of the mosque is emphasized by the single minaret in which there is an observation deck. The location on the water reveals the meaning of the word: “minaret” in Arabic – “lighthouse”. It symbolizes a spiritual landmark for believers and at the same time is a landmark in the city” [16]. (Fig. 1).

While this is only a project, it makes sense to ask questions: how original is it, how acceptable is the image used, and does it meet the announced objectives of the competition?

### **The building of the mosque as an image of the Kaaba?**

The release clearly states the conceptual reference to the Kaaba as the source of the image for the mosque, and this reference immediately drew criticism. S. Shakurov, who designed the Kul Sharif in Kazan and the White Mosque in Bolgar, drew attention to the fact that the Meccan shrine is located in the center of the space intended for worship, and the current project involves placing the place for worship inside the cube;

in other words, the object and function are swapped. A. Sattarov, one of the winners of last year's competition, noted: "For more than a thousand years of the existence of Islam, no country in the world has thought of repeating it in the form of a mosque. You can't build a second Kaaba! I believe that the authors of the project have no idea what is Islam, what is a mosque, what is the spatial structure of the mosque and its functional purpose" [17].

However, architectural practice shows that the critic is wrong: contemporary mosques that use the image of the Kaaba exist. Perhaps the earliest was the "national mosque of Bangladesh" – Baitul Mukarram in Dhaka (1959–1963), and its architect A. Tariani considered it necessary to partially devalue the direct reference to the Kaaba, making the cubic volume not black, but white [7, p. 335–336] (Fig. 2). A slightly modified "version" of the Kaaba was the mosque named by Magomed Dadaev in the Chechen Zakan-Yurt (2011): the architect reproduced not only the black color of the cladding, but also the golden calligraphic frieze, referring to the *kiswa* of the Meccan shrine, however, despite the obvious recognition of the original source, he avoided direct "quoting", changing both the proportions of the parallelepiped and its conciseness, adding galleries and porticoes and cutting through the walls with arched skylights (Fig. 3).

By 2017, a mosque of Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib appeared in Grozny, which is a replica of the Kaaba, surrounded by a white gallery in the form of an eight-pointed star and with four minarets on the cardinal points. This building is presented by the press as "the second mosque in the world with the Kaaba in the very center"; it is obvious that in this case there is a substitution of concepts, and in the mass consciousness the idea is fixed not of a replica or copy of a symbolic object, but of the possibility of the existence of a "second Kaaba".

The Kazan architect is certainly right that there cannot be a second Kaaba, but not in the sense of likening the form and reproducing the image, but in the liturgical, cosmic meaning. The thesis has already been spoken many times that the Meccan shrine, unlike the mosque, is precisely the temple, that is, the House of God (*Bayt al-Allah*), erected by Abraham and Ismail "as a blessing and guide for the worlds" (Quran 3:96; 106:3). The Qur'an stipulates its "preservation" (*haram*) and exclusivity for sacrifices and pilgrimage (Quran 2:125; 3:97; 5:97; 22:26; 22:33) [2, c. 76–80; 7, c. 12–13; 8, c. 111–124; 10; 14]. The uniqueness of the Kaaba, which is made up of a number of factors,

predetermined the orientation necessary in the ritual practice of Islam – the *qibla*, and the vectorial nature of the ritual understanding of space, directed to Mecca, regardless of the location of the worshiper; observance of this direction is a condition for performing prayer (Quran 2:144; *Buhari. Sakih.* 251–252 (398–399)) [11].

However, the recognition of the uniqueness of the Kaaba both as a spatial point and as a physical object does not mean at all that its image cannot be reproduced. There are no prohibitions in this regard, and the assessment of the permissibility of such an act depends solely on individual interpretations. Islam turned out to be indifferent to the issues of symbolism and architectural design of the prayer space, and, as already indicated, the shape of the mosque building depends on optional factors and can be almost any [1, c. 117–122]. The image of the Kaaba is often placed on prayer rugs, indicating the *qibla* and visibly showing that goal – the House of God, to which the prayer is directed. However, it should be clearly understood that the object of worship is only the Kaaba itself, the only “ritual substitute” allowed in Islam (believers worship not the building itself, but the One to Whom this House is intended), but not its image. The situation is different, for example, in Christianity, where sacred ideas about space are reproduced in any church, it is images (icons) that are used in worship, and in remote lands the sacred topography of the Holy Land can be modeled, and even the Kuvuklia of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the image of which is a full-fledged object of worship in the absence of the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (for example, in the monastery “Holy bushes” in Bashkortostan) [4; 6, c. 5–10, 520–543, 745–773]. Islam does not allow the worship of any images, and although the assimilation of the mosque building to the Kaaba is not prohibited, the use of recognizable references to the Meccan shrine in the organization of a prayer space will always find violent opponents.

