

Un edificio tanto sobrio e razionale nella sua solida tettonica quanto ricco e raffinato nelle sue ramificazioni concettuali, sospese tra echi kahniani e densità storiche. La moschea, dismessa ogni corriva eloquenza di forma e di stile, risale alla sua fonte più originaria fondendo senza residui vita profana e tensione al trascendente, quotidianità e incanto.

A building that is as sober and rational in its solid tectonics as it is rich and refined in its conceptual ramifications, suspended between Kahnian echoes and historical density. The Mosque, once every hasty eloquence of form and style is abandoned, returns to its original source blending together perfectly profane life and transcendent tension, everydayness and charm.

# Marina Tabassum Architects

## Con la terra, la luce *With the earth, light*

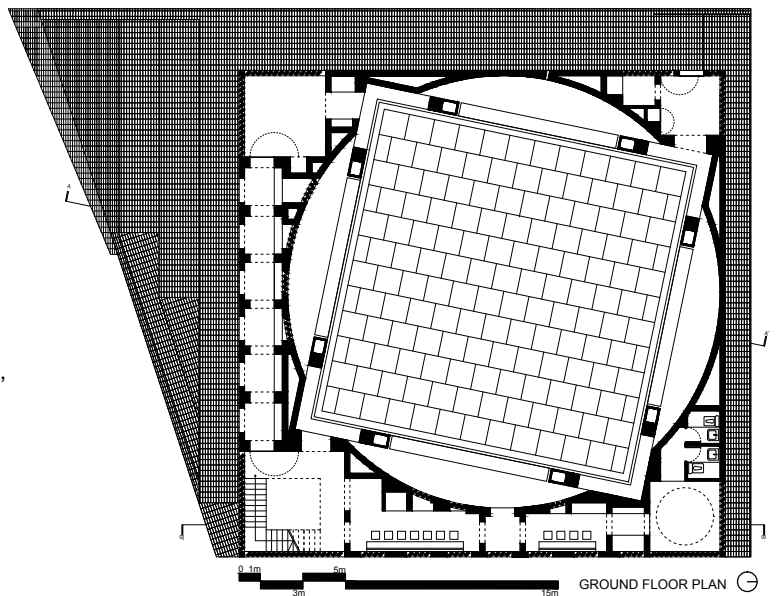
