

Arts and Architecture

by Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice

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Baha'i World Center

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I.

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh:

1. O people of creation!

It is incumbent upon you to build, in the cities and in the name of the Lord of Revelation, Houses as perfect as can be built on earth, and to adorn them with that which beseemeth them, not with images and statues. Magnify ye then therein the praise of your Merciful Lord in a spirit of joy and radiance. Lo! it is through His mention that hearts are illumined and eyes solaced.

(From a recently translated Tablet)

II.

From the Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

2. I rejoice to hear that thou takest pains with thine art, for in this wonderful new age, art is worship. The more thou strivest to perfect it, the closer wilt thou come to God. What bestowal could be greater than this, that one's art should be even as the act of worshipping the Lord? That is to say, when thy fingers grasp the paint brush, it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple.

(From a recently translated Tablet)

3. The Mashriqu'l-Adhkar must have nine sides, doors, fountains, paths, gateways, columns and gardens, with ground floor, galleries and domes, and in design and construction must be beautiful. The mystery of the edifice is great, and cannot be unveiled yet, but its erection is the most important undertaking of this day. The Mashriqu'l-Adhkar has important accessories, which are accounted of the basic foundations. These are: school for orphan children, hospital and dispensary for the poor, home for the incapable, college for the higher scientific education, and hospice. In every city a great Mashriqu'l-Adhkar must be founded after this order. In the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar services will be held every morning. There will be no organ in the Temple. In buildings near by, festivals, services, conventions, public meetings and spiritual gatherings will be held, but in the Temple the chanting and singing will be unaccompanied. Open ye the gates of the Temple to all mankind.

(Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era , Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970, p. 192)

4. ...The Mashriqu'l-Adhkar in 'Ishqabad is almost completed. It is centrally located, nine avenues leading into it, nine gardens, nine fountains; all the arrangement and construction is according to the principle and proportion of the number nine. It is like a beautiful bouquet. Imagine a very lofty, imposing edifice surrounded completely by gardens of variegated flowers, with nine avenues leading through them, nine fountains and pools of water. Such is its matchless, beautiful design. Now they are building a hospital, a school for orphans, a home for cripples, a hospice and a large dispensary. God willing, when it is fully completed, it will be a paradise.

I hope the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar in Chicago will be like this. Endeavor to have the grounds circular in shape. If possible, adjust and exchange the plots in order to make the dimensions and boundaries circular. The Mashriqu'l-Adhkar cannot be triangular in shape. It must be in the form of a circle.

(*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982, p. 71)

III.

Extracts from letters written on behalf of the Guardian:

5. ...He sincerely hopes that as the Cause grows and talented persons come under its banner, they will begin to produce in art the divine spirit that animates their soul. Every religion has brought with it some form of art - let us see what wonders this Cause is going to bring along. Such a glorious spirit should also give vent to a glorious art. The Temple with all its beauty is only the first ray of an early dawn; even more wondrous things are to be achieved in the future.

(11 December 1931, to an individual believer)

6.

Also, you raise the question of what will be the source of inspiration to Bahá'í musicians and composers; the music of the past or the Word? We cannot possibly foresee, standing as we do on the threshold of Bahá'í culture, what forms and characteristics the arts of the future, inspired by this Mighty New Revelation, will have. All we can be sure of is that they will be wonderful; as every Faith has given rise to a culture which flowered in different forms, so too our beloved Faith may be expected to do the same thing. It is premature to try and grasp what they will be at present.

(23 December 1942, to an individual believer)

7. Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian does not feel that there should be any cultivation of "Bahá'í Music" any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá'í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write and compose as their talents guide them.

(20 July 1946, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

8. He personally does not believe that the Master's wish to have a Temple inspired by the Taj Mahal meant that it must be one hundred percent based on that building and fully Indian in all details. He feels the Master meant that the general impression, the beauty, contours and symmetry of that glorious tomb should be predominant in the Temple.

(3 July 1947, to an individual believer)

9. These slides of our Bahá'í Temple and various activities are very interesting, and open a new door on the teaching approach to the general public. The more interesting sets can be collected and circulated amongst the friends the better....

