The Usefulness of Main Prayer Hall of Masjid Agung Islamic Center of Lhokseumawe, Aceh - Indonesia

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Abstract. Spatial design of masjids is typically the result of duplicating or replicating typology considered appropriate by the Muslim community. Often, this approach results in a massive centralized main prayer space that is underutilized and may contradict fundamental Islamic principles derived from the Quran and Hadith (canonical sayings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ). This article attempts to reveal the utilization of the main praying hall at Masjid Agung Islamic Center (MAIC) of Lhokseumawe. Further, this study challenges the MAIC in light of the Islamic principle of ‘avoiding exaggeration’. Observation was conducted over 30 days alongside an exploration of values and principles guiding Islamic Architecture according to Quran and Hadith. Findings show the utilization of the main prayer hall of MAIC averaged 3.24% on a daily basis and 3.26% for Shalah (ritual prostration performed five times a day); clearly, a sign of wasted space. Results of this study are expected to stimulate discussion in the area of design and planning of Islamic Architecture toward a wiser design, particularly in Aceh Province of Indonesia.

Keywords: masjid, main prayer hall, avoiding exaggeration, waste of space, simplicity

1. Introduction

Masjid Agung Islamic Centre (MAIC) of Lhokseumawe is situated in the center of the city on a land area of 33,748.47m². Today, the masjid building itself occupies an area of 16,475.80m². Inside, there is a main space with an area of 3,558.33m² dedicated for conducting the prayer. Other rooms are provided, such as a secretariat, imam’s room, meeting hall, ablution area and office units. Administratively, MAIC is located in Banda Sakti district of Lhokseumawe. The district covers 112.40 hectares with a population of 80,769 people. The population is spread over 18 gampongs (villages) with a gender ratio of 100 women to 99.66 men. Other than MAIC, there are 13 other masjids spread across the gampongs in Banda Sakti district. For an approximation, if an area of 0.72m² (0.6x1.2m) is used for performing shalah, then the main prayer hall of MAIC is able to accommodate 4,942 people for that activity.

Many hadiths explain the numerous ways masjids were used during the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, particularly the Masjid al Haram in Mecca and Masjid al Nabawi in Medina. The Hadith literature, describing the behaviour and attitude of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ constitute a normative reference for the individual Muslim in all aspects of life, including when designing and using space within a masjid. Narratives of the social life around the Kaaba, which is now the center of the Masjid al Haram, illustrate
that the masjid was utilized for congregation for all levels of society. Political and diplomatic activities were conducted nearby. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ held many discussions and preached within this space.

Such hadith show the sacred space around the Kaaba was not merely a location for prayer but for a variety of other communal activities. Masjid al Nabawi was utilized the same way too as a center for social, political and worship activities. Other Hadiths provide support for the use of a masjid as a shelter, an educational institution, health facility, and a site for celebration and recreation activities nearby.

Figure 1: Illustration of Masjid al Nabawi during Prophet Muhammad’s time, with its various activities in the spirit of Islam.

Architecturally, spaces within Masjid al Nabawi had a very flexible arrangement allowing for multifunctional spaces. The spaces had full utility without any wasted space. A spacious courtyard surrounded by walls made the area safe and comfortable enough to allow for congregational shalāh training for physical activities, sports activities, gatherings, discussions and educational activities to take place. Also, the roofed spaces were flexibly used for various activities such as congregational shalāh, study and discussion. Of course, the existence of a large courtyard for congregational prayer space was suitable for the dry climate of Medina and the entire Arab peninsula. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ reminded his followers not to exaggerate in building a masjid as stated in the following hadith:

*Ibn ‘Abbas relates that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “I was not ordered to build high masjids.” (Narrated by Abu Dawud)*

*Anas ibn Malik relates that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “Judgement Day will not arrive until humans exaggerated in building masjids.” (Narrated by Ahmad, Abu Daud, An-Nasa’i and Ibn Majah)*

Figure 2: MAIC of Lhokseumawe
‘High masjids’ in the hadith above literally implies exaggeration in space planning and construction. Therefore, a masjid can be understood to be not a monumental structure that is utilized simply for the purpose of prayer alone. Rather, a masjid is intended to be a place for Muslims to interact and conduct various activities that provide benefit to the religious community.

