

Cairo *samā'khāna*: design and cultural relevance

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Abstract

The *samā'khāna* of Cairo, within the historical arc of the *Mawlawī* brotherhood, was one of the last built and represents its final evolution. Its configuration is generated by the symbology of the ceremony and involves actors and spectators, as essential elements of the same architectural design.

The evident structural interaction of form and function assimilates Cairo's *samā'khāna* to the codified principles of design. The building is itself a virtual expression of the rite.

The *samā'*, organically reflected in the figuration of the building, conveys the thoughts and teachings of Ğalāl al-Dīn Rūmī who, spiritually, unites religions and cultures. The ceremony, in its development, collects ancient knowledge mirrored, albeit in a mystical intuition, in the evidence revealed over time by science. From the symbolism of the centre, which is the origin of the circle, to its circular path, "without beginning or end", the *samā'* visualizes the process that leads from knowledge to consciousness: the final aim of every culture. It is a vision rooted in history in which Human Cultural Identity has always been reflected. Cultures can change over time, but this only affects appearances, not those identity contents that are ingrained in the Human being.

In present-day globalization, which relativizes every attention to the constant individual present, Rūmī's message is an appeal, for Religions to recover unity, Science its identifying purpose and Art its expression, of which *samā'* is an emblematic example.

Keywords: Cairo, *Samā'khāna*, Design, Culture.

The architecture²

The *samā'khāna* of Cairo, seen from the façade towards the convent, presents the viewer with the image of a cube, with a sphere emerging from its center (fig. 1).

The configuration of the interior evokes the 19th century Ottoman style and has the appearance of a theatre (fig. 2).

Its layout consists of a square, from which the space develops upwards with its architectural definition. In the centre of the square there is a circular area dedicated to the *samā'* event. 12 equidistant pillars, positioned along the perimeter



Figure 1. *Samā'khāna*'s exterior



Figure 2. *Samā'khāna*'s interior

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² This article was the subject of my conference: "The architecture of Cairo *samā'khāna* - design and function" (an intercultural and interreligious architecture, at the origin of the Mevlevi rite), Academy of Egypt in Rome, 2018.

of the circular area, support the balcony with the overhang of the musicians' area and the dome

above it that emerges on the outside, virtually contained by the cube (fig. 3).

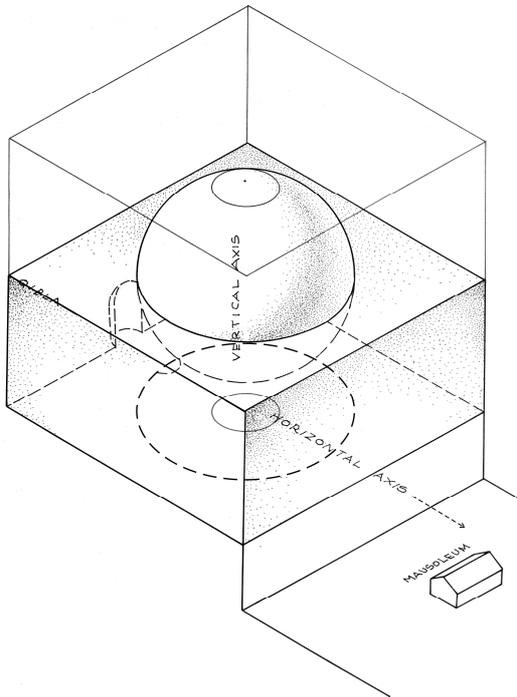


Figure 3. Volumetric diagram

This is, essentially, the pattern common to all *samā'khānas*, and is more or less recurrent in all historical illustrations (fig. 4).

However, the Cairo building, in its flow from the outside to the inside, expresses a formal harmony whose simple, but well-balanced, nature suggests a deep and not random logic.

Cairo's *samā'khāna* was one of the last to be built during the historical arc of development of the order



Figure 4. Galata *samā'khāna* (F. Smith. 1769)

and represents its final evolution. Its planimetric and volumetric configuration visually denotes the abstraction of the *samā'* rite, of which it respects the symbolic and conceptual elaborations analyzed in depth, in the 16th - 17th century, by Dīvāne Mehmed Çhelebī and

Ismail Rūsūhī Ankaravī, on the thought of Ğalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, (Fanfoni 1988, pp. 210-211).