(28 December 1946, to an individual believer)

10. There now remains the important consideration of a design for the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar. It does not matter whether it is executed by a Bahá'í or a non-Bahá'í architect, but the essential thing is that it must be beautiful and dignified. There must be none of this hideous, exaggerated, bizarre style, which one sees in many modern buildings. It is not befitting for our House of Worship. He thinks that you should impress this on any architects wishing to submit drawings. The essentials of the design, as stipulated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, are that the building should be nine-sided, and circular in shape. Aside from this, the architect is not restricted in any way in choosing his style of design.
(25 June 1954, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

11. In passing, there is one point to be mentioned; and that is that the Temple in Wilmette does not constitute a pattern for other Temples, nor does it represent a new type of Bahá'í architecture. Therefore it is not necessary for your architects to endeavour to follow that pattern. What should be done is to follow the Master's instructions as to the Temple, and then create something that will be desirable and appropriate for your area.
(10 February 1955, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

12. He was very happy to hear that the National Assembly is pressing the work as regards having designs made for the Temple to be built in Frankfurt. He attaches the greatest importance to this enterprise, as you know; and considers that two points must be constantly borne in mind by the architects; one, that the building must not be too expensive, and two, that the design must be beautiful and dignified, and not show the influence of the extremes of modern architecture, which are transient in style, for the most part ugly, and altogether too utilitarian in aspect for a House of Worship.
(9 April 1955, to an individual believer)

13. The Guardian feels very strongly that, regardless of what the opinion of the latest school of architecture may be on the subject, the styles represented at present all over the world in architecture are not only very ugly, but completely lack the dignity and grace which must be at least partially present in a Bahá'í House of Worship. One must always bear in mind that the vast majority of human beings are neither very modern nor very extreme in their tastes, and that what the advanced school may think is marvelous is often very distasteful indeed to just plain, simple people.
(11 July 1956, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

IV.

Extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

14. Thank you for your letter concerning the design for the building which is to serve as the Seat of the Universal House of Justice on Mount Carmel.

The beloved Guardian made it clear that the flowering of the arts which is the result of a divine revelation comes only after a number of centuries. The Bahá'í Faith offers the world the complete rebuilding of human society - a rebuilding of such far-reaching effect that it has been looked forward to in all the revelations of the past and has been called the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. The new architecture to which this revelation will give birth will blossom many generations hence. We are now merely at the beginning of this great process.

The present time is a period of turmoil and change. Architecture, like all arts and sciences, is undergoing very rapid development; one has only to consider the changes that have taken place in the course of the last few decades to have some idea of what is likely to happen during the years immediately ahead. Some modern buildings have, no

doubt, qualities of greatness and will endure, but very much of what is being constructed now may be outgrown and may appear ugly but a few generations hence. Modern architecture, in other words, may be considered a new development in its primitive stage. Classical Greek architecture, however, is an example of a mature art style. It is very beautiful now, just as it has been beautiful for some two thousand years or more.

The edifice we are now about to build is intended to serve for hundreds of years and is part of a complex of buildings around the arc on Mount Carmel which are to be harmonious in style. This is why we have chosen a style that is proven and has long endured, rather than a modern style which may well be ephemeral.

(18 July 1974, to an individual believer)

15. The House of Justice has no objection in principle to the holding of an exhibition such as you propose, but this is a matter for the National Spiritual Assemblies to decide. Therefore you should refer the suggestion to your National Assembly. Believers in Europe have on previous occasions used the illuminations of Tablets for various purposes, and the House of Justice suggests that you might be able to obtain samples from them through the various National Assemblies or directly. The actual Tablets should not, of course, be used in any such posters as you propose.

(29 December 1981, to an individual believer)

16. Your letter of 8 September 1983 requesting guidance in the matter of visual representation of the personages connected with the Heroic Age of the Faith has been received. The Universal House of Justice wishes you to know that there is nothing in the instructions of the Guardian, nor of the House of Justice, copies of which you enclosed with your letter, to prohibit artists, such as the person whose letter of 8 February 1983 you also enclosed, to make drawings of Letters of the Living in surroundings, or participating in events, which are historically accurate. Obviously, in addition to accuracy, it is important to uphold the dignity of the personages being portrayed.

(5 October 1983, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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