It is no coincidence that the architect S. Shakurov noted the paradoxical “inversion” of the ritual space in the new project of the mosque: when praying towards the Kaaba, the Muslims of Kazan will find themselves inside the image of the Kaaba. This idea can be developed in several directions: the shape of the object that is the purpose of prayer is used to decorate the place of prayer; the beginning of the “vector of Islam” models the end of the same vector; the sensation of the Kaaba in front of oneself, which is necessary for Muslim prayer, is mixed with the presence of its own image inside,

etc. Obviously, the use of the image of the Kaaba in the contemporary architecture of the mosque, which seems simple and logical to architects, may not seem like a good visual solution to Muslim theologians and turns out to be a collision in the organization of the ritual space.

### **Originality or set of quotes?**

The project of the Kazan mosque was perceived as the “highlight of the program” of the exhibition “Arch Moscow 2023” – a surprise was expected from the “architects of the year” Nikolay Lyashenko and Alexandre Tsimalio, no one knew about this project, the presentation stand itself was designed in the form of a five-meter black cube and was recognized as the “best exposure” of the exhibition (Fig. 4) [18; 19]. But how innovative is this project?

As already mentioned, the architecture of the mosque is not limited by anything and leaves ample opportunities for searching for forms, but it is extremely difficult to find fundamentally new ideas, which was shown by last year’s competition in Kazan. However, it is one thing to stylize it as a specific symbolic pattern, and another thing is a combination of quotations in the expectation that the primary sources are not very well known and will remain unidentified.

The simplicity and conciseness of the forms of the Kaaba, reduced to a single regular geometric body, cannot be surpassed, and one can only strive to limit the number of bodies in the volume of the building [5, c. 91–95]. There are quite a lot of Muslim buildings, the body of which is composed of a cube (or other polyhedron based on a regular figure) and a hemisphere – such are the majority of domed mausoleums and reliquaries. Moscow architects placed the dome not *on* the cube but *inside* the cube, but should this be considered an achievement?

In the prayer hall reduced to a hemisphere, there is nothing new either – one can name, for example, the Tauba mosque in Karachi (1969), Nilin in Omdurman (1976), Yeshilvadi in Istanbul (2004–2010) [7, c. 328, 358–359; 3, c. 175]. The self-supporting construction of the dome over the entire prayer hall was conceived in the project of the Ankara Kocatepe-cami by V. Dalokay (1957) and implemented in the Istanbul Shakirin-cami (2009) [3, c. 161–163, 176–178; 7, c. 266–267, 274–275]. The idea of “double layering”, the presence of space between the outer shell and the wall of the prayer hall, accentuated on the stands of the project, evoke associations with the Cairo mosque of Ibn Tulun (876–879) (Fig. 5) [9, p. 51–57]...

The greatest impression on the journalists who wrote about the project was the construction of the mosque on the water (at the stand, the surface of the pedestal for the model was also covered with water). In the absence of sites in the center of Kazan for such a large-scale project, the “capture” of the Volga is justified, but this idea is not original either. The source here is primarily the idea of King Hassan II of Morocco, who wanted to build the westernmost mosque of the Old World and was inspired by the verse that the Throne of Allah is on the water (Quran 11:7). The architect M. Pinseau realized this idea by partially moving the mosque of Hassan II in Casablanca (1986–1993) to a platform in the Atlantic Ocean (Fig. 6) [7, p. 364–367]. In fact, there are enough mosques raised above the water in the world – al-Rahma in Jeddah, Haji Ali Dargah in Mumbai, this concept is actively developing in Malaysia [13]. The story, told several times, loses its pathos, and the repetition of a grandiose plan on the banks of the Volga no longer looks interesting, especially since we are still more accustomed to placing entertainment facilities “above the water” (Sydney Opera House, Baku Crystal Hall). As for the perception of the minaret as a lighthouse, this is not a philological discovery of Moscow architects, but a historical routine, and both the watch and signal towers of port cities were used to proclaim the azan (as was the case, for example, in the *ribat* of Sousse), and the minarets of mosques with a weakening positions of Islam were specially converted into landmarks for ships [15, p. 335]. Does the spirituality of Kazanians need a “symbol of a spiritual landmark”, will the panorama of Kazan withstand an additional dominant, does navigation along the Volga require another lighthouse? A. Sattarov, who perfectly understands the local conditions, noted that the water level in the Volga is constantly changing, and the water turns into ice in winter [17], which means “like in Sydney and Casablanca” or on the lakes of Malaysia will not work. The implementation of the idea, no matter how interesting it may be, promises to overcome additional difficulties that may not be visible to Moscow architects at the stage of developing a catchy image of the future building.

