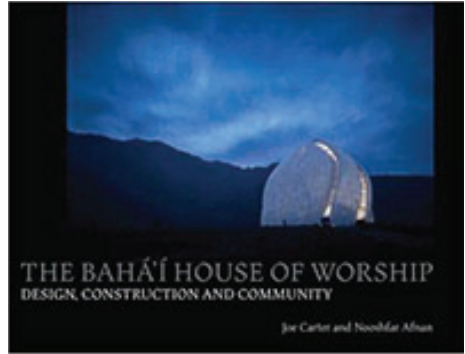


to outworn concepts and unworkable assumptions, leaders, together with the peoples of the world, must arise, and with resolute will, consult together in search of appropriate solutions.” Pourmokhtari’s monograph is an important contribution to this effort. It documents the unworkable assumptions of IR that humanity must urgently reconsider, making the case for both the avid layperson and the scholar in the field that the time for a paradigm shift has come.

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viii + 310 including bibliography, notes and references, brief note about the origin of the book, and author bios

#### ANN BOYLES

Midway through *The Bahá'í House of Worship: Design, Construction and Community*, authors Joe Carter and Nooshfar Afnan pose a question central to the theme of their volume: “The challenge for all the architects of a Bahá'í House of Worship is how to create what may be our most ancient building type in a new way. What is sacred space for our age, one that is open to all the people of the world, to all faiths, or no faith? There are no precedents” (187).

While published in coffee table book format with stunningly beautiful photographs to illustrate what such sacred spaces can look like, Carter and Afnan’s work offers more: substantive text that addresses this question.

Carter, himself an architect, and Afnan, an experienced writer on arts and culture, are well qualified to author such a volume. The informative opening essays situate the development of Bahá'í architectural expressions within a broader view of religion, civilization and architecture. The bulk of the book, however, is devoted to telling the stories of how the first of these temples have come into existence. The text provides information about their designs and construction processes, their relation to the environments and cultures from which they have emerged, and the awards and tributes they have garnered. As a coffee table book, it can certainly be dipped into, but a front-to-back reading conveys a wonderful sense of how temple-building efforts have evolved and how their design coheres with community development around the world.

A unique and central institution in the faith, the Bahá'í House of Worship is described in the Bahá'í writings as the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* (“dawning place of the mention of God”) and as a collective center of society. Thus, it brings together two indispensable expressions of faith: worship and service. Not only a structure for prayer and meditation, it also consists of associated dependencies that develop in accordance with the needs—educational, medical, social—of the surrounding community. Since the ground was broken for the first Bahá'í House of Worship, fifteen of these institutions have been raised up around the world, a development guided by the central authority of the

Faith. The book conceptualizes this emergent process as occurring in three distinct stages to date: the period of early growth, through the raising of Houses of Worship in Ashgabat and Chicago; the era of the construction of continental Houses of Worship circling the globe; and the current stage, marked by the emergence of national and local temples from the matrix of community-building efforts.

The word “emergence” deserves special attention in this context, as it has been used repeatedly by the Universal House of Justice to describe the process through which these Houses of Worship have been brought into existence in designated locations around the world. Envisioning how a seed breaks through the surface of the soil as a young plant or how an entity gradually becomes manifest through evolutionary processes can perhaps help us to appreciate the trajectory of this development. Carter and Afnan’s organization and discussion provide readers with the opportunity to better understand this emergence in terms of both design/construction and community development.

Regarding design, the only requirement for a Bahá'í House of Worship is that it have a nine-sided plan inscribed within a circle. In the first stage of development, which began in 1902, it was natural to expect that more traditional elements of sacred architecture—including the drum and dome, for example—would be incorporated into this new format. And so in Ashgabat, while the first Bahá'í temple

certainly adhered to the necessary design requirements, Islamic cultural influences, particularly the Taj Mahal, are also apparent. In Chicago, on the other hand, the architect stated explicitly that his goal was to avoid any specific past style and instead to use “a composite architecture, expressing the essence in the line of each of the great architectural styles, harmonizing them into one whole” (Louis Bourgeois, qtd. in Carter and Afnan, 65). This second temple, then, already began to move away from tradition through innovations in design as well as construction materials and methods.

As for community development, the contrast between the Ashgabat and Chicago temple-building projects highlights their emergence from very different cultural matrices and communities. In Ashgabat, the mostly-Persian Bahá'ís had formed a tight-knit community forged through hardship, persecution and exile in Russian Turkestan. They drew strength from each other. They lived in close proximity. They prayed together. They socialized together. They needed to educate their children. Their desire to construct a House of Worship and, importantly, its dependencies was an organic outgrowth of their desire to satisfy these needs. The Chicago temple's origins and context were very different. Widely scattered across the continent, the early Bahá'ís in North America could not draw on physical proximity and did not have the same needs as their co-believers in Ashgabat. Their model was not one of a “local” House

of Worship. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá guided them from the outset to think of it as an institution for the entire continent. In essence, while the Ashgabat temple grew from the seeds of a unified community, the Chicago temple-building project was a means through which the North American Bahá'í community learned how to work together in unity.

