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Specific features and issues of preserving the historic cities of Algeria – centres of Islamic construction

Cechy charakterystyczne i problematyka ochrony historycznych miast Algierii – ośrodki budownictwa islamskiego

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INTRODUCTION

A mosque as a unique phenomenon of the Muslim sacred architecture plays a dominant role in the spiritual, social, cultural and educational life of the Islamic world [2] (fig. 1). In the course of historical evolution, starting from the time of the origin of Islam in the 7th century, a mosque changes in the direction of improv-

ing the architectural-semantic image, its significance increases not only as a spiritual one, but also as an urban dominant.

In most Islamic schools there is a transition from functionally simple to large magnificently decorated mosques [2, 4]. A certain hierarchy of mosques is formed according to their importance in urban space – the main Congregational Mosque Djama'a al-Kebir

(fig. 2), a jama masjid – Friday Mosque, a quarter mosque, an open mosque – musalla, a palace mosque, mosque attached to the tomb of the holy imam, a mosque at madrassah, a mosque in the fortress. According to the established traditions, the main congregational mosque Djama'a al-Kebir, should have been the largest one and designed for a great number of believers.

However, in history, there are examples when the greatest mosques were located in fortresses or the mosques built by the ruler as a symbol of his devotion to Islam and, at the same time as a symbol of his power. The ruling dynasties of Muslim countries were closely associated with Islam, and at the same time, Islam was an upbringing and legal factor for the population of these countries.



Fig. 1. Djama'a al-Kebir. Algeria

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Fig. 2. Djama'a al-Kebir. Tlemcen



Fig. 3. El Meshuar mosque. Tlemcen

Gradually, from a purely canonical element of the urban development, the mosque became the oldest multifunctional public building in the Islamic world, and in some cases into a public complex with a mosque, madrassah, saint's tomb, pilgrim hotel, etc.

In every Islamic country, a mosque gradually evolves, its town-planning, architectural-planning, and decorative features are being formed. At the same time, a mosque as a type of ancient public building of Islam, remains universal, that preserves canonical foundations on a vast territory of various countries and for many historical periods asserts its role in social and political life and urban structure, being the main centre of attraction of people and a symbol of unity of community. At all times, Islam always had close links with the power structures, Islamic rulers in every way contributed to the construction of mosques. In many cases, the pompous, exaggeratedly large, profusely decorated mosques were supposed to show strong power of the rulers and at the same time to confirm certain religious canons.

MAIN PART

The origins of the Maghreb mosques

Initially, Algerian cities were built as military fortresses-kasbahs, by the representatives of local military dynasties that determined the medieval defensive principle of their planning and the absence of representative

areas around the main mosques [3] (fig. 3). At the same time, the location of mosques in the system of narrow winding streets, surrounded by buildings, created an additional shadow on the streets devoid of greenery, but over time it created problems in the conditions of modern urban population growth, increasing the boundaries of cities, and the development of road transport. As to the origin of architectural and construction tradition in the Maghreb countries, it was a purely functional tradition, adapted to the climatic conditions and optimal for defence, fortress and, for example, in Persia – pre-Islamic religious and exaggeratedly luxurious palace architecture, and it resulted in two fundamentally different paths of evolution of these architectural schools. It was reflected even in such a significant element of the Islamic architecture as the minaret, which in the Maghreb mosques had not only religious, but also defensive (a watchtower) function, and in the Persian and Ottoman mosques, the minaret was a particularly canonical ideological decorated element.

The unique heritage of the Islamic architecture in Algeria was formed at the junction of many cultures – local Maghreb, Kharijites, Arabic, Persian, Ottoman, Spanish, Portuguese, influenced by the architectural heritage of the times of the Roman Empire and Byzantium. This multiculturalism is a distinguishing feature of Islamic architecture, in comparison with, for example, the Persian school, which is based primarily on its own pre-Islamic heritage in combination with the Arab canons in the early period, or Ottoman school based on the traditions of Byzantium. It is known that in the middle of the seventeenth century there were 122 mosques per 100 thousand of the population of the city of Algiers, including 13 jama masjids and about fifty other Islamic buildings [5–7].