Ğalāl al-Dīn Rūmī

The poetic production of Rūmī (1207-1273), is often compared, for its spirituality, to that of Francis of Assisi, who lived in the same period (1182-1226).

According to these two mystics, the Universe is conceptually a sacred Unity since its origin, and in every appearance of its becoming.

Hence, in “*The Canticle of the Creatures*” by Francis of Assisi we read: “[...] Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord brother sun [...] through sister moon and the stars [...] through brother wind, and through the air [...] through sister water [...] through brother fire [...] through sister mother earth [...]”, (Francis of Assisi, 1226).

While in Rūmī’s “*Canzoniere*” (*Divan-i Shams-e Tabrīz*) we find this description: “You were first a stone, then you became a plant, and then again an animal [...]. Then you became a Man with science, mind and faith [...]. And, spent beyond Man, you will become a Angel [...], afterwards: your place is in the heavens [...],³ beyond the Angel, in that Sea you immerse yourself: so that you, a drop, will be immense sea and Ocean (Rūmī, 2004, pp. 55-56).

That is to say, all things, even in their mutable manifestation, consist of a Unique destiny.

In this spirituality, each element welcomes the call of Absolute Unity. As the story of the Sermon to the Birds by Francis of Assisi: “[...] he encounters a flock of birds that do not immediately fly away and so the saint preaches to them. The birds wait hopefully for the saint’s words and after the blessing they fly away” (Cesari, 1859, p. 31).

In a similar way, the hagiographer Aflaki recounts about Rūmī: “[...] while the *Mawlānā* was talking to a group of people [...] all the dogs of the city gathered around the town joyfully [...] and, as they listened, they rhythmically shook their heads and tails and yapped softly. - In front of such event Rūmī exclaimed:- these dogs understand the Absolute better than many men and these walls also understand [...]” (Rūmī, 2004, p. 31).

The sacrum, structural element of consciousness, (Eliade, 1999) permeates the universe in every part, both as appearance and as Original Essence.

Rūmī says: “I was, in the time when they were not the Names, and there was no trace of existence of beings [...]” (Rūmī, 2004, p. 57).

³ The last part is a conceptual translation, if compared to the more literal translation (Nicholson 1950): “[...] Angel soul, I shall become what no mind e’er conceived. Oh, let me non-exist! [...]”.

It is the evocation of the original Unity (see also Yunus Emre, in Gölpınarlı, 2017, p. 98) when, before the *Big Bang*, according to contemporary science (Bojowald, 2011, p.149), the elements had no form and, without analytical data, had no identity or names.

Mysticism, aimed at the transcendent consciousness of Unity, is the heart and origin of religions, which in Rūmī's thought are all unified.

This is the starting point of Rūmī's arduous search, through the manifestations of daily religious life.

“Cross and Christians, from end to end, I surveyed; He was not on the Cross. I went to ancient pagoda, to the idol-temple, no trace was visible there. [...] I bent the rein of search to the *Ka'ba*; He was not in that resort of old and young. [...] And, finally, I gazed into my own heart; there I saw Him; He was nowhere else. So drunken and intoxicated and distraught I was that not an atom of my being was visible anymore. I was no longer.” (Rūmī, 2004, p.57-58).

At last, then, the Truth emerges, in the mystical “annihilation”, from the deepest depths of consciousness.

The mystical aspiration has always been opposed by religious organizations. The mystics have been persecuted and often crushed in horrible ways: as the martyrdom of the mystic Mansūr al-Hallaj, tortured for three days with the cutting of his ears, nose, hands, feet, nailed to a cross and finally burned alive on the square in Baghdad in 922 (Rūmī, 2006, pp. 23-24).

There is a clear conflict between the mystical impulse originated by spirituality and the forces of power, which want to gain control over religions. A power which, being political, clashes with the very identity of religion which, in fact, is not power but consciousness.

Despite such persistent contrasts, ‘spirituality’ has always revealed itself the ‘inner projection’ of humanity. This is evident everywhere in Cultural Heritage, both material and immaterial. The very origin of mankind emerges from spirituality, hence the more recent definition of *Homo Spiritualis*, as an alternative to *Homo Sapiens* (Clottes, 2016).

