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**Persian and Islamic Architecture in Melbourne: a personal search**

**Discovery**

The romance of the Middle East, once called the Near East, has long been a source of fascination to me. My first memories are of a children’s version of *The Arabian Nights* published in the early 1900s by Blackie and Co. It had evocative illustrations by Helen Stratton, some including architectural allegories. The visual imagery of the stories, combined with the illustrations, were the most exotic images of my childhood. As I did not make any distinction between Persian and Arabic culture, neither did most people fascinated by the Near East. An illustrated *Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam was a vivid childhood memory, as were visits to Luna Park.

Later at high school, Matthew Arnold’s *Sohrab and Rustum* marked another early discovery of Persian culture, especially the word images of the dramatic landscape of Central Asia. This poem, first published in 1853, covered the dramatic finale of the *Shah Nameh* by Ferdowsi. Visiting his mausoleum in 2006 at the site of the ancient city of Tus, in north-east Iran on the edge of Central Asia, provided a sense of place to my
early memories. Rimsky Korsakov’s brooding Scheherazade, and the music of Borodin including On the Steppes of Central Asia and the Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor, as popularised by the musical Kismet, provided me with another dimension of the texture of the east, but as represented from a European perspective.

The exotic world continued to excite me after I began my career as a conservation architect, particularly while undertaking various conservation studies. This time I was more interested in how exoticism found its way into a local context. Initially these studies focussed on area studies of inner Melbourne and the goldfields. Later my practice has been more devoted to detailed studies of specific sites and complexes, including gardens and landscapes, and their restoration. Projects with specific Islamic references included the restoration of the entrance towers and face of Luna Park, and the preparation of the Conservation Management Plan for the facade of 184 George Street, East Melbourne.

Formative memories provided a background for my much more recent interest in Iran and its culture, especially in its architectural traditions. This has included two extensive visits in 2006 and 2010, meeting inspiring and extremely hospitable Iranians, and being overwhelmed by the buildings and cities, as well as the landscape. The

Jameh (Friday) Mosque Yazd, Ilkhanate – Timurid period – an important model for later mosques. Photo by Nigel Lewis.
outstanding experience of these two visits was climbing one of the towering minarets at the Jameh Mosque at Yazd whilst conservators were restoring the tiles to the minaret shafts.

The Iranian landscape is embedded with cultural values relating to its continuous human occupation over millennia, and is essential to an understanding of the evolution of building and landscape design. The grandeur of the landscape is one of the country’s most defining characteristics with most of it consisting of a high plateau with mountain ranges and desert.

There are a number of parallels with parts of inland Australia. Water and irrigation are of enormous importance to both countries. Rainfall is largely limited to winter in most areas in Iran. The exceptions are the regions to the north-west and around the Caspian. The scale and harshness of the arid landscape is resonant to Australian eyes, although Iran lacks the red ochre of the inland and north-west. The dramatic strata of mountain ridges is clearly revealed by minimal if any tree or soil cover. In the lower Zagros Ranges, the thin scattering of Holm Oaks on the harsh ranges looks very Australian in colour and pattern, and recalls the paintings of Fred Williams. The difference is that the desert mountain ranges are snow covered until early summer. Chinese based academics have also compared the landscape of Central Asia with Australia, and this is a reminder that Persia forms part of this land mass.

The Broader Islamic Conundrum

A defining characteristic of Persian arts is the manner in which they are interrelated. Not only is architecture linked with garden design and plants, but also with carpet and textile design, metalwork, tilework, pottery, painting and calligraphy. In turn these are linked with poetry, music, food and beverages. In all forms the use of symbolism and metaphor is present, as is the importance of the past events to the present, and the pleasure derived from the pursuit of beauty whether spiritual or worldly. When poetry or music are performed within an enclosed space in which the scent of citrus is trapped, and architectural beauty is augmented by cooling water, all the senses are evoked.