Today in Algeria there are more than 17,000 old and new mosques. The national identity of the Islamic architectural heritage of Algeria is evidenced by the fact that, despite the external political, cultural and architectural influences of other states, since the early period and up to the period of French colonization, an authentic, based on the national Maghreb traditions, type of simple (according to the volumetric and spatial composition) mosque without decoration on the facades and with a specific, square minaret-tower, has been preserved. Other typical national mosques in Algeria are the mosques of the Kharijites, concentrated in the M'zab Valley.

Town planning principles of the location of the mosques of Algeria

Residential quarters with winding narrow streets were located at a distance from busy transport networks and the market square, however, it was always within the limits of the call for prayer from the minaret (this was the main requirement for accommodation of residential quarters). If the city was large and had several districts, each district could have its own mosque, besides, the main Congregational Mosque Djama'a al-Kebir for the entire city (for example, ancient Tlemcen, Nedroma, Oran, Constantine mosques) [5–7]. Special attention in the Maghreb school was paid to gardening, since it was an imitation of the paradise gardens, and the garden itself, according to the teaching of Islam, was intended for solitude, observation, and own prayer [1, p. 187]. These green territories with fountains and a complicated water supply system were the contrast to the surrounding desert landscape and were masterpieces of medieval science and technology. Over time, the fountains, along with the magnificent gardens, became an integral part of the mosques and palace complexes of the Maghreb countries, and the buildings of the Caliphate of Cordoba were like a model to emulate.

According to the common urban planning scheme, the main mosque of the city, Djama'a al-Kebir, was located not far from the main market square and the main representative square for ceremonial events, often in the structure of the medieval city there was a citadel – the ruler's residence, which could have its own mosque.

The location of mosques in the structure of the settlements of Algeria should be traced at different periods, starting from the early period, but taking into account the town-planning activities of the time of French colonization. It should be noted that certain regions of the country have developed their specificity in the location of mosques in the town-planning structure. In particular, the mosques of Algeria, just as of Morocco, were built according to the same principles as the defensive fortification, since the ruling circles were military dynasties, and in the structure of the cities, the kasbah was distinguished – the fortified citadel was fortified and the medina – trade and craft quarters.

The contour of the walls of the city-fortress was determined by strategic needs and was determined by the outlines of the coastal strip and the relief. For example, the defensive walls of the forts of El Achir and Al Qal'a of Beni Hammad are located along the mountain slopes, and the top served as a point of observation, the most protected place in the event of an enemy siege, and it was here that the drinking water was stored.

Due to the danger of enemy attacks from the sea, the medieval cities of the Maghreb countries were founded at a certain distance from the coastal strip, every city had its own port – the city of Tiaret – the port of Mostaganem, the city of Tlemsen – the port of Honaine. A separate group of cities was the cities which initially sprang up as large port trading cities on

the Mediterranean coast. These include primarily the capital city of Algiers, founded in the middle of the tenth century. Specificity of port-cities, unlike fortress cities, is the fact that the outer walls often united the extreme points of the coast with the elevated part, forming a triangle. A passage for warriors and a series of rectangular towers were arranged along the outer wall; the line of the city fortifications was reinforced by a lower front wall and a moat. In some cases, between the external defensive walls and the city buildings, there was a large space used as fruit orchards. From the sea, the ships passed along the corridor between the two watchtowers and at night these gates were locked with chains. The kasbah-fortress was located in the highest part of the city. On the outskirts of the capital cities there was a rulers' residence – Marzan with office, a hall for receptions, a harem and gardens, surrounded by its own walls.

From the early period of building mosques, the regional specificity marked the development of Kharijites cities (associated with the rule of the Persian dynasty of Rostemids) in the valley of the M'zab River – Ghardaïa, El Atteuf (Tadjnint), Bounoura (Has Bunur), Béni Isguen (in Russian Sources Beni Eskin), Mélika.