The culture

Culture is the behaviour, more or less codified, of any organism, generally aimed at its survival. This is valid for every organism, from bacteria to plants, animals and therefore man. However, human beings have evident motives and aspirations that go beyond material and existential purposes. The whole thought of Rūmī emphasizes them, through highly mystical expressions. The peculiarity of this human leading force is, moreover, recurrent in every literature. These verses of Dante Alighieri, ascribed by him to Ulysses to encourage his companion sailors, to follow him and discover distant lands, are emblematic: “you were not made to live your lives as brutes, but to be followers of virtue and knowledge” (Dante, 1555).

Virtue and knowledge that is, knowledge and consciousness, are the native forces of the culture lived by Religion, Science and Art. Religion, in its primary input, is aimed at intuiting the Absolute, its origin and its underlying reasons; Science analytically researches its evidence; while Art, with feeling, expresses its problems, which are often existential. These areas constitute the “human seed”, as Dante calls it: the Human Cultural Identity where the provision of knowledge increases consciousness and, in its transcendence, configures the becoming of culture.

In this proceedings of consciousness, which goes beyond individual or group, existential and material interests, there is no conflict between Religion, Science and Art because their innate aim is univocal.

The *samā'khāna* of Cairo as Religion, Science and Art

The *samā'khāna* is a mystical place whose plan or design is the configuration of its same function: that is, the visualization of the spiritual project expressed in the ritual of *samā'*.

Design is an English term introduced with the advent of industrialization (late 18th - 19th century).

In Italy the exact wording, ‘industrial design’ is used. In fact, design simply indicates the usefulness of the drawing for the definition of the object to be entrusted to the serial industrial production. In other words, the objective of the design is achieved and ends with the production of the object.

Unfortunately, 'design', in English, is also understood as 'planning' (e.g. of events) and therefore in some way likened to a project, but only as a technical procedure, related to the production of analytical works and, in any case, aimed at the realization of the object or even of the event finally performed. And this has led to the con-founding of design, in any case pertaining to technology, with the 'project itself', which is projection beyond the object or event. In fact, in a deeper sense, project defines in Man: "what we aim for, in the making of ourselves"⁴ (VocabolarioTreccani, 1970).

The word 'project' therefore, has a more conceptual than technical connotation. That is, if we want to apply the term to the production process, it should highlight not the object realized, but the cultural perspectives that its realization tends to promote as a projection of Human consciousness⁵.

Unfortunately, in today's globalization of the technological process, the meaning of project has been relativized, and therefore instrumentalized.

In the *samā'khāna* the two meanings coexist interrelated: design, as drawing that gave it form, and project as objective, that is a projection of consciousness, towards which the whole of the architectural organism and rituality of the *samā'khāna* aim for.

In particular, the Cairo *samā'khāna* has a design that is unique in the history of this type of building and, in general, of any architecture of all times, as regards the relationship between form and function. In fact, both the planimetric and spatial form of the building originates directly from the mystical symbolism of the rite in its representation. The architecture of the Cairo *samā'khāna* is not a heterogeneous space within which the ritual takes place, that is, a mere container, where there are often also symbolic elements but juxtaposed to the form and, therefore, not essential to it, nor to the accomplishment of its function. In Cairo's *samā'khāna*, instead, its form is the very essence of the ritual that denotes and configures the space in an interaction between the performers of the rite and

⁴ In J.P. Sartre: "Man is first of all that which hurls himself towards a future and which is conscious of projecting himself into the future [...] man is first of all a project [...] consequently every project, however individual, has an universal value", J.P.Sartre).

⁵ "[...] you plan against something that is, so that it changes [...]". "[...] the project made for the future serves to live today [...]": are some expressions conceptually consistent with the definition of project given by Sartre, although likewise limited to the social sphere (Argan, 1965, p. 62).

the spectators involved. At the same time, for its religious projection, the project is conceptual, aimed at the unity of matter and spirit, rite and cosmic space, performers and spectators, in a metaphysical absence of time.

