A TASTE OF PARADISE:
Designing the Cambridge Mosque Garden

By

EMMA CLARK

[Photo courtesy of Emma Clark]
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In Arabic the word *dhawq*, ‘taste’ is strongly associated with Sufism, the inner spiritual or mystical aspect of Islam. Indeed, for over a thousand years Sufism has been described as *dhawq* ‘because its aim and its end could be summed up as direct knowledge of transcendent truths’\(^1\), that is, knowledge through experience and through the senses as opposed to abstract mental knowledge.

To refer to a traditional Islamic garden as ‘A Taste of Paradise’ brings to mind, therefore, this idea of direct experience. If, while walking or sitting contemplatively in such a garden, our intention and our hope is to draw closer to the Divine, and our hearts are open (a key tenet of Sufism) then it is possible – by the grace of God – that we may actually encounter a ‘taste’ of the beauty and peace of the Eternal garden. This indeed is one of the principal aims of an Islamic garden on earth: it may offer a flavour of the Gardens of Paradise, the *Jannat al-firdaws* described in the Qur’an, as well as being a profound symbol and a reminder of them.

The new Mosque in Cambridge, now called the Cambridge Central Mosque, was completed in April 2019. It is the brainchild of Professor Tim (Abdal-Hakim) Winter, Lecturer at the School of Divinity, Cambridge and Dean of the Cambridge Muslim College. The mosque is the first one in Europe to be constructed according to ecologically friendly principles. Marks Barfield, the London-based architects, ensured that everything, from energy use and lighting to the structural elements and materials, was designed with sustainability and sensitivity to the environment in mind. *(Illustration 1)*

My own interest in Islamic gardens began when studying at the Royal College of Art in London (1988-90) under Professor Keith Critchlow, one of the co-founders of the Temenos Academy. Keith is recognised world over as the central figure in the revival of the practice of geometry of the Sacred, \(^2\) following Plato in his profound understanding that geometry is fundamentally a language of metaphysics. Therefore Tim Winter and the architects had no hesitation in calling upon Keith to design the geometric patterns within the mosque. He made beautiful hand-drawings of the floor pattern of the atrium *(Illustration 2)*, the patterns on the magnificent wooden doors, *(Illustration 3)* the stained-glass windows and the mashrabiyya (carved wood screens separating the prayer areas *Illustration 4*). One of the many important drawing mantras that Keith imparted to his students was the crucial relationship

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\(^1\) Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* 1988 Preface. (first published 1975)
\(^2\) It is popularly known today as ‘sacred geometry’, a phrase that Keith Critchlow dismissed, preferring ‘geometry of the Sacred’. Geometry is one of the three principal languages of Islamic design – the other two are calligraphy and *islimi* (arabesque).
between the head, the heart and the hand. It was therefore a constant source of frustration to him that it was necessary for his accurate hand-drawn patterns to be converted onto the computer screen at the architects’ offices.\(^3\)

At the Royal College of Art, Keith introduced us to the profound beauty and meaning expressed in the multiplicity of geometric patterns employed in the art and architecture of the Islamic world. After some time studying the Qur’an, researching Islamic gardens and learning about Sufism, I entered Islam myself. Eventually, I was extremely fortunate to bring together my own love of English gardens with this new love of Islamic spirituality and civilisation.

It was in fact through Keith’s recommendation that in 2011 Tim Winter invited me to design the garden at the Cambridge mosque; I owe Keith a huge debt of gratitude for this. It was a great honour for me to be involved in such a project and, as with all new Islamic garden projects, I began with the most elevated of intentions to create a garden that would, God willing, offer a taste of the gardens of Paradise. But how to do this within the limited space of the site, placed as it was between the mosque and the noise and pollution of traffic-clogged Mill Road? As with all landscape design and garden projects, an understanding of the situation and context is vital. Tim Winter was keen to create an Islamic garden which would fit into the urban context of Cambridge as well as evoke the atmosphere of peace and contemplation that many gardens of the Muslim world are famed for.

The limitations, which at first seem challenging may, with an open and creative outlook, together with knowledge, skill and experience, be transformed into advantages. Thankfully, my associates on the project, Urquhart and Hunt Landscape Studio,\(^4\) possessed all these qualities in abundance; and like me they were also determined to apply principles of sustainability, biodiversity and insect-friendly planting wherever possible.

