

TCI 9.3 City Building and Architecture

Many large cities developed in Muslim lands, and this growth encouraged new kinds of architecture. Thousands of workers labored to build palaces, schools, orphanages, hospitals, mosques, and other buildings.

The City of Baghdad - After the Muslim Abbasid dynasty (758–1258 C.E.) rose to power in the Middle East, Caliph al-Mansur decided to move his capital from Damascus to a site that was more central to his far-flung empire. The site he chose was Baghdad, a village between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in present-day Iraq. This location was a crossroads of trade routes connecting distant parts of the empire.

Baghdad was one of the most glorious Muslim cities. It took 100,000 architects, workers, and craftspeople four years to build the new capital. Because of its shape, people called the capital complex the “round city.” At its center were the caliph's palace and the grand mosque. Around them were offices and the houses of court officials and army officers. A double wall with four guarded gates surrounded the inner city. Shops, markets, and residences grew up outside the wall. Soon, Baghdad was one of the world's largest cities. Bridges, palaces, and gardens all added to its splendor. One Arab historian of the 11th century called Baghdad “a city with no equal in the world.”

The Mosque - Muslims created distinctive forms of architecture. A particularly important type of building was the mosque, the Muslim house of worship.

Mosques usually have at least one minaret (tower) with a small balcony where the muezzin chants the call to prayer. In a courtyard, stands a fountain for washing before prayers. Inside the mosque is the prayer room where worshippers sit on mats and carpets on the floor. The imam gives the sermon from a raised pulpit called the minbar. Next to the minbar is a niche in the wall that indicates the direction of prayer towards Mecca.

Many design styles and materials went into building mosques, reflecting the great diversity of Muslim lands. Like the cathedrals of Europe, mosques express the religious faith and the artistic heritage of their builders.