Therefore, while in design (industrial design) the objective is reached with the realization of the 'finished' object ready for use, with the *samā*' (and configuration of the *samā*'*khāna*), the objective is the projection (project) towards Unity, that is the transcendent "Infinity" of consciousness.

Design and Project

Usually in order to describe any architecture, technologically speaking, we start from a plan and then by means of sections we describe the elevations and finally the intended volumetric space through axonometric or perspective representations.

In the case of the *samā*'*khāna*, instead, it is necessary to start by highlighting the original symbol of the ceremony, the basic concept, and gradually, following its expansion, it will be possible to visualize the spatial development up to the point of defining the architectural figure that is, so to speak, the cosmic space that contains the ceremony with its performers and spectators (Fanfoni, 1988).

Essential symbolic elements in this description are the point and the circle (fig. 5), as conceptual geometric elements of ancient origin and Greek definition (Pythagorean and Platonic).

The point, geometrically speaking, has no dimension, is invisible in reality, and is highlighted only after the tracing of the circumference as a reflected image of the point (the line is in fact a sequence of points).

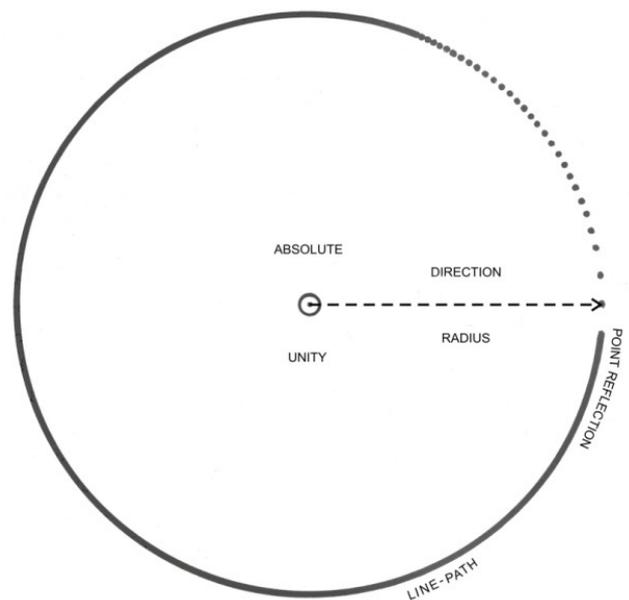


Figure 5. The center as origin of the *samā*'*khāna* circle

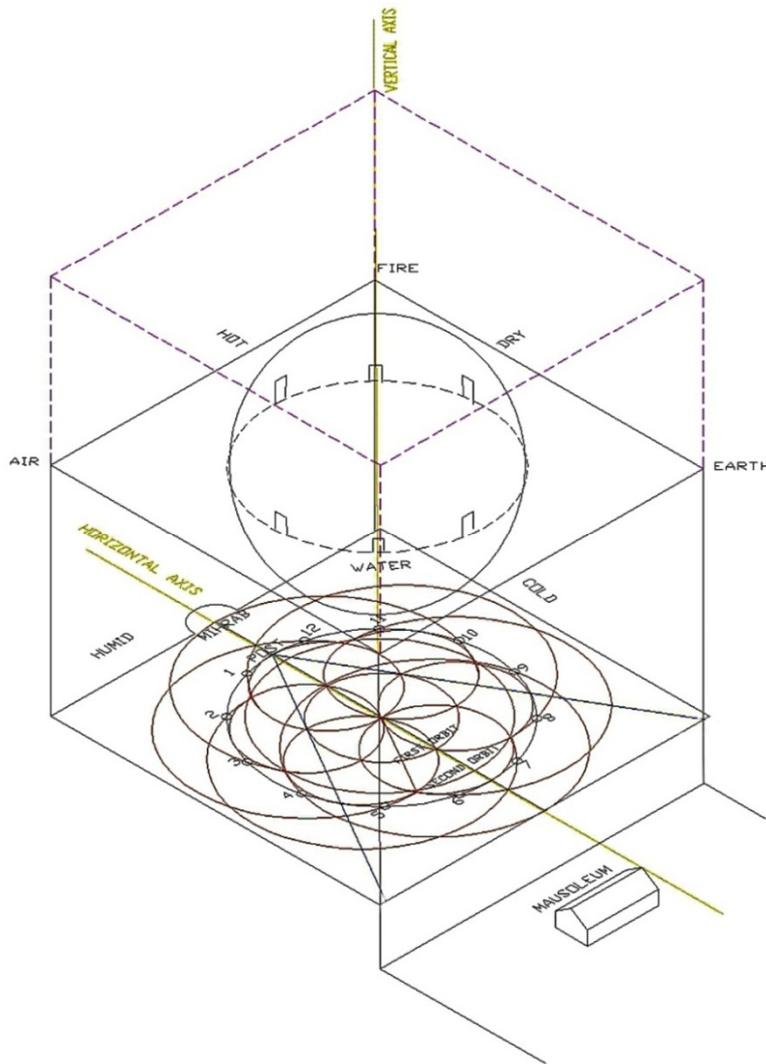


Figure 6. Scheme of functions and symbology of *samā'khāna*

of the circle...” (in fact, the Center does not pronounce itself, it creates.) (Rūmī, 2004, p. 60).

“Go you into that Workshop, which is Nothingness, that you may see the Making (the Creation) and the Maker (the force which determined it) at once!” (Rūmī, 2004, p.12).

The Nothing is therefore the return to the origins, to Unity, recalled in the poetry of the *ney* (reed flute).

“Listen to this reed how it complains: it is telling a tale of separations [...] everyone who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was united with it. [...]” (Rūmī, 2006, p. 65.

Nicholson, 1926).

Separation is understood as metaphysical detachment, which, as such, animates the conscious aspiration to Unity. It is different from the physical, relativistic detachment, namely that of the