The dilemma with this subject is that it is often difficult to distinguish what is Persian, rather than simply Islamic. This is because of the long periods of cultural overlap between Persia and her neighbours. While Persian identity and language is focussed on the Fars province which includes Shiraz and Persepolis, Bukhara, now in Uzbekistan, was also an important centre of Persian culture. For this reason I believe that it is instructive to consider how Persian culture interacted with the broader region and, later, with western culture.

It has been suggested that the Early Persians migrated south through the Caucasus region. They were Indo Europeans, as was their language Farsi. The Archaemenid Empire of 675 – 330 BC is generally considered to mark the commencement of Persian identity. However, as there was no design tradition, the principal Archaemenid cities of Shus
and Persepolis adopted the design idioms used by artisans from Babylon, and from the further reaches of this vast empire which extended from Egypt to the Indus River. The Sassanian dynasty of 242 – 642 AD was the next major era with a clear Persian identity, and was usually noted for robust design with less attention to surface decoration. The history of the Sassanians was dominated by their conflict with the successive Roman empires. Again the Persians absorbed construction technology and design influences from their rivals, and other parts of the ancient world. Roman technology led to the introduction of large domes, later to become a symbol of Islam.

However, the era that best characterises Persian design began after the rapid introduction of Islam to Persia in the seventh century AD. This followed the invasion by the Umayyad Caliphate which ruled from Damascus (661-750). Later the Abbasid Caliphate based at Baghdad (750-1258) extended control across the Middle East, Central Asia and much of North Africa. Both caliphates enabled the transfer of ideas, and saw Persian culture and design influences extending across the whole Islamic region, including Spain. The Samanids of the 10th century, based in Bukhara, broke free of Abbasid Baghdad and revived the Persian language and identity, including architecture.

Islamic culture was first absorbed into the European consciousness through the Maghreb states of western Islam, especially during the period when they included Spain (8th – 15th century) and Sicily (9th – 11th century). These western Islamic states remained a stronghold for the Umayyad Caliphate despite a loss of power elsewhere.

Persian architectural development thrived during the Ilkhanate era. This was established following the ruthless Mongol invasion of Ghengis Khan in 1221 which ended the caliphate control of the regions surrounding Persia. The succeeding Timurid era, based at Samarqand, supported the continuing development of Persian architecture. This was despite the equally bloodthirsty invasion by Timur (Tamerlane) in 1405. The Timurids, in establishing the Mughal era, were strongly influenced by Persian culture.

The Safavid dynasty, founded in 1501, was the first wholly Persian era since the Sassanians. The regime united the country and brought about the domination of Shi’ism, which continues to the present time. This sect clearly distinguished Persians from Arabs and the Ottoman Turkey. The new capital was established in Esfahan by Shah Abbas I in 1547, and was built with the involvement of skilled Armenian artisans, including tilemakers, as well as craftsmen from Italy, India and China. This period is clearly the high point of Persian culture, yet came at a time of growing contact with Europe. Abbas conquered Baghdad and the Shi’ite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. His legacies included the construction of main roads and caravanserais across the country, and the remarkable garden city of Esfahan. The 18th century Zand era, based in Shiraz, marked the end of this cultural epoch, and was succeeded by the Qajar era which was heavily influenced by western ideas. The Qajars established the new capital at Tehran.

Formal Persian cultural interchanges with Europe began with contacts by the English and French with the Safavid court of Esfahan. The Persian Gulf Residency
was established by the English after assisting Shah Abbas to expel the Portuguese from Hormuz Island in 1622. At a similar time, the East India Company in India introduced the English to the Persian language and poetry of the Mughal culture, and to its architecture.

Before shipping routes were established, the geographical location of Iran made it the cross roads of travel between the east and west: the network of caravanserais was established almost two thousand years ago. The Caspian Sea and the mountains of Iran and Afghanistan funnelled the movement of armies and traders across the Iranian plateau and deserts. The Silk Road had its main routes through the principal cities of Iran, including Esfahan and Shiraz, providing another connecting link between Persia and Europe.

