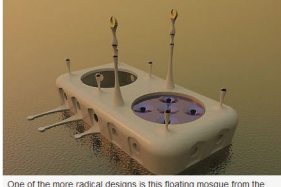


## How should a mosque look?

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One of the more radical designs is this floating mosque from the architect Koen Olthuis.

"It's like a spaceship," Yousef Mohammed says, peering up at the sleek new construction of gold and chrome as he sits in a park on the Corniche in Abu Dhabi.

Modern design is hardly unusual for a building along the waterfront, but this one is attracting quizzical looks, because it is a mosque.

At first Mr Mohammed, a 40-year-old Pakistani, seems unsure of it. He tilts his head to one side before announcing decisively: "I like it. It's better than the old style."

The building is nearing completion amid a growing debate over mosque design and a push by authorities to regulate their development. Traditionalists believe new mosques should adhere to "Islamic architecture" while some architects propose a complete rethinking of their design.

With its glass front, gold panelling and unconventional dome encased in chrome bars, the Corniche mosque is considered a victory for the modernists. They argue that design of the country's religious buildings, which historically have adapted to suit their environment and needs, has stagnated, and some are proposing even more radical designs.

Fariborz Hatam, a senior associate with the Dubai office of the architectural firm Aedas, for example, has put forward a contemporary design that completely rips up the traditional blueprint for a mosque.

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In his design, the 99 names of the Prophet Mohammed are inscribed on the sides of a minaret that climbs skywards. The dome, rather than being placed on top, covers the whole building.

Mr Hatam, born in Iran and raised in Australia, said he felt something was missing in the architectural landscape when he moved to Dubai.

"There's no such thing as Islamic architecture," he said, pointing out that minarets were copied from Syrian churches. Also pushing the boundaries is Koen Olthuis, an architect with Waterstudio, a company that specialises in architecture and city planning related to water. He has designed a "floating mosque" for Dubai, in collaboration with Dutch Docklands. The concrete structure pokes above the surface like a submarine.

"If you look at the construction of mosques, there's been a lot of change over the past 1,000 years. I don't think it's necessary to stick to the same model we see now," he said.

The Emirati architect Omran al Owais, agrees. He has also come up with a reworked concept for a mosque with an underground prayer room and a glass roof covered by water, allowing light to ripple on to worshippers below. Instead of a minaret, a leaf-shaped steel lattice rises from the ground.

It is unclear whether designs such as Mr al Owais's would be permitted under new guidelines being drawn up by the Mosque Development Committee, headed by the Urban Planning Council.

The guidelines will preserve "Emirati, Arab and Islamic identity" but also "encompass the various architectural styles and influences of the differing locations", said the committee's chairman, Falah al Ahbab.

Authorities in Dubai are also focusing on adherence to traditional Islamic mosque design. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, ordered a review of Al Manara Mosque in Umm Suqeim, which is planning an expansion in line with traditional Islamic architectural principles.

The director of Sheikh Mohammed's office said the Ruler "pays surprise visits to oversee that mosques are built in the distinguished heritage shape", the state news agency, WAM, reported last week.

But Mr al Owais said the concept of "Islamic design" being confined to geometric shapes and arches was flawed. "If we are from Dubai and Abu Dhabi and we worked on it and we are Muslims, then we can call it Islamic," he said.

"There's no such thing as Islamic architecture," he said, pointing out that minarets were copied from Syrian churches.

Saeed al Rahomi, the assistant director for technical support at Dubai's Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department, believes the issue is not one of modernity versus tradition, but that designs should at least be derived from traditional Islamic architectural schools.

"It is not a matter of modern design," Mr al Rahomi said, "but of design that has a root in the culture, so that we can see where it came from."

The contention that there is no such thing as Islamic architecture is strongly contested by Mohammed al Mazrouei, the executive manager at the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (Awqaf). Most mosque design, he said, was inspired by the architectural heritage of Islamic historical eras such as the Umayyad and Abbasid periods.

The famed Hagia Sophia Mosque in Istanbul, for example, is often cited as an inspiration for mosques of the Ottoman period. Recently, more religious buildings in the UAE have been designed in the Mahali style, influenced by traditional Emirati architecture. The Jumeirah Mosque, Mr al Rahomi said, was seen as one of the standards for Islamic architecture in the UAE. "But there are some modern designs that are just not suitable," he said. "We face many people who bring many designs. But there are specialists in the field of Islamic design."

The Mosque Development Committee might turn back proposals, Mr al Mazrouei said, because the buildings were too small or too far away from population centres. "But if it is empty of Islamic designs, then we must refuse," he said.

However, Sheikhha Radia Salem, an Islamic adviser at Awqaf, said that as long as a mosque provides a clean space for prayer, it should not matter how it looks.

"Across time and places and rulers, different mosques were built and all were acceptable for prayers," Sheikhha Salem said. "So what really is classical sense of a mosque design? It was never uniform."

The architects argue that it is important to leave something for future generations to study.

"Five hundred years ago they put buildings up that were celebrating those times, that we go back into and say 'Wow', but the question is, what are we going to leave behind from the modern age?" Mr Hatam said.

Mr al Owais argued that in today's world, mosques should be sustainable buildings and to save energy, domes should be removed, as the high ceilings they create mean more air to cool. Their original purpose, to improve acoustics, had become obsolete with speaker systems, he said.

Mr al Mazrouei, however, said that while mosques should retain traditional design principles, that did not preclude them from embracing modern innovations. Awqaf is looking to incorporate more technology in mosques, such as sensors which would detect when someone enters the building, automatically switching on the lights or air conditioning. The Mosque Development Committee's guidelines will also include "Estidama" or sustainable principles.

Mr al Owais contended that making buildings more environmentally friendly would encourage innovation. "By making it green so many things will be affected and the architecture will change," he said.

But the modernists still have a steep hill to climb.

"The majority of the people prefer the traditional design," said Ibrahim Mosa, 36, a Jordanian teacher, looking up at the golden rocket-shaped minaret along the Corniche. "This is good, but the Sheikh Zayed Mosque is the most beautiful."

Sheikh Abdul Rahman Ammoura, a mufti who works with Awqaf, said he believed traditional architectural principles should be maintained because the buildings should reflect a "respect for Islam".

"Firstly, people should know clearly that this is a mosque and secondly, they should respect that place," he said. "A mosque should be a reflection of Islamic heritage and engineering."

### Designs must be approved

Before a mosque can be built in Abu Dhabi, the design must be approved by the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (Awqaf), the municipality and the Mosque Development Committee, headed by the Urban Planning Council.

The Mosque Development Committee is preparing architectural guidelines that include specifics such as the dimensions of the prayer hall, the shape of minarets and the design of doors and windows. A mosque design proposal must include provisions such as proper ablution facilities and male and female prayer halls when possible, according to Mohammed al Mazrouei, the executive manager at Awqaf.

If Awqaf inspectors find a mosque does not comply with regulations, they will send a letter to the building's chairman requesting he oversee the necessary changes. The inspectors later check to ensure the maintenance or alterations were made.

Awqaf is responsible for mosques across the country, with the exception of Dubai, where they fall under the Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department. In Dubai, designs are submitted to the department and the municipality for approval.