Special mention should be made of the location of mosques as a part of historical fortresses (kasbahs); the example is a UNESCO World Heritage Site – located on a hill above the Mediterranean Sea, the Casbah of Algiers, the citadel (which means fortress) on the coast of the Mediterranean, just on the famous Carthaginian trade route. Behind the ancient defensive walls, the ancient monuments of the palace architecture of the Ottoman era and historical mosques of Djama'a al-Kebir, the Ketchaoua Mosque, Djama'a al-Djedid have been preserved along medieval defensive walls [5–7]. Like other coastal areas of Algeria, this territory repeatedly belonged to the Romans, the local Berbers, the Arabs, the Ottomans, and the construction of the fortress was associated with the period of Ottoman rule, since it was the Turkish Corsair Heir Ed Dean in the sixteenth century (namely in 1516) initiated the construction of an impregnable citadel, which occupied an extremely advantageous strategic place. The construction of the fortress continued for several centuries. The diverse ethnic composition of the population of the city of Algiers led to diversity in the architecture of mosques. Due to trade, the city developed at a fast pace.

The Ketchaoua Mosque (1612) is located at the foot of the Casbah fortress, several styles were joined together in it – the Moorish, Byzantine, during the French colonization it was rebuilt into the Catholic Cathedral of St. Philip.

A special town-planning position outside the dense building is occupied by the Djama'a al-Djedid mosque, the city of Algiers (the so-called Mosque of Fisheries) (fig. 4). This mosque with a simultaneous combination of the type of the Ottoman dome mosque (it was built during the Ottoman rule in 1660) and a modified form of the Maghreb type minaret is located in open space

and is observed without distortion from a long distance. It is significant that the minarets of mosques are a kind of dominant landmarks against the background of historic residential neighbourhoods.

In front of the Ketchaoua Mosque, there is the white facade of Dar Aziz Bey Palace, dated 1551, in which the Bishop's Palace was located during the French occupation, and now there is a tourist bureau. The palace of Dar Hassan Pasha, the residence of the Turkish beys, adjoins to the Ketchaoua Mosque on the right. This quarter is considered to be the quarter of the palaces, Janín; about ten palaces of the residences of Turkish Beys and Algerian Deyls have survived within the Casbah, but most of them look quite modest from the outside and differ little from traditional housing.

It is necessary to determine the peculiarities of the layout of Casbah residential areas with historic streets with one-way traffic. Traditionally, the first floors of residential buildings are occupied by shops, the side streets are occupied by spontaneous bazaars right on the pavement. The neighbouring houses are closely located to each other.

If you go along the historic street – Rue al-Hajj Umar, behind the Dar Aziza Palace the street widens and turns to the side. Unlike European houses, the Algerian house has only one entrance from the street and it is always locked. The houses are almost identical in appearance, with blank whitewashed walls, with non-systemically located windows on the upper floors. Some houses cannot be reached by transport, only narrow steep streets with many stairs.

In the gap between the dense residential buildings you can see the Martyrs Square and the minaret of Djama'a al-Djedid. Many houses are in disrepair or being repaired. Sometimes the second or the third floors of the house hangs over the first and rests on wooden consoles, sometimes on the third floor an additional bay window is arranged. It is difficult for tourists to navigate among the narrow streets: there are no street names on the signs on the walls, often there are no numbers on the houses, the buildings

located on the terraces and it does not allow to see the dominant from afar.

Despite the emergency state of some parts of Casbah development, the status of UNESCO preserves historic quarters from destruction and forces the authorities to carry out restoration activities; many objects are reinforced with metal corsets.

CONCLUSION

Most of the historical mosques of the city of Algiers are located within the Casbah, as well as in other cities, such as Tlemcen and Nedroma. This allows us to formulate the construction features of most of the historical mosques of Algeria: cities initially sprang up as fortified fortresses, and it determined the specificity of urban development: there was not enough space in front of mosques (especially quarterly ones), they were in the system of winding medieval streets, they do not meet modern evacuation and fire regulations.

During the French colonization, regular redevelopment of the territory of the city of Algiers began, with the formation of wide boulevards, avenues, squares, but most of the medieval buildings in the Casbah were not preserved, and the comprehensive revival of the city – fortress began only since the early 1970s, when Algeria had gained its independence.