From the start of the garden design it was important that the local community were kept informed as much as possible. Therefore, in 2012, an exhibition about Islamic gardens and the mosque was put up at the local garden club in Romsey – the name of this area of Cambridge. I gave an illustrated talk about Islamic gardens to the club and later on at the School of Divinity also – in order to enlighten local people and attempt to mitigate as many reservations as possible. In fact, the garden immediately adjacent to the pavement of Mill Road is now known as the Community Garden since part of it used to be maintained by the local community.

\(^3\) It is very sad that Keith passed away in April of this year, 2020, before he could visit the Mosque to see his intricate geometric designs transform the natural materials of wood, stone and glass that are such an integral part of the beauty of the Mosque.

\(^4\) [https://www.urquharthunt.com/](https://www.urquharthunt.com/)
The traditional *chahar-bagh* (from the Persian, *chahar* meaning ‘four’ and *bagh* meaning ‘garden’) or four-fold garden design of many Islamic gardens across the world is inspired by and modelled upon the fundamental archetype in the Qur’an, the two pairs of gardens as depicted in *Surat al-Rahman* (Chapter 55, the All-Merciful): “For him who feareth the standing before his Lord there are two gardens… And beside them there are two other gardens”. They are given material form in, for example, the exquisite gardens and courtyards of the Alhambra and Generalife in Spain, the great Mughal mausoleum gardens of India (most notably the Taj Mahal), and the gardens of Iran such as the Bagh-i-Fin and Chehel Sutun. (Illustrations 5-8)

Hence the Qur’an provides the essential four-fold lay-out which is in fact a completely universal design, as many garden lovers will know. It is found throughout the world in a multiplicity of forms, not least in Cambridge itself. Look at the quadrangles of the university colleges where the enclosed squares are often divided into four areas of grass by four pathways meeting at the centre. (Illustration 9) What are they if not adaptations of the *chahar-bagh*, four-fold gardens looking inwards to the heart and upwards to heaven? Likewise, medieval cathedral cloisters are based on a similar lay-out as are many enclosed kitchen gardens, not least the large walled garden at Highgrove, the country house belonging to the Patron of the Temenos Academy, HRH The Prince of Wales. (Illustration 10)

In the Paradise gardens of the Qur’an, the description is of four rivers flowing from the fountains in the centre of each garden. However, in the Paradise gardens on earth – as here in the Cambridge quads – the rivers are often pathways due to either scarcity of water or the difficulty and cost of maintenance. A fine exception is in the famous Court of Lions at the Alhambra where there are four exquisite narrow rills of water flowing from the large central circular fountain. (Illustration 11)

We knew from the beginning of designing the mosque garden in Cambridge that the large number of worshippers – many with children – as well as budget restrictions would prevent the presence of water rills. However, despite this, here was a golden opportunity to demonstrate, not only to Cambridge but also to visitors from further afield, that it was possible to marry eastern design principles with a western context in a pleasing and harmonious way. Indeed, for the British – the so-called ‘nation of gardeners’ – what better way of enlightening people about Islam, with its belief that our heavenly home – Paradise – is a garden, than through a garden? The more experience I have with creating Islamic gardens in an apparently non-Islamic setting the more it becomes clear that embracing the context and sensing the ‘spirit of the place’ is crucial. Therefore, the overriding aim was to create something that looked both comfortable in the English urban setting whilst also speaking of Islamic design and the Qur’anic gardens of Paradise, the *Jannat al-firdaws*. This, partly due to the

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5 Qur’an 55:46-64
6 Two of which are named in the Qur’an, ‘Tasnim’ (‘Exaltation’) and Kauthar’ (‘Abundance’).
application of the universal four-fold plan together with an understanding of local planting conditions, meant that we could create something pleasing and harmonious that did not look like an alien import – clearly a concern with some local community members.

WATER, SHADE AND GREEN
There is no doubt that the two supreme elements of the traditional Islamic Paradise Garden are water and shade; fountains and running water are referred to often in the Qur’anic descriptions. Not only does water quench our thirst and cool the air, offering sound and patterns of light, as well as indirectly providing shade, but also there are many layers of symbolism. The eternally-flowing waters of Paradise represent the source of all life on earth as well as being symbolic of the soul – sometimes restful in a still pool, sometimes dynamic when it is flowing fast. (Illustration 12) More profoundly, in Sufism, water represents the Light of Divine Knowledge and is regarded by worshippers as a gift and blessing from God, a sign of his mercy (“We sent down out of Heaven water and caused to grow in it of every generous kind”) Water and shade are clearly less vital in Cambridge than in hotter climates; nevertheless, despite the cooler conditions, they are still important elements here and contribute greatly to the overall tranquillity of the garden.