Prophet Muhammadﷺ forbade his ummah (religious community) from exaggeration or excess including in building and selecting material for a building. Islam teaches a simple, humble and functional architectural language as described within the following hadiths:

"Anas bin Malik said: Prophet Muhammadﷺ one day saw a massive building with dome on top it and then said: What was it? Prophet Muhammad answered: it was a building belong to someone..., one of the Ansar. Prophet Muhammadﷺ did not mention any single word thus raised a big question among prophets’ companions. n its owner greeted, Prophet Muhammadﷺ turned away his face and step away from him. The owner repeated his greet several times and Prophet Muhammadﷺ reacted in the same way, thus the owner realized Prophet Muhammad’s anger toward him. Finally, he asked about his problem to other companions and said: I swear to Allah, that I did not understand Prophet Muhammad’s attitude toward me. The companions answered the Prophet Muhammadﷺ behave in that way after He saw a massive building with the dome belong, to you. He then returned home and destroyed the building to the ground. One day Prophet Muhammadﷺ saw the direction of the dome building and He did not discover the dome building anymore. The Prophet Muhammadﷺ asked: What had happened to the dome building? The Companions answered Him: "the owner had complained about your attitude toward him that you had turned your face away from him when you met him and when we told him the cause of it then he destroyed his dome building. Prophet Muhammadﷺ said: “Every building was a slander to his owner unless human could not live his life without it”.

(Sunnah Abu Dawud, Vol. III, pp 1444-1445)

The usefulness of space is a fundamental value in architecture. Uselessness can cause waste and disadvantages toward certain matters, especially if it is done repeatedly and exaggeratedly. In the Islamic worldview, knowledge and understanding toward the rule of usefulness and avoidance of disadvantages will benefit to obtain maslahat and elude mafsadat in the practice of architecture. The explanation of the previous hadiths has showed the spirit toward simplicity and humbleness for the true beauty according to Islamic principles.

2. Methods
This study used a normative case study method aimed at developing knowledge intensively about an object (Zeisel, 1980). This research was conducted by surveying the hadith literature which then were used as a framework to explore the usefulness of the main prayer hall of a Masjid. Data was obtained from dimension mapping of the main prayer hall of the MAIC, observing and measuring the space used during the 5 daily salah and for Jum’ah (Friday sermon). Observation and measurement was conducted within 30 days. The observed data of prayer attendance were recorded and tabulated with the hall measurements to yield the utilization of the area, compiled and displayed using Microsoft Excel in the form of tables and diagrams. Analysis and discussion were performed through a thorough observation of phenomena of usefulness of the main praying hall.

3. Results and Discussion
Result are plotted consecutively through the tables that follow. Table 1 tabulated average percentage values (%) of used space according to day and time of salah. The table showed the highest average utilization value happened on Friday during Jum’ah at 31.26%, equivalent to 1,112.33m2 of space used, leaving 2,445.99m2 unused. Meanwhile, the lowest average utilization value occurred on Sunday during Isya (night) prayer at 0.63%, equivalent to 22.42m2 of area used, 3,535.91m2 vacant.

Table 2 showed tabulated average data (%) of used area according to prayer time. The highest average utilization occurred at Dzuhur (noon) prayer at 5.48% (including Jum’ah, which replaces Dzuhur on Friday), equivalent to an area of 194.99m2 of space. By contrast, the lowest average utilization happened at Shubuh (dawn) prayer at 1.10% or 39.14m2 of space used. In total, the average...
utilization value for 30 days was 3.26%, equivalent to 116.00m² of space. These findings indicate a massive amount of vacant space on average, reaching 96.74% of space.

Table 1. Average (%) of utilization of main prayer space according to day and time of shalah, 30 observation days

| Time  | Iyha | Maghrib | Asr | Dzuhur | Subuh |
|-------|------|---------|-----|--------|-------|
| Mon   | 0.91 | 5.30    | 5.85| 0.73   | 1.05  |
| Tue   | 1.13 | 5.80    | 4.63| 1.44   | 1.13  |
| Wed   | 4.73 | 8.28    | 0.77| 1.58   | 1.50  |
| Thu   | 1.58 | 5.58    | 4.65| 1.34   | 1.50  |
| Fri   | 1.68 | 5.16    | 4.67| 31.26  | 1.07  |
| Sat   | 1.48 | 2.29    | 0.65| 0.91   | 0.85  |
| Sun   | 0.63 | 1.01    | 1.09| 1.11   | 0.77  |

In total, the average value of utilization according to praying time for 30 days was 3.24%, equivalent to 115.28m² area coverage. A massive 96.76% of hall space remained unused.