The importation of Persian carpets probably had the most widespread cultural impact in the West. This importation increased dramatically in the 19th century, coinciding with the increased interest in Orientalism. The carpets introduced new design idioms to the west, including the *chahar bargh* (literally four/garden) the formal double axial garden with four sections, usually divided by water channels. They also introduced architectural references and plants. Carpet design motifs are found in Persian tile work.

The fluidity of ideas and cultural influences that passed through the Middle East and North Africa came to greatly enrich European culture, especially from the 17th century onwards, with the expansion of trade to these areas. At the same time European culture began to influence Persian architecture, for example in the use of Italian mirrors for internal tile work.

**Orientalism in the Nineteenth Century**

The broader influence of Islamic culture in Melbourne was linked to the sustained interest in Orientalism within Britain that began in the early 1800s. This included Persian cultural influences that had spread across the Islamic world. The legacies of the Maghreb and Mughal India provided the basis for much of the so-called 19th century Moorish or Saracenic Revival in western architecture that continued until the 1930s.

One of the works that inspired the new interest in Orientalism was *Oriental Scenery*, a two volume folio of prints by Thomas Daniell, first published in 1795-1796, and regularly reprinted over the next twenty years with extra illustrations, some by Thomas’ brother William. This elaborate publication provided an entirely new vision of the Indian subcontinent and had a major influence on the decorative arts and architectural design. Among these was the landmark Brighton Pavilion, the best known example of Islamic inspired design in England. John Nash redesigned the building externally between 1815 and 1822. This early example of the exoticism of the Near East and Far East, contrasted dramatically with the prevailing Regency style.

In 1856, the influential English architect and theorist, Owen Jones, published *The Grammar of Ornament*. He noted under the introduction to the Indian section that
The 1851 Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations was barely opened to the public ere attention was directed to the gorgeous contributions of India. Amid the general disorder everywhere apparent in the application of Art to manufactures, the presence of so much unity of design, so much skill and judgement in its applications, with so much of elegance and refinement in the execution as was observable in all the works, not only of India, but of all the other Mohammedan contributing countries, – Tunis, Egypt, and Turkey, excited a degree of attention from artists, manufacturers, and the public which has not been without its fruits.9

It is interesting to note that this glowing appreciation of the Indian exhibits was written just one year before the Indian Mutiny when over four centuries of Mughal culture was about to come to a terrible end. In this book of 112 colour plates, 31 were from Islamic countries,10 clearly indicating Jones’ great interest in Islamic design at this time. Jones also expressed the view that the mosques of Cairo are among the most beautiful buildings in the world.11

Jones had helped set up the 1851 Exhibition in the Crystal Palace, and his dramatic internal colour scheme was inspired by the Alhambra. This made a dramatic contrast with the industrial aesthetic of Joseph Paxton’s design, and was considered a very brave statement for such a major project. Jones had previously travelled to Egypt, Turkey and Spain, and had undertaken a detailed recording of the Alhambra. He was involved with the relocation of the Crystal Palace in 1854 to Sydenham, where he designed the Oriental Court with reconstructions from the Alhambra. He was responsible for raising public awareness about ‘Moresque’ ornamentation.12 The Alhambra became a significant influence in western architecture, as an easily referenced example of Islamic architecture.

However, the use of the expressions Moorish Revival and Saracenic Revival architecture should be reconsidered. Often there are few clear distinctions between these designs. Of even greater concern is that these expressions now have pejorative connotations. Saracenic was the expression Christian Crusaders used, while the expression Moorish, is now considered racist. Moreover it is often used indiscriminately, and not confined to the western Maghreb. In the 1948 edition of A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method,13 Sir Bannister Fletcher tellingly used the expression Persian Saracenic which included several buildings in Baghdad. However, he also used the expression Saracenic for all Islamic architecture, including Indian, and noted that Saracenic architecture could be called Islamic architecture. Bannister’s influential book was widely used by architecture students until recent years.