I myself always return to the gardens and courtyards of the Alhambra and Generalife in Spain for inspiration, particularly to observe the multitude of different fountains there, all beautiful, elegant and simple designs with the perfect gentle flow of water, murmuring not shouting. (Illustration 13 and 14) In larger gardens than here at the Cambridge Mosque why is it that it is always near water where we end up sitting? Its beauty and mystery draw us like an invisible magnet. It seems that near water we discover a profound feeling of rest and calm, a sense of identification where the eye, the heart and the soul are fully engaged – we feel truly and completely at home. Indeed, the phrase ‘Gardens underneath which rivers flow’ (Jannat tajri min tahtihar al-anhar) is the one used most often to describe the Jannat al-firdaws, the gardens of Paradise.

It was not until Islam conquered other countries with civilisations of their own, in particular, Persia, that the Islamic garden may be said to have been born. Islam absorbed the already well-established Persian tradition of royal hunting-parks (called pairidaeza in Farsi, from where the English word ‘paradise’ comes) and pleasure gardens and infused them with a whole new spiritual vision. Thus it could be said that it was the impact of the Islamic revelation on the ancient Sassanid and Achaemenian civilizations of Persia, with their sophisticated irrigation systems, that ultimately brought the Islamic garden into being.

Islam itself was born in the Arabian desert where the Prophet Muhammad was

7 Qur’an 31:10
brought up in the sixth century AD among one of the nomadic desert tribes. As far as is known, there is no history of gardens as we understand them in Arabia during this period: water and a date-palm tree (*Phoenix dactylifera*) – that is, the oasis – was a garden. (Illustration 15) Where there is water the earth comes alive and the colour green emerges as if by magic. It is no accident that green is the colour of Islam – it is the colour used repeatedly in the Qur’an to describe the gardens of Paradise, where the faithful recline on “green cushions” in “green shade”. Not only is it the colour of all vegetation, symbolising growth, fertility and hope, but it is also the antithesis of the sandy-browns of the stony desert offering a longed-for soothing and gentle relief to the eyes. So, contributing as much “soft” green and planting as possible in the limited space in order to balance the “hard” materials of the mosque and paving was one of our principal criteria. (Illustration 16) The planting was designed not only to give a calm and contemplative green space for visitors to walk through or sit in before entering the mosque for prayer but also to make an uplifting impact upon the senses – in particular sight, smell, and sound (from both the water of the fountain as well as the wind in the leaves) in contrast to the noise and pollution of the street.

THE MOSQUE GARDEN
The area for the whole garden is small and consists of two distinct sections, the inner Islamic Garden, immediately in front of the atrium of the mosque, measuring 30m x 10m., and the outer (i.e. outside the iron railings and main gateway) Community Garden, mentioned above, measuring 30m x 6m. (Illustration 17, Plan) Together, they form an important calm and green transition area between Mill Road, with existing bus-stop, and the entrance to the mosque itself. The outer Community Garden with bicycle stands is immediately adjacent to the pavement and forms a kind of buffer zone between the road and the mosque railings. It is therefore open to passers-by all the time, offering much-needed green relief on this long, busy thoroughfare, specially if waiting for a bus! (Illustration 18)

THE COMMUNITY GARDEN
The Community Garden comprises four planting beds each containing carefully chosen shrubs and flowers mainly from the Mediterranean and Turkey, which also grow happily in the UK. The *Teucrium fruticans* and Rosemary (*Rosmarinus* has the lovely meaning ‘dew of the sea’) in particular have both done very well in their first year providing striking blue colour and some scent throughout almost every season. A columnar form of the Birch, (*Betula pendula* ‘Obelisk’) was selected, one in each of the beds, not only to offer a strong vertical accent emulating the tall elegant cypress tree – a cherished feature of gardens across the Islamic world – but also to honour the local community who were attached to the Himalayan Birch tree formerly growing here.