The completion and dedication of the Chicago temple in 1953 heralded the next phase of emergence identified by the authors: the establishment of Bahá'í Houses of Worship on each continent, to serve as beacons in the same manner as the one in Chicago. During this stage, the Bahá'í community grew, achieved wide geographic spread, and welcomed diverse populations to join in building a world based on the unity of the human family and shared belief in one Creator. Architectural designs of the Houses of Worship built during this stage evolved correspondingly.

The volume explores how, while unity in concept and essence of form was preserved, the temples' diverse designs and construction processes reflected humanity's “changing cultural perspectives” to a greater and greater degree (Carter and Afnan 4). The continental temples in Africa (Kampala, Uganda) and Australia (Sydney) largely held true to the form of their two predecessors (by featuring the drum and dome, for example), but the next three, in Europe (in Frankfurt, Germany), Central America (Panama City, Panama), and the Pacific Islands (Apia, Western Samoa), innovated by eliminating the drum. Distinctive

cultural elements were also incorporated in the Panamanian and Samoan Houses of Worship. The next temple, in New Delhi, India, saw the entire structure take on the shape of a lotus flower. Its structural features, while adhering to the design brief, spoke to its cultural context through a striking appearance and innovative construction. The last of the continental Houses of Worship, in South America (Santiago, Chile), dedicated in 2016, marked a further evolutionary step. In this “temple of light,” innovations in design and materials allowed the building both to absorb and emit light. Structural elements underwent radical change. The traditional base-middle-top design was “replaced with nine torqued, gossamer wings that leap directly from pools on the ground to meet around a glowing oculus at the top” (191). And yet the building maintains a sense of approachability and connection with the landscape and the people who gather within it.

The evolution in design and construction during this era of temple building was matched by advances in learning around the world about the relationship between worship and community. In Santiago, efforts to engage the support and harness the energies of the local population around the temple went hand in hand with the construction process. And elsewhere, in cities and villages around the world, Bahá’ís were learning that by gathering together with their families, friends, neighbors, and others for devotional gatherings—“occasions where any soul may enter, inhale the heavenly

fragrances, experience the sweetness of prayer, meditate upon the Creative Word, be transported on the wings of the spirit, and commune with the one Beloved”—they could evoke the spirit of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár (Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015).

This development leads us on to the third—and current—stage identified by the authors. Efforts are being made in nations and localities around the world to raise up vibrant, purposeful, and spiritually healthy communities. The level of energy and effectiveness reached in this work indicates a community’s readiness to engage in constructing an edifice that will give physical expression to the spiritual forces set in motion. Carter and Afnan trace the construction of the world’s first two national Houses of Worship, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Papua New Guinea, and the first five local Houses of Worship, in Battambang, Cambodia; Norte del Cauca, Colombia; Tanna, Vanuatu; Matunda Soy, Kenya; and Bihar Sharif, India.

At this stage in the emergence of the institution of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, the process of temple-building stems directly from a community’s development and needs—in much the same way that it did in Ashgabat. Consultation with people living in the area of the temple is actively pursued, more design elements are drawn from national and local cultural contexts, and attention is given to environmental concerns and sustainability. Recognizing this, the Universal House

of Justice writes that the Battambang temple “unquestionably belongs to the land from which it has risen” (1 September 2017) and describes the House of Worship in Norte del Cauca as a symbol of “a significant milestone in a process of development that has unfolded in this region over the course of many decades” (22 July 2018). In Vanuatu, the emergence of the Bahá'í temple was seen as pointing toward “a great change that is taking place on this island spiritually and materially” (qtd. in Carter and Afnan 264).

*The Bahá'í House of Worship: Design, Construction and Community*, with its detailed and chronological treatment of the Bahá'í temple-building process, provides the reader with a helpful sense of arc and scope, in which are embedded a number of recurrent themes including the metaphor of light, the dynamics of crisis and victory, and achieving a balance between innovation and maintaining what one commentator refers to as the “presence of the hand” (Marsh Kelmans, qtd. in Carter and Afnan, 198).

Of course, the temple-building project is not finished. As more and more national and local communities manifest capacities to sustain a vibrant community life around both worship and service and thus demonstrate their readiness to establish this institution in their midst, more Bahá'í Houses of Worship will emerge. In fact, since the publication of this volume, there has been further movement in this direction. In 2023, the Universal House of Justice called for a national House of

Worship to be raised up in Canada, and for two more local Houses of Worship to be built in Kanchanpur, Nepal, and Mwinilunga, Zambia. What innovations in design and form will be manifested in these new institutions? What specific cultural features will be incorporated? How will their national and local communities become involved? The prospects are exciting. A volume such as *The Bahá'í House of Worship: Design, Construction and Community* provides readers with a helpful perspective on these developments, allowing us not only to look back at the path we have been walking but to envision, at least in broad brush strokes, what lies ahead.

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