In terms of popular culture, the Thousand and One Nights, or The Arabian Nights, appears to have had the widest influence, through numerous translations from the 18th to early 20th centuries. The original basis for this story was Persian in origin, concerning the Persian king Shahryar and his wife Scheherazade and her nightly life-saving stories. Over time this frame story included stories not only of Persian origin, but also stories from Arabic, Indian, Turkish, Egyptian and Mesopotamian folklore. They were translated into European languages in the 18th and 19th centuries. The illustrations that accompanied
them may also have encouraged their acceptance into popular culture.

Matthew Arnold wrote *Sohrab and Rustum: an episode* in 1853, the epic poem based on Ferdowsi’s *Shah Nameh (Book of Kings)*. Completed in 1010, the *Shah Nameh* provided a national rallying point for Persian culture, and helped reinforce the use of Farsi, then under threat from the use of Arabic. Edward FitzGerald’s second edition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, the remarkable Persian poet and polymath, was published in 1868, and was very successful, despite its lack of accuracy as a translation. Many editions had exotic illustrations by famous artists.

**Materials and Use**

Mud architecture has formed the basis of traditional building in Persia since the beginning of permanent settlement in Persia and in other countries of this region. There is a huge surviving legacy, despite the widespread modern use of steel, concrete and brickwork. Mud buildings blend in with the all pervading colour of the bare landscape. The simple vault, combined with domes, provided the basic form of cover, while in some areas flat mud roofs are built on unsawn timber beams. The scale of component elements was usually restricted by the width of roof spans. The mud architecture of Persia evolved to incorporate environmental design principals, including the use of thermal mass, orientation, walls for wind protection and to create micro-climates, including shading ice forming pools. *Badgirs* or wind towers were used to collect and funnel small wind movements to cool living areas.

Water was a critical aspect of Persian design, using evaporative cooling by fountains and water channels. The widespread *qanat* system brought water in underground tunnels from the melting snow of nearby mountains. They ran beneath private houses to provide water for fountains in underground retreats in mid summer. They supplied enclosed gardens that provided refuge from the predominant desert landscape of Iran, then were directed to street channels that watered street trees and parks, and irrigation for agriculture.

Plaster was used for structural purposes from the earliest times, as it provided quick support for the construction of vaulted and domed structures. However, it was also used for decorative geometric design surface patternation before the widespread use of glazed tiles. This patternation was often coloured, creating a complex polychromy that may have influenced later tile work.

Fired bricks were first made in the region over three thousand years ago, and still form an important adjunct to mud buildings, as well as in modern steel framed buildings. The bricks are uniformly of a cream colour, which provides a subtle highlight to the colour of mud bricks. Flat paving bricks were developed to provide waterproof roofs for flat and vaulted and simple domed roofs.

Persian buildings were remarkable examples of what is sometimes called pattern architecture, based on the repetition of similar or matching elements. Thus buildings
Oljeitu Mausoleum, Sultaniyya, Ilkhanate era arcade interior around drum of the dome.
Photo by Nigel Lewis.

Prayer hall, Vakil Mosque Shiraz, Zand era.
Photo by Nigel Lewis.
evolved which used a repetition of vaults and domes. The *eyvan* (a large arched porch) provided a cool shaded sitting area, often elevated. In mosques and caravanserais *eyvans* were used for grand entrances.

Mosques, caravanserais, bazaars, palaces, houses of all sizes, and urban form all used similar layouts and forms. Open spaces ranged from the restricted courtyards of humble houses to the *meydan* or town square. In between were the enclosed courtyard gardens with pools for the houses of the well to do, and the ablution courtyard for mosques and madraseh. The smaller unit was the tile, the largest a whole town.