### **Game by new rules**

Both media representatives and Kazan citizens were surprised by the assertion of the project authors that their concept had already been approved by the leadership of Tatarstan. A. Sattarov asked a completely fair question: was it necessary to hold an international competition in order to simply “appoint”

the winner a year later, putting him in completely different conditions? [17] Recall that the participants in the Kazan mosque project competition were offered a site on the site of the Kyrlyay park, which caused dissatisfaction among residents and where it was necessary to take into account the difficult hydraulic situation, the complexity of the transport system and the preservation of the panorama in a protected historical area near the Kazan Kremlin [12, p. 4–5]. The transfer of the mosque to the Volga automatically cancels the restrictions that were originally set for the contestants, and devalues all the work done.

In addition, under the terms of last year's competition, the new mosque was supposed to become a model that reinforces the "Tatar style", and the participants were specially acquainted with historical monuments. I had to criticize competition projects for being overly dependent on prototypes [12, p. 6–9]. It is unlikely that a translucent cube with a dome inside, raised above the water, meets this requirement – such a mosque is in no way connected with local artistic traditions, which the Spiritual Administration of Muslims insisted on identifying and fixing.

One can easily understand the negative attitude towards the new project of the participants, and even more so of the winners of last year's competition – they had to develop their projects, focusing on completely different tasks, and adapt to other requirements of customers, including to size restrictions, despite the fact that the competition did not reveal a clear winner and the first place was shared. The unconditional right of the customer to change the requirements, especially when it comes to a large socially significant object, and even appoint a work contractor; strange, however, to completely change the concept of the task without any prior discussion. However, there was no preliminary discussion at the stage of the competition. However, we have to admit: last year, when the architectural competition for the anniversary of the adoption of Islam was announced, an international pool of architectural studios was involved, a vision of the image of the future object was formulated and terms of reference were proposed, the results were summed up and places were distributed, the rules of the game were completely different. The project "Kaaba on the Volga", whether it is good or bad, clearly does not comply with these rules. Of course, this problem should not be solved by architects or art historians.

**Conclusion.** Despite the overdue desire to modernize the forms of the mosque and complaints about the monotony of religious buildings

under construction, the new project of the Cathedral Mosque in Kazan, presented at “Arch Moscow 2023”, looks like a strange “stuffing” both in the previously voiced requirements for this structure and in the practice of Russian architecture of mosques. This project is presented in an original and spectacular way in the conditions of the exposition and impresses with its laconicism, however, it does not contain anything new in terms of the concept of a Muslim prayer building. The desire of the architects to create a figurative reference to the iconic object – the Kaaba – turns out to be a provocation and generates controversy, that is leads to results that are far from the doctrines of Islam. The focus on laconism of forms does not go beyond the combination of a cube and a hemisphere, which is familiar to Islamic architecture, but no longer carries anything new. Although this project falls short of the desire to bring out a national tradition, it – like most of last year’s competition products – did not go beyond a combination of recognizable architectural quotations. I suppose that despite the attention to this project of individual officials, Kazan deserves other, more interesting and original ideas to create an undoubted showplace.