Results show the excessive amount of area unused at the main prayer hall of MAIC with 95% of unused area. This must be considered excessive. In building of a masjid, increasing cost for construction is often the most important issue that was seriously discussed; as a consequence, often the planned budget for construction would be categorized as excessive.

High construction cost with only less than 4% area properly utilized is one of the strongest signs of excess. Furthermore, appropriate analysis for the main prayer space of a masjid relative to population and situation of a specific community was clearly not carried out effectively.

On the other hand, the massive size of the prayer hall requires high energy for maintenance and routine use of electricity which in turn contributes to excessive operational cost. High operational costs become a waste where less than 4% of the space itself is actively used.

This situation is in high contrast to the Islamic way of life practiced by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as shown in the following hadith:

Narrated by Muhammad bin Ziyad: I had heard Abu Hurairah said,

“When they saw a man, the important person of Bahrain, swipe the ground using their clothes, I said, ‘the important person is coming, the important person is coming.’”

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Indeed, Allah Most High would not bless those who swipe the ground boastfully (Shahih Muslim. Hadith No 1359. pp. 772.)

Table 2. Average value (%) of utilization according to Shalah, 30 days’ observation
Narrated by Anas bin Malik:
When we sat with Prophet Muhammad ﷺ inside the masjid, someone came riding a camel. He ordered his camel to kneel at the masjid yard, tied its front feet and asked, “Who among you is called Muhammad?” At the time Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was sitting among companions leaning on both of his hands. We answered, “The white man sitting leaning on his hand.” The man looked toward Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, “Oh the son of Abdul Muththalib.” Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “I came here to answer your questions.” The man asked Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, “I wanted to ask something that seems hard for you to answer. So do not be angry.” Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Ask anything you want to ask.” The man said, “I ask in the name of your God, the God of people before you, did Allah Most High send you as a prophet for entire humankind?” Prophet Muhammad ﷺ answered, “For the sake of Allah Most High, that is right.” Then, the man asked, “In the name of Allah Most High I ask you. Did Allah Most High order you to conduct shalah five times within one day and night?” Prophet Muhammad ﷺ answered, “In the name of Allah, that is right.” Moreover, the man asked, “In the name of Allah! Did Allah Most High order you to fast during the month of Ramadhan?” Prophet Muhammad ﷺ answered, “Right, in the name of Allah Most High.” Further the man asked, “In the name of Allah Most High! Did Allah Most High order you to take charity from the wealthy and distribute it to the poor?” Prophet Muhammad ﷺ answered, “In the name of Allah, that is right.” Then the man said, “I confirm my faith in what He has sent down to you. I was sent by my tribe as a messenger, my name is fulan from the family of Bani Sa’d bin Bakar.” (Shahih Muslim. Hadits No.1387. pp. 784.)

The hadith above illustrates how the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ conducted himself among his companions inside the masjid. He did not show himself as an important person as a messenger of Allah Most High; rather, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ carried himself in an egalitarian manner. His demonstration of simple and humble living is an important value that informs every aspect of the believer’s daily life. This is highly relevant when it comes to building of a masjid which is the architectural manifestation of the spiritual values of the ummah.

In an effort to reduce excess and practice simplicity when building a masjid, main prayer spaces should be designed appropriately to avoid potentially useless space. Functionally, the main prayer hall of MAIC could avoid exaggeration by arranging two groups of spaces, a fixed praying space and a flexible area for various relevant activities to take place. The fixed space would provide space appropriate for conducting shalah (specific to MAIC: ± 3.26% x 3.558.33 = 116.00 m2). The remaining area can be a flexible space for other relevant activities as has been exemplified by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Also, for temporary praying activities that require larger space such as Jum’ah and Eid (holiday) prayers, it can take advantage of the flexible space to accommodate exceptionally large congregations.

### 4. Conclusion

Findings indicated that the main prayer hall must be considered an exaggerated and wasteful space. Observations over 30 days revealed that the usefulness of space is less than 4% (3.24% according to day of the week and 3.26% according to praying time) out of the total available main prayer space.

| Day  | Average Use (%) | Average Not Used (%) |
|------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Sun  | 98.97           |                      |
| Sat  | 98.78           |                      |
| Fr   | 91.26           |                      |
| Thu  | 97.16           |                      |
| Wed  | 96.63           |                      |
| Tue  | 97.16           |                      |
| Mon  | 97.23           |                      |
The waste of space can be avoided by mature design considering the capacity from the specific population of an area and the expected number of community members using the space. With that, the useless space within masjids can be avoided as an implementation of simplicity and humbleness as taught by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

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