Today we know as the most reliable scientific hypothesis that the origin of the universe is focused on the infinitely substantial ‘Zero Point’, which is followed by the *Big Bang* and the current expansion of the cosmos (Hawking, 1988, p. 142).

For Rūmī the point is the Absolute (as invisible as the geometric point) and, at the same time, it is the Nothingness, that is what exists before the *Big Bang*. As Rūmī says: “Be silent as the Center

working plan, which ends in the attainment of the finished object. In the first concept we have the volitional mystical annulment in the Unity of consciousness. In the latter there is the relativistic affirmation and possession of the object in space, or also the conquest in market competition, which is rather similar to the war detachment before the clash. (Gürsoy, 2016, p. 23, *The metaphysical detachment*).



Figure 7. *Samā'* expansion through circular movements

The *samā'khāna*, symbolically, (fig. 6) is, the metaphysical universe within which, through the event of the *samā'*, the path of knowledge in 'space-time' is represented; outside of it there is neither space nor time: it is eternity⁶ in Unity.

The path of man is circular, without beginning or end (fig. 7). Rūmī describes it in this way: "[...] he -the man, in his path- destroys his illusory appearance and evolves along the imaginary circle as knowledge evolves in science." (Molé, 1963, p. 250).

⁶ The concept of eternity returns, nowadays, as essential, in its metaphysical context, in Severino, 1964, p. 174.



Figure 8. The *shaykh* in the finale of the ritual

The whole ceremony unfolds through circular movements, both of the actors on themselves, as in the rotation of the planets in the cosmos, the elements of the atom or all the elements of nature, and along two circumferences, according to a geometric

development of continuous expansion that extends to the spectators themselves and over the entire area of *samā'khāna*.

Finally the rite ends with the *shaykh* in the middle (fig. 8) and the dervishes around him.

He is the axis mundi, the cosmological tree, “the tree of bliss” (Molé, 1963, p. 263).

Each element of the building has a symbolic reference: the square and the cube are the earth (Nasr, 1978); the circular