Although many design idioms are common across Islamic areas, the multi-foil arch is rare in Persian architecture. Persian minarets are usually cylindrical and paired with conical turrets, and differ markedly from the common single minaret of North Africa, which is square in plan, is stepped, and has a pyramidal turret. The Mughal turret has a distinctive lower secondary roof, located beneath and projecting past the dome, and is probably derived from earlier Indian traditions and the need to shed rain water, but is also found in western Islam.

The main differences in building design between Persian and much other Islamic architecture lies in planning, and the extent and location of external decoration. Persian architecture often limits elaborate architectural treatment to main facades, such as the grand arcading and *eyvans* used for entrances. The rear of such structures is often extremely simple, usually unadorned mud walls. Courtyards normally provide the main elevational treatment, with punctuated arcading and central *eyvans* to one or more sides.

The development of geometry in Persia and Mesopotamia assisted the building design of this region, for example in the construction of larger domes. It also was essential for the construction of *muqarnas*, which have a stalactite appearance. These are complex geometric decorative devices used to help resolve areas requiring a transition between forms. They are widely used in *squinches*, the triangular sections that connect domes with supporting rectangular walls, and in vaults such as with within *eyvans*. This form of decoration dates from the 11th century, apparently well before its adoption elsewhere in Islamic architecture. Initially *muqarnas* were quite simple, such as on the exterior of the Gonbad Ali at Abarkuh near Yazd, built in 1057. Later they became very complex.

Geometry was also essential for the development of geometric ceiling patterns and ribbed domes, especially from the Safavid era and later. The use of geometry in building is best expressed with tile work, especially on the exterior and interior of domes. Tiles provided the enduring *leit motif* for Persian architecture. Apart from decoration, tiles may incorporate *kufic* inscriptions with Qur’anic quotations. Flat panels surmounting entrances often include the tree of life, an ancient pre-Islamic symbol.

Tiles provide a bright contrast with the colour of the buildings and landscape, in the same way that the bright irrigated patches of wheat and orchards also provide a contrast with the bare landscape. Blue tiles representing the colour of heaven in Persian architecture can also be seen as a response to the climate with many months of cloudless
skies. *Haft rangi* (seven colours) refers to tiles with painted designs in different colours. Some colours predominate in specific areas, such as pink in Shiraz. Tiles were also an important means of protecting mud brick structures.\(^{17}\)

**Islamic Architectural Legacies in Melbourne**

The influences of the Middle East are manifested in Melbourne architecture both directly and indirectly. I have considered a number of well-known and other buildings and works and their possible design provenance. The influence of Islamic architecture is most pronounced in the design of entertainment and leisure venues, and applications where a more whimsical approach was required. Persian influences in Melbourne have mainly come through designs derived from elsewhere in the Islamic world. These influences and parallels can cover a range of building designs and practices.

Decorative brickwork, especially polychrome, was an important aspect of Melbourne architecture from the 1870s to the 1900s. It is quite remarkable to compare Melbourne polychrome brickwork with the 1310 upper level arcade of the Oljeitu Mausoleum at Sultaniyya, built during the Illkhanate period of Mongol rule.

As noted previously, the use of external tile work in western Islamic architecture, such as in Algeria and Spain, was influenced by Persian architecture. The introduction
of brightly coloured external tile work to Melbourne in the 1890s was promoted by architects such as Nahum Barnet. He wrote about this subject in an article entitled ‘Climatic Architecture’, in which he noted:

    In Madrid, Stamboul and Vienna we have Melbourne; but we require a soupçon of the sirocco, and the same of the English north-east wind, to complete the climatic picture of our wayward city.