In the system of narrow winding medieval streets there is also the Hassan Pasha mosque in the city of Oran. Therefore, the facades of the mosque are perceived with distortion, and the concave wall of the mosque was dictated by the outlines of the street network. At the same time, the distorted street forms picturesque perspectives of perception of the mosque as an architectural dominant.

The example of the combination of old medieval buildings and modern high-rise buildings are the city of Constantine with simultaneous layering of many cultures at once, that is noticeable in the city's planning system at the foot of the mountain, and in the stylistics of the built-up environment. An active natural rocky

terrain with cliffs, mountain roads and bridges over precipices create picturesque sceneries. The streets near historical mosques are somewhat wider than, for example, in Ghardaïa or Oran, but still, some facades of mosques are perceived not from the front, but from the perspective.

The samples of the main cities – centres of Islamic construction (Algiers, Tlemcen, Oran, Nedroma, the cities of pentapolis of the M'zab Valley and others) proved that originally these cities sprang up in the form of a fortified



Fig. 4. Djama'a al-Djedid mosque. Algeria

kasbah-fortress, which had its own street network system with narrow winding streets, at first one large main mosque – the main Congregational Mosque Djama'a al-Kebir (often there was a trade market square next to it), then smaller quarterly mosques and mosques attached to the tombs of the holy imams, were built. Even after the cardinal town-planning activities

in the cities of Algeria during the French colonization, in some cities, a significant part of the medieval street network was preserved (for example, in the town of Nedroma). The specificity of the location of mosques is that in most cases (especially it concerns quarterly mosques) they are located deep in the quarter, in a narrow street or, in general, with a setback from it.

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Abstract

Historically, the ancient cities of Algeria as the centres of Islamic construction sprang up at the sites of ancient fortifications. Another specific feature was that the ruling dynasties were military leaders, and the mosques were built like fortresses – according to the same principles and with the use of the same building materials. In this way the historical mosques of Algeria are different from the pompous mosques of Turkey or Persia that were developed based on such examples as the cathedrals of the Byzantine Empire or pre-Islamic palace architecture of the ancient Persia.

The national feature of the mosques of Algeria is their optimal adaptation to the conditions of strong seismic activity, since this factor contributed to the development of the corresponding stylistic features of the mosques of the Maghreb or Kharrijites types.

Since the ancient Algerian cities sprang up in particular as the cities-fortresses, this led to the appropriate planned structure of quarters with winding irregular streets and mosques along with residential buildings. Accordingly, this creates significant problems for preserving the historical environment, since the ancient layout and location of mosques does not meet modern evacuation standards.

Streszczenie

Historyczne miasta Algierii jako centra budownictwa islamskiego powstały w miejscach starożytnych fortyfikacji. Inną szczególną cechą był fakt, że dynastie rządzące stały na cele wojska, a meczety budowano jako twierdze – zgodnie z tymi samymi zasadami i przy użyciu tych samych materiałów budowlanych. W ten sposób historyczne meczety w Algierii różnią się od pompatycznych meczetów w Turcji lub Persji, które zostały opracowane na podstawie takich przykładów jak katedry Cesarstwa Bizantyjskiego lub przedislamska architektura pałacowa starożytnej Persji. Narodową cechą meczetów w Algierii jest ich optymalna adaptacja do warunków silnej aktywności sejsmicznej, ponieważ czynnik ten przyczynił się do rozwoju odpowiednich cech stylistycznych meczetów typu Maghreb lub Kharrijites. Ponieważ starożytnie miasta algierskie powstawały przede wszystkim jako miasta-twierdze, wpłynęło to na specyficznie zaplanowaną strukturę kwartałów z krętymi nieregularnymi uliczkami, meczetami oraz budynkami mieszkalnymi. Wiąże się to z poważnymi problemami w procesie ochrony tych historycznych struktur, gdyż zarówno układ urbanistyczny jak i lokalizacja meczetów nie spełniają nowoczesnych standardów ewakuacji.