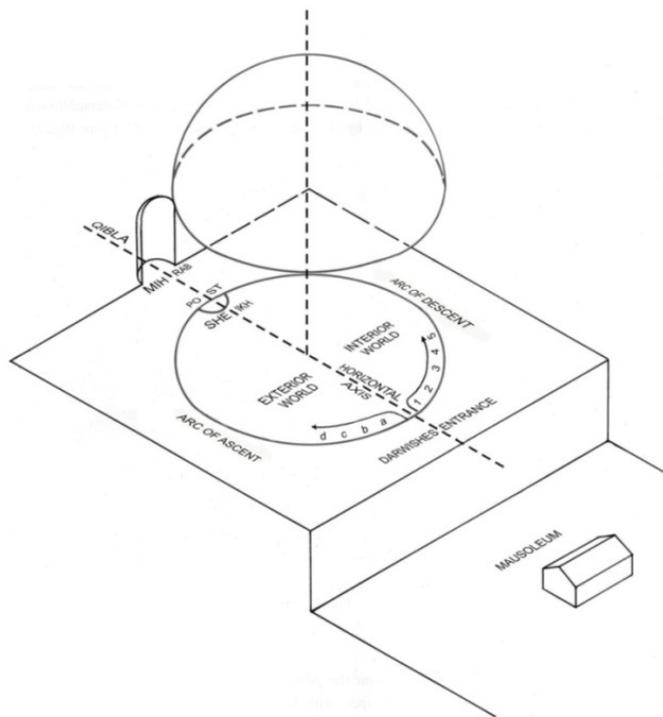


Figure 9. Symbology of the *samā'* areas

spatial development is the universe that emerges together with the dome, whose 8 windows symbolize the 4 elements of nature and the intermediate elements; on the horizontal axis (Dickie, 1979, pp. 9-15) marked by the *qibla*, (fig. 9) which separates the two hemispheres of the inner world and the outer world (Molé, 1963, pp. 249-268. Nasr, 1978, p. 267) we find the *pöst* of the *shaykh*, while in front of him there is the entrance of the dervishes in the circular area and, further on, the tomb of the previous *shaykh*, from whom he inherited his role.



Figure 10. Symbolic references of *samā'khāna*

And so, the symbolism continues down to the smallest details (fig. 10): the 18 elements of the 12 sectors of the balustrade refer to the 18 stages of the novitiate in the 18 cells of the convent and the conventional number of dervishes that participate in the rite (Rūmī, 2006, p. 36); the archways between the pillars evoke the arc of ascent and descent of the mystical arches (Birge, 1937, pp. 114-118). The whole contributes to the metaphysical atmosphere of the mystical ceremony of the *samā'*.

Other *samā'khānas* have the same geometric configuration, but the one in Cairo is the most representative (Fanfoni, 2010).

In the diagram (fig. 11) of the Cairo *samā'khāna*, the entire area of the square is the ground plan, with

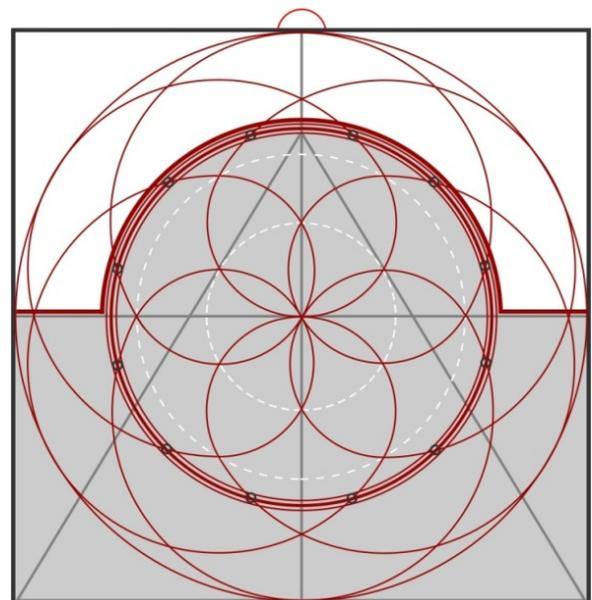


Figure 11. Univocal correspondence of the horizontal and vertical section of the *samā'khāna*

the 12 pillars and the two paths of the ceremony, while the development of the vertical section is visually overlaid and included in grey in the same area. The geometrical layout is identical in the horizontal plan and in the vertical section, thus confirming the aspiration to the organic unity of the whole, the *samā'* and the *samā'khāna* architectural configuration.

Conclusions

The principles of restoration are essentially aimed at the recovery and conservation of the Human Cultural Heritage, “[...] restoration is the methodological moment of recognition of the work of art, in its physical consistency and in its dual aesthetic and historical polarity, looking forward to transmitting it to the future.” (Brandi, 1963, p. 34).