He took inspiration from houses with bright tiles in Algeria that suited Melbourne’s glitter and colour of the sunny south, stating that coloured materials especially tile work were better suited to our bright skies than the monochrome of cement render. With respect to church design, Barnet wrote that:

    If the Gothic style is to be considered as forever attached to ecclesiastical architecture, then let there be selected some rich eastern gothic, the colourful Byzantine, the gay Moresque, or some other conception such as would be a worthy gem in the brilliant setting that Nature has provided for it.\(^\text{18}\)

More specifically, in an earlier letter to the Argus, he said that stucco, “Melbourne’s great architectural curse” should be abandoned in favour of a colourful, new style using terracotta, faience and tiles.\(^\text{19}\)

Reference to western Islamic architecture is also found on the façade of Barnet’s
Auditorium Building at 171 Collins Street, which uses dramatic horizontal banding. An Islamic reference is also found with the use of horizontal banding in the interior of St Paul’s Cathedral, and with its geometric patterned tiled dado.

The so-called Spanish Mission style became an important part of domestic design in Melbourne, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. It came here from the west coast of America, using a pastiche of local Spanish colonial practices, and imported Spanish designs. These included Islamic detailing adopted from Spain’s Maghreb era including twisted columns and the use of brickwork for grilles. These two design idioms are common in Persian architecture.

There are a number of specific examples in Melbourne of Islamic influences with possible Persian origins. One of the earliest examples I have found is the unusual verandah design used for three 1850s terraces at 182-186 George Street East Melbourne. Designed by the noted architect Joseph Reed, they were constructed in 1856-57, when Reed was working on the Melbourne Public Library. The two-storey timber verandah features projecting bracketed eaves and highly skilled carving in the Regency style. The eaves design may have drawn inspiration from Middle Eastern or Mughal porches or garden pavilions.

These verandahs dated from the earliest decade of terrace house design in Melbourne. Despite the structural advantage of the cantilever, this verandah design did not take hold except for railway station awnings, where it had the advantage of keeping columns clear of the platform edge.

The design can be compared with the cantilevered verandahs found in the most modest of vernacular Persian design, such as at the mountain village of Abyaneh. It is also found in grand porches of the Safavid era in Esfahan, notably the Ali Qapu Palace overlooking the vast meydan or square, and nearby Chehel Sotun Palace. It remained in use in later periods, for example at the Zand era citadel, the Arg-e Karim Khan at Shiraz.

The next known Melbourne example with Islamic influence was the 1889 design for the Comedy Theatre in Russell Street by William Pitt. Featuring an elaborate Islamic styled exterior and interior, it remained, unfortunately, a design only. Terry Sawyer has noted the connection between this use of the Moorish style in Melbourne and theatre design in Britain. He has linked this design with a key British theatre building in this style, the Royal Panopticon of Science and Art built in London in 1854, and later renamed the Alhambra Theatre. It was followed by a number of theatres in the United Kingdom which also used the title Alhambra and adopted the Moorish style popularised by Owen Jones.

In 1894 the new façade to the 1872 Eastern Arcade brought an unmistakable Middle Eastern presence to 131-135 Bourke Street. This appears to be the first use of this style in Melbourne, yet was demolished in 2008 with council approval. This was despite it being identified in the 1976 study of the Melbourne CBD. The façade design by Hyndman and Bates featured a large pointed horseshoe arch, surmounted by round
horseshoe arches for the pilasters, arcading and windows. A perforated grille and a distinctive geometric frieze were other Islamic features. The façade recalled the entrances of many bazaars in the Middle East, and provided an appropriate identity for an arcade, as the design of arcades has much in common with the design of bazaars.

In 1901 Pitt used his 1889 Comedy Theatre design for the exotic interior of the New Opera House in Bourke Street. It was built for Harry Rickard’s Tivoli Circuit, after which it was later named. However, only some of the Islamic external elements were used. The domed turret of the original design was replaced by the landmark sphere. The Tivoli was ‘modernised’ during Melbourne’s Olympic ‘heritage holocaust’ in 1956 and demolished in the 1960s.

In 1902 Pitt provided Melbourne with another Islamic inspired façade with his alterations to convert the former Cyclorama to shops at 166-186 Little Collins Street. The Cyclorama was used to display dramatic painted subjects in the round, such as the The Siege of Paris, shown from 1891 to 1896. For many years it was Georges Hostess Store, and now it has been converted to apartments with an additional mansard roofed upper floor. At the rear, the circular form can still be seen.