THE ISLAMIC GARDEN
It was clear from the beginning that the design of the main garden, the Islamic garden, should have a fountain in the centre, around which visitors may walk from the
entrance gateway to the mosque. All geometric patterns radiate from the centre of a circle, the circle being the symbol, *par excellence*, of Divine Unity: so the garden design radiates from this central focal point. (*Illustration 19*) Fountains and running water are vital elements in the Paradise gardens of the Qur’an. Not only does water quench our thirst and cool the air, as well as indirectly providing shade but also there are many layers of symbolism attached to water in an Islamic garden. The eternally-flowing waters of Paradise represent the source of all life on earth as well as being symbolic of the soul – sometimes restful in a still pool, sometimes dynamic when it is flowing fast. More profoundly, water represents the Light of Divine Knowledge and is a gift and blessing from God, a sign of His mercy: ‘We sent down out of Heaven water and caused to grow in it of every generous kind.’ (Qur’an, XXXI:10)

Either side of the fountain, to the right and left, we created a small *chahar-bagh*, the pathways paved with a cream-coloured York-stone and the planting beds designed with a mixture of perennials, (e.g. Roses, geraniums, salvias, iris, *perovskia*, *oregano*, *teucrium*), scented flowering shrubs (e.g. Myrtle, Jasmine, Daphne, European and N. African natives) and a succession of bulbs including iris, narcissi and tulip species. (*Illustration 20*) The plant selection is a balance between bold colour amongst plenty of green in order to be both calm and meditative as well as giving the sensation of walking through a living richly jewelled carpet. A dark green yew (*Taxus baccata*) hedge forms the evergreen structure or geometry of the garden against which the colours of the flower can sing. As with the plants in the Community Garden many of these plants have been selected because of their provenance in Turkey, the Mediterranean and further east which also thrive in the UK. (*Illustration 21*)

Fruit is a key element of the paradise gardens in the Qur’an and, after much deliberation, we selected an upright crab-apple tree, (*Malus x robusta* ‘Red Sentinel’) one in each of the eight planting beds, aligning them with the ‘tree-columns’ of the mosque atrium directly behind. These crab-apples offer delicate pale-pink spring blossom, then bright scarlet fruit followed by strong autumn colour. (*Illustration 22*)

Perfume is an important characteristic of an Islamic garden, (‘sweet-smelling herbs’ is mentioned in Qur’an in Chapter 55) so plants were also chosen for their sweet scent, not only because it is so delightful to experience, but also because it has the power to evoke profound memories – even the deepest memory of all perhaps, the Garden of Eden when humankind was at one with Nature.\(^8\) Together with a few select grasses, the planting beds have been laid out in a naturalistic style in order to present a contemporary vision of sustainable, ecologically- and pollinator-friendly planting for the city. Indeed, a guiding principal has been to combine, not only Islamic design with

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\(^8\) *Jannat al ‘Adn* meaning ‘Garden of Eden’ is one of the names given to the Garden of Paradise in the Qur’an (18:31). It is written *inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi rajioon*, meaning ‘We belong to God and unto him do we return’ (2:156). In the Abrahamic tradition our original home is a garden and by the grace of God that is the place we will return to after death.
a contemporary British plant palette, but also to select plants which promote biodiversity and encourage insects.\(^9\) And today, just over one year on, the garden is beginning to achieve the result we aimed for, a pleasing balance of rigour and abundance which integrates well with the design of the mosque.

Enclosure is another key element of the Islamic garden. The original idea was that the perimeter walls would keep the heat and sand of the desert outside while protecting the abundant planting within, creating a calm, green and peaceful sanctuary with the gentle sound of trickling water. This notion may be transferred to the urban context – as in Cambridge – where one of the aims is to dull the noise and pollution of the street while nurturing the tranquil oasis within. In order to give an idea of the enclosed intimacy of the traditional Islamic garden, there is a small space in each of the *chahar-baghs* in which to sit for quiet contemplation. We commissioned a craftsman to design and make the elegant oak benches in the hope that sitting here, as well as around the fountain, surrounded by the trees and plants, visitors may experience some balm for the heart and soul. (Illustration 23) It is hoped that they may take the opportunity to deepen their connection with both the outer natural world and with their inner selves. The idea of a sanctuary, an internal garden, is also present symbolically in that we need to nurture our own internal garden, that of the heart and of the soul. As the 12\(^{th}\) century scholar, poet and mystic Jalal ud-din Rumi wrote, ‘the real gardens and flowers are within, in man’s heart, not outside.’ This garden requires nourishing in order to give us some peace from our own endlessly chattering thoughts. In Islam, especially Sufism, this is gained through prayer, contemplation and, most of all, through the remembrance of God. For others it may be through contemplation alone and interestingly, the word ‘contemplation’ itself means to gaze attentively upon, and cultivate, a sacred space.