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### **MÜASİR MƏSCİD MEMARLIĞINDA KƏBƏƏ OBRAZI: KAZANDAKI MÜSABİQƏYƏ DÖNÜŞ**

Yaxın keçmişdə keçirilən “ArxMoskva 2023” memarlıq sərgisində Kazanda Böyük məscidin yeni layihəsi təqdim olundu ki, burada memarlar daxilində günbəzli ibadət zalı olan qara kub şəkilli nəhəng bina tikməyi təklif edirlər. Tatarıstan rəhbərliyi tərəfindən guya artıq bəyənildiyi bildirilən bu layihə keçən ilki müsabiqənin iştirakçılarında anlaşılmazlıq doğurdu və qəbul edilmədi. Müasir məscid memarlığında Kəbə formalarına müraciət edilməsi halları mövcuddur, lakin bu – “Məkkə ziyarətgahı obrazından istifadə edilməsi nə dərəcədə məqbul və məqsədə müvafiqdir?” – sualını heç də aradan qal-

dırmır. Məqalədə bu layihənin orijinallıq aspektləri və onun artıq keçirilmiş müsabiqənin şərtlərinə uyğunluğu təhlil edilir.

*Açar sözlər:* müasir məscid, memarlıq layihələri, Kəəbə, Kazan Cümə məscidi, ArxMoskva.

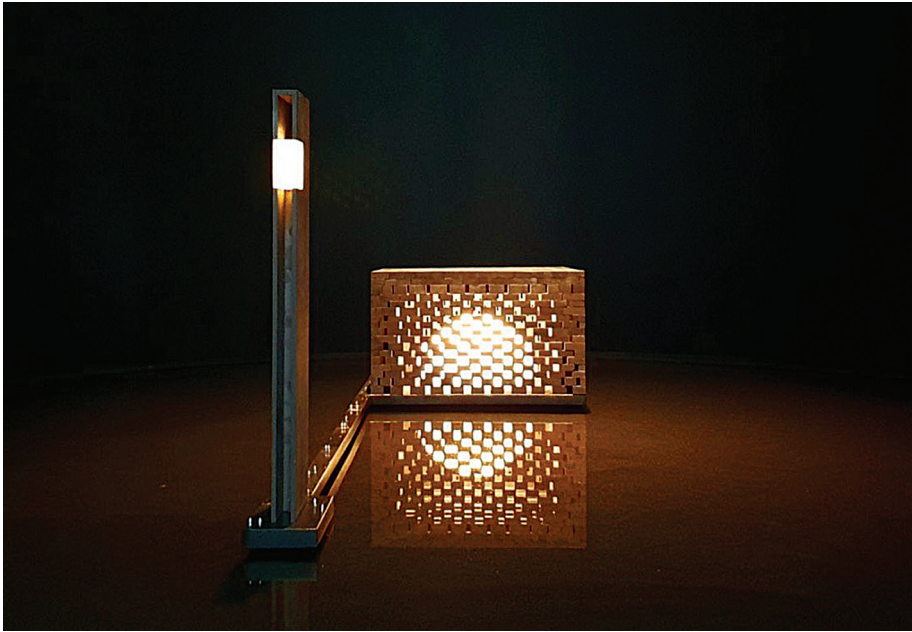
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### **ОБРАЗ КААБЫ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ АРХИТЕКТУРЕ МЕЧЕТИ: ВОЗВРАЩАЯСЬ К КОНКУРСУ В КАЗАНИ**

На недавней архитектурной выставке «АрхМосква 2023» был представлен новый проект Большой мечети в Казани, в котором архитекторы предлагают возвести огромное здание в виде черного куба с вписанным в него купольным молитвенным залом. Этот проект, якобы уже одобренный руководством Татарстана, вызвал недоумение и неприятие участников прошлогоднего конкурса. Обращение к формам Каабы имеет прецеденты в современной архитектуре мечети, что не снимает вопрос – насколько допустима и уместна эксплуатация образа мекканской святыни? В статье анализируются аспекты оригинальности данного проекта и его соответствие задачам уже проведенного конкурса.

*Ключевые слова:* современная мечеть, архитектурные конкурсы, Кааба, Казанская соборная мечеть, АрхМосква.