There were a number of other Islamic influenced retail facades constructed across
Melbourne at this time. The 1910 – 1914 façade of shops at 647 – 653 Burwood Road Hawthorn, near Auburn Road, is an example.

In 1912 flamboyant Islamic design idioms were used for the entrance towers at Luna Park on the St Kilda foreshore. Luna Park was built by US/Canadian entrepreneur J. D. Williams, with the three Phillips brothers, Leon, Herman and Harold from Los Angeles. Despite the squat Mughal domed turrets, the composition of a pair of turrets flanking the giant entrance arch recalls the *eyvan* entrance of a Persian mosque, except of course, for the insertion of the face! Other references to Persian mosque design are geometric patternation and pointed horseshoe arches as well as the sheer facadism of the entrance and the contrast with the humble corrugated iron fence for the rest of the site.

The entrance towers that surmount the face are among Melbourne’s best known structures. What is probably less known is that they are the vestiges of a range of Islamic inspired buildings, mainly dating from the 1920s, that also included the entrance stations for the Big Dipper and Scenic Railway. Both stations were Islamic domed structures with stylised minarets.

The Phillips Brothers had previously established other amusement parks at Coney Island and Delhi. It had been assumed that the designs were influenced by Mughal buildings in Delhi, but it is more likely that the adoption of this style was part of a wider cultural movement that led to many US cinemas being built in an Islamic style. It is
interesting to speculate whether this may have some connection with the founders of Luna Park, as they returned to California to establish Warner Brothers.26

The Mughal domed turrets of Luna Park appear to have established something of a fashion for this part of St Kilda. In 1922 Arthur Purnell adopted a similar design for the paired Mughal domed turrets of the 1922 Wattle Path Palais de Danse, later to become St Moritz.27 However, this design was subject to some major changes by the 1950s. This later iteration lacked the domes, and was otherwise seemingly devoid of Islamic detailing. It was destroyed by fire and demolished in the 1980s.

The State Theatre (now the Forum Cinema) was built in 1928, as Melbourne’s grandest Islamic inspired building. It was designed by the American cinema architect John Eberson in association with the Melbourne architects Bohringer, Taylor and Johnson. It had the largest capacity of any cinema in the country with 3371 seats. As noted earlier, such Islamic revival styles for cinemas were also in vogue in the United States at this time, and this design has to be seen as an American importation, as was the design of Luna Park.28

The design is completely eclectic, and is hard to analyse for specific influences. Suffice to say, it is a fabulous architectural fantasy, tending towards the architecture of western Islam, such as found in Cairo. The dominant corner tower recalls North African practice of having a single main square minaret. There is a sequence of secondary
minarets of a descending scale and complexity of design, and these all provide a strong skyline effect. However there are also a number of design details that do have Persian associations. These are the twisted engaged columns defining the main tower, as well as diagonal shaped panelling, grilles and horseshoe arches. The dome on the corner tower is the most distinctly non-Persian feature. By way of contrast, the interior is a mixture of Italian medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and Spanish Mission styles combined with bold classical Roman and Renaissance architectural forms. The tempietto to the right hand side of the original proscenium, however, does have a passing resemblance to the iconic 1930s structure erected by Reza Shah over the shrine of the poet Hafez in Shiraz.