OTHER VOICES:

My associate, Adam Hunt, Director of Urquhart and Hunt Landscape Studio, wrote:

“One of the outstanding aspects of the project for me was the link between faith, the environment and the local community. These tenets were clear in the beautiful and innovative Mosque design. For we landscapers these same principles were a priority underpinning every decision made during the design process. The result is a mosque and garden built with love and care at every step of the journey.”

What Adam has written here reminds me that this was no ‘ordinary’ garden design project for him and his team. Coming from the ‘outside’ as it were, neither Muslim

\(^9\) Some of the most interesting and unusual species include *Geranium ibericum* ‘Ushguli Grijis’, *Trifolium rubens* (Noble clover), *Cyclamen persicum* (Persian cyclamen), *Nectaroscordum siculum* (honey garlic or honey lily), *Dianthus carthusianorum* (Carthusian Pink), *Verbascum phoeniceum* ‘Violetta’ (Pheonician purple mullein), as well as the better known *Viola odorata* (violet), *Primula* (primrose), *Eryngium* (mountain eryngo) and *Phlomis* (Middle Eastern Sage).
nor part of the local Cambridge community, it is interesting to hear his and his colleagues’ views. As he observed, the whole project of the mosque and the garden was indeed initiated by faith and love, and it will be sustained by faith and love God willing. Many volunteers have been working in the garden over the past year, all supervised by a local, highly professional and knowledgeable gardener, Helen Seal. She has been exceptional in her care of the plants, taking notes on which ones have thrived and which have not, making excellent suggestions regarding replacements.

Petra Ulrik also from U&H Landscape Studio, commented, “What stood out most for me was how welcoming the community was, people stopped to offer their help to plant the garden (something I have never experienced before). The onlookers were very excited and keen to learn what was planned for the outdoor space and once you started talking to them you learnt that they have travelled from faraway places to come and see the mosque, even before it was completed.”

CONCLUSION

Some may say that a garden in front of a mosque is an innovation in Islamic architecture and design – and this is probably true in the main. However, a garden constructed next to a mosque or a community centre is agreed by most to be a bid’ah hasanah, that is, a good innovation since, clearly, it offers so much that is positive. Today, the vast majority of mosques are built in urban or suburban centres and they cry out for some green landscaping around them, both on an aesthetic and sensorial level as well as on a deeper spiritual, psychological and emotional level.

As soon as the Cambridge Mosque was opened, visitors came from far and wide, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. We landscapers like to think that the garden is an essential part of their experience, enabling them to slow down and take a moment before either entering the mosque to pray or simply to observe the soaring, vault-like architecture within, ennobled by the graceful geometric patterns.

It has been said many times that visiting gardens and parks, walking in Nature, and better still actually gardening, are all a balm for the heart and mind. An Islamic garden of the chahar-bagh (four-fold) type, with its emphasis on contemplation, and its reference to the jannat al-firdaws, may offer even more in the way of a calming sanctuary. In these days of the coronavirus pandemic many of us are addressing our mortality with a little more seriousness perhaps. Thus to sit in a garden which is consciously inspired by the eternal gardens may offer even more in the way of stillness and peace – remembering also that Salaam, Peace, is the only word spoken in the Heavenly gardens.

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10 Formerly of the Cambridge Botanic Garden, Helen also looks after the Cambridge Muslim College garden.
NB Below is a sample of illustrations from the paper above. The remainder can be found on the separate pdf alongside this one on the Events web page.

GROUND PLAN OF CAMBRIDGE MOSQUE (Illustration 19)

ISLAMIC GARDEN SPRING 2020 (Illustration 27) Photo: Howard Rice
ISLAMIC GARDEN WITH CRAB-APPLES (Illustration 24) Photo: Howard Rice

FOUNTAIN (Illustration 22) Photo Tom Gawanlock
CAMBRIDGE MOSQUE INTERIOR (Illustration 1) Photo Emma Clark
CRAB-APPLE BLOSSOM (Illustration 25) Photo Howard Rice

COMMUNITY GARDEN (Illustration 20) Photo Emma Clark