

Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar.* Philip Jodidio, New York: Prestel, 2008. 228 pp.

Reviewed by Bernard O’Kane

A quick search on Amazon.com brings up some thirty books by Philip Jodidio on modern architecture, certainly an impressive total. However, this may be less impressive than it seems, particularly if the ratio of text to photographs in the other books is like that of the current publication, where Jodidio’s contribution amounts to some 12,000 words, basically that of a long essay. The episodic and repetitive nature of his text is also less than impressive. Not included in this figure of 12,000 words is the text in the section (pp. 86-181) that is used to introduce the photographs of outstanding objects in the museum. Each of the other two main sections on “The Architecture” and “The Exhibition Design” had the initials of the author at the end. The section on the objects is uncredited, but I suspect that the expertise of the director of the museum, Oliver Watson, is to be discerned in the pithy but informative entries.

This means that the work is first and foremost a picture book, and it must be said at the outset that the photographs are excellent, particularly from the artistic point of view, and, to a slightly lesser extent, in giving the reader an idea of the layout of the main spaces and the circulation through them.

Jodidio has also published a book on the complete works of I. M. Pei, the architect of the Museum, and is therefore able to range comfortably among Pei’s earlier works to provide illuminating parallels. Many quotations from the architect also add a definitive flavor to the text. Of course, it is as well never to take at face value the statements of an artist or architect. Referring to its 14th century ablutions fountain, Pei asserts (p. 46) that “I had at last found what I came to consider the very essence of Islamic architecture in the middle of the mosque of Ibn Tulun.” True, it has a stepped exterior zone of transition, which may have provided the spark that led to Pei’s much more complicated stacking of cubic forms, but the Ibn Tulun example leads to a dome, whereas the Museum of Islamic art is notable for not expressing a dome on the exterior. Rather, it is crowned by another cube, alleviated by a lunette on each side that somehow reminded me of the eyes of Purusa, the universal man painted on the summit of Nepalese Buddhist stupas. There is a dome on the interior, however, a *muqarnas* stainless steel cupola that is partially illuminated by an oculus at the top. Perhaps Pei felt that an exterior dome would be too clichéd a reference to earlier Islamic architecture, or perhaps he wanted to avoid the visible change in materials that would have been necessary to accommodate a transparent oculus for the interior dome. The employment by Pei of arcades of semi-circular rather than the pointed arches typical of Islamic architecture is also surprising. They are found in the earliest period of Islamic architecture, in the Great Mosque of Hama, for instance, but again Pei may simply have wished to avoid being accused of too slavish an adherence to earlier forms; a fault that has rendered some similar recent attempts, such as those of Abdelwahed El-Wakil in Saudi Arabia, merely derivative. Jodidio provides a good summary of Pei’s achievement as follows: “If the superficial Post-Modern movement gave a ‘bad name’ to historical references in contemporary architecture,

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it will be shown that Pei's exploration of the essence of cultures... is a real direction for the future" (p. 82).

The book shows the attention to detail that has been lavished on the structure by the architect and designer. When visiting the site I had not realized that the majestic palm trees that line the avenue leading up to the buildings were larger than the native palms of Qatar and had to be imported. The concern for floodlighting evidenced by Pei is also revealing—the solution, given the lack of surrounding buildings to illuminate its seaward facing north side, was to construct two small artificial islands with light towers. Another detail of the interior design that had escaped me is the extensive use of fiber optic lights within the cases, powerful, but so small as to be inconspicuous, and more importantly, non-heat generating.

So who is this book aimed at? Its contents are almost evenly split between the objects and their description, and Jodidio's text on the architecture and exhibition design. Those whose foremost interest is contemporary architecture may have preferred a work on that subject alone, while those who go to the building to view Islamic art would have preferred the objects alone. However, gift giving is enshrined in the Middle East as one of the essentials of hospitality, and the book is certainly a handsome way of advertising the patrons' munificence to the society at large.

The 1983 Pritzker Prize jury citation for Pei notes (p. 34) that "his concern has always been the surroundings in which his buildings rise." This concern was more easily dealt with in this case by the construction of an artificial island on which to erect the building. But the building may reverberate in much wider surroundings. If its education wing ever functions as it is supposed to (at the opening of the Museum its bookshelves were conspicuously bare), then generations of Qataris may come to appreciate their cultural heritage in a way that was not possible before without extensive travel. And the establishment of a masterpiece of modern architecture, filled with one of the world's finest collections of Islamic art, will also make Doha an essential stop for anyone interested in those disciplines. This handsome book is a good introduction to both the building and the collection.

Bernard O'Kane is a Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at The American University in Cairo. He is the author of several books including The Appearance of Persian on Islamic Art (Persian Heritage Foundation, 2009) and Treasures of Islam: Artistic Glories of the Muslim World (Duncan Baird Publishers, 2007). His current research focuses on epigraphy on the monuments of Cairo, Persian and Arab illustrated manuscripts, the Islamic architecture of Southeast Asia, and Islamic tilework.