The Pioneer Women’s Memorial Garden which was constructed in 1935 recalls Persian precedents. It is located in the Kings Domain near the Sidney Myer Music Bowl. Built in an old rockery (originally a quarry) that was formerly part of the grounds of Government House, it was designed by Hugh Linaker and funded by the Women’s Centenary Council. It is a sunken, enclosed garden with a very formal axial design focussed on a long central pool that terminates in a semi-hemispherical tiled apse. The Persian character derives from the dramatic use of blue tile work, and the main axial water channel.
Melbourne has several other axial designed gardens with central water features, most notably by Rodney Alsop. It is interesting to note that his most significant commission was the 1932 Winthrop Hall in the Hackett buildings at the University of Western Australia, designed in what has been variously described as a Spanish / Mediterranean / Romanesque style. More recently the moat at the National Gallery of Victoria, completed in 1968, recalls the manner in which buildings in Iran are presented across water. The plain external walls, the ‘eyvan’ entrance and the original courtyard design also have Persian parallels. The channel in the current version of the City Square is similar in design to many such channels in larger Persian gardens.

Finally, the work of Walter Burley Griffin in Melbourne came to mind on numerous occasions during my last visit to Iran. The refectory ceiling of Newman College has a striking resemblance to a number of Persian ribbed domed ceilings.

Griffin’s use of crystalline decoration, such as at the Capitol Theatre, has parallels with the use of carved plaster decoration at the Ilkhanate era Jameh Mosque at Yazd, and even earlier brickwork at the 11th century Jameh Mosque at Esfahan.

Another example of this crystalline decoration is found within the Safavid era
pigeon towers at Esfahan through the use of projecting pointed mud bricks, laid in a hit and miss pattern. These bricks are designed as perches that facilitate faecal discharge to the floor for collection to fertilise melon fields. The arcaded balcony also makes an interesting comparison with Griffin’s refectory at Newman College.

The widespread use of *muqarnas* in Persian architecture, usually in plaster or tiles, created stalactite forms. This form of decoration was later adopted in the western Maghreb. A particularly elaborate form, the acoustic *muqarnas* within the music room at the top level of the Safavid era Ali Qapu Palace at Esfahan, have a similarity with Griffin’s later use of hollow stalactite forms. Jeff Turnbull has suggested that the Capitol Theatre ceiling design was influence by a stalactite ceiling in the Alhambra.30

Turnbull has noted that the two level barrage bridges in Esfahan have a remarkable parallel with Newman College. These living bridges, some with tea houses, have a particular affinity with the form and rhythm of the externally expressed two-level corridors at Newman, as well as with the battered base work. He has observed that French books on Persian architecture available during Griffin’s student days included drawings of these bridges.31

He also notes that the form and composition of the Persian bridge had much in common with other living bridges, from many periods and cultures, including Europe in the Middle Ages. Turnbull also has observed that Griffin was concerned to adopt compositional patterns with universal precedents.32 Regarding Newman College, Turnbull has noted that:

The metaphor in the design of Griffin’s Initial Structure seems to have been that the two dormitory wings were living bridges connecting the three community nodes.33

**Conclusion**

The direct influence of Persian architecture and building practice in Melbourne is hard to establish. However, the search for such influences reveals a number of secondary connections and interesting parallels. This is because of the widespread influence of Persian culture in the Islamic world.

There are some aspects of Islamic design found in Melbourne, and elsewhere in the western world, which are very likely to have a Persian provenance. Most have been derived from the western Maghreb and from Mughal culture. Other influences have come directly from the broader Middle Eastern region that has been shared by Persia for much of its history. Sadly, today there are clearly defined boundaries and nationalistic rivalries between modern Iran and its Arabic speaking neighbours which make any joint attribution extremely contentious. Finally, there are also some parallels that may be mere coincidence. There are many examples around the world where the performance of building materials and growing human requirements have produced similar universal designs.
The western use of Islamic design and building practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries has largely been undertaken to create a sense of fantasy and mystery. Accordingly it was usually confined to theatres and other amusement venues. The exception is the Islamic inspired aspects of Spanish Mission. These were widely applied to all building types.

The Moorish nomenclature for Islamic revival styles, should be used with care, and Saracenic not at all.

It is equally important to acknowledge that architecture was just one of many ways that the Islamic world has shaped our lives, whether it has a Persian origin, or comes from elsewhere in the Islamic world.