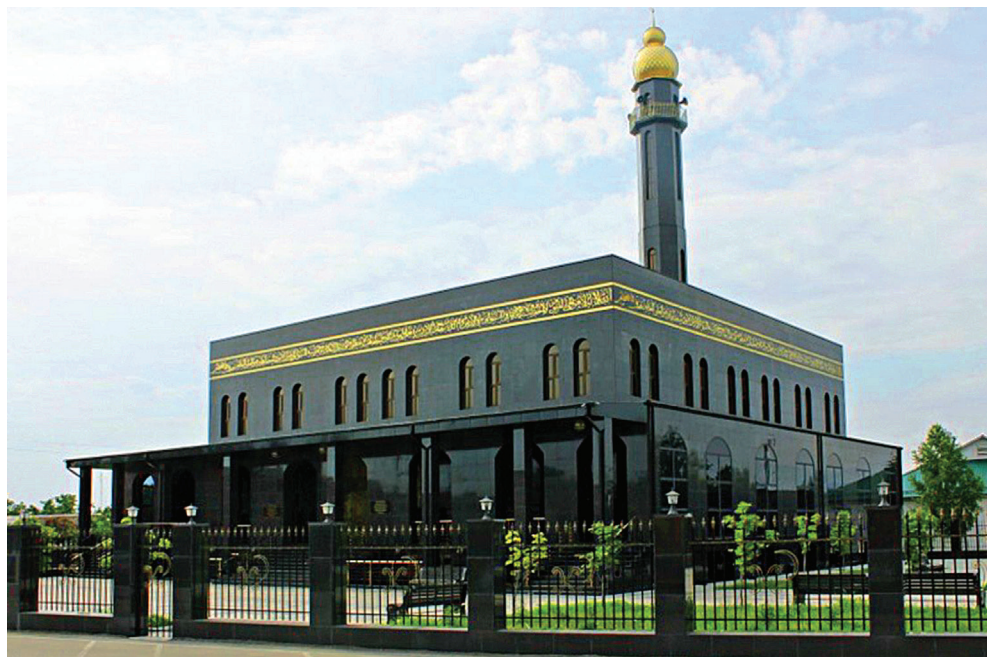
## FIGURES



**Fig. 1. The project of the Kazan Cathedral Mosque from «Tsimailo Lyashenko & Partners».**



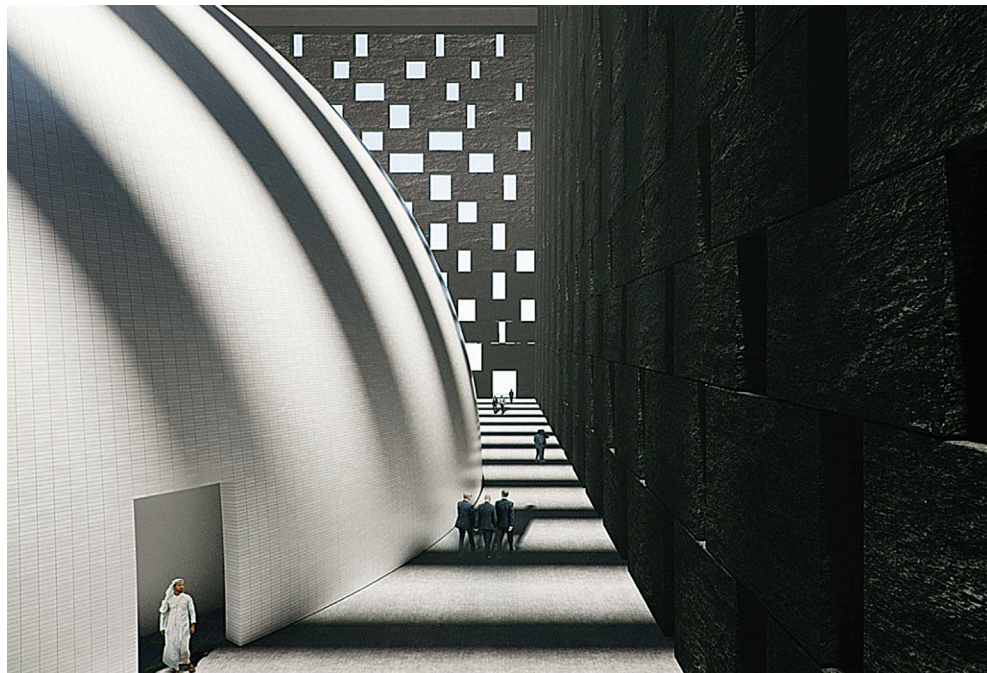
**Fig. 2. Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Dhaka, Bangladesh. 1959–1963.**



**Fig. 3. Mosque n. by Magomed Dadaev, Zakan-Yurt. 2011.**



**Fig. 4. The stand of the bureau «Tsimailo Lyashenko & Partners»  
at «ArchMoscow 2023».**



**Fig. 5. The project of bypassing the prayer hall of the Kazan mosque.**



**Fig. 6. Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca, Morocco. 1986–1993.**