This recognition constitutes the verification and recovery of the original cultural identity of the work of art, since the past, like the future, is a cognitive projection.

The recovery of the *samā'khāna* of Cairo is emblematic of these objectives. The building represents the philosophical and religious thought of Ġalāl al-Dīn Rūmī developed in the culture of the *Mawlawī* confraternity.

Cairo's *samā'khāna* is the unique synthesis of design, in its realized form, and project, in its pursuit of the Absolute.

Its cultural contents are related to:

- Religion, in the projection of consciousness into transcendent Unity;
- Science, both in ancient symbolic references (such as the point) and in modern scientific hypotheses (such as the *Big Bang*, time-space and other findings in contemporary science);
- and finally Art, in the very performance of *samā'* (nowadays protected by UNESCO).

Those are the cultural contents that have always driven the cognitive aspirations of Humanity and constitute its Identity unchanged over time. Culture, along with the progress of technology and social organization, and therefore with the changing customs of peoples, can modify its

manifestation over time, but this happens only in appearances, not in the Identity contents that are rooted in the Human being.

In Human culture, the ultimate destination of knowledge is consciousness. In this process, culture is what through knowledge increases consciousness, as it is artistically expressed in the symbolism of *samā'* where knowledge, in its endless circular path, evolves in science to increase consciousness in its transcendental projection.

Unfortunately, in today's culture these values have been lost.

In fact, as for Religion, God is no longer an objective, a project, a projection, but has become a simple instrument of use, for individual or collective needs, hence the monstrous phenomenon of ISIS (which is not the first, historically speaking, and if we do not become aware of this, it will not be the last); Science, in its meaning now widespread, is no longer a cognitive objective aimed at consciousness, but instead has become an area from which to select data relativized. So it has been transformed, from an objective into a tool, for technological growth in the context of market conquest, by means of the incentive to consumerism. In fact, technology, from being originally a means for planning and carrying out cognitive activities, has become the target to which science itself has been enslaved. Thus, consciousness, being itself relativized, has lost its aim of project, and, the becoming of culture, by now having broken the knowledge consciousness process, has alienated the very Human nature of Cultural Identity. Therefore, Man is dead!

In the end, Art no longer expresses cognitive apprehension but is merely entertainment, perhaps through more advanced technology, but basically with purposes similar to any animal's play, such as cats, dogs, etc.

So all values are reversed or lost.

In such a context, school, meaningfully intended to promote culture, does not educate, rather it instructs: as if one were to go to war. The objective of the school has been qualitatively deviated. In fact, instead of promoting knowledge, it promotes competition to manage the power of notions, but not their consciousness.

In today's globalization, which relativizes every attention to the constant individual present, Rūmī's message is an appeal, for Religions to recover unity, Science its objective identity and Art its expression, of which *samā'* is an emblematic example.

Well aware of the dramatic conditions of today's culture, in the restoration of *samā'khāna* we have adopted a '*work-site school*' organization. In our laboratory, notions are given and acquired through practice, in order to gain consciousness of them. This echoes Rūmī's warning: "I did not write the *Mathnawī* so that you would learn it to recite it, as a memory notion or erudition, but for you to put it under your feet to fly high" (De Vitray, 1977, p. 142).

In conclusion, the restoration of the *samā'khāna* has been conducted in accordance with the principles of integral conservation of the monument and in the contextual recovery and enhancement of its Human Cultural Identity, experienced today within the project of its transmission to the future (Fanfoni, 2006).

With the intention of recovering every formal and technical aspect of *samā'khāna*, the restoration has been carried out preserving all its material elements, both technical and figurative. Each intervention was designed and implemented as a support to the pre-existing conditions, without any replacement. This careful recognition of the architectural structure was also the occasion for the recovery of the cultural contents represented by its form and function.

I hope that the uniqueness, now fully recovered, of Cairo's *samā'khāna* will be appreciated also at a political level and that UNESCO will officially recognise it in order to include it on the list of World Heritage Sites. I therefore appeal to anyone who has the possibility and the power to act in this regard so that this symbol of culture may be preserved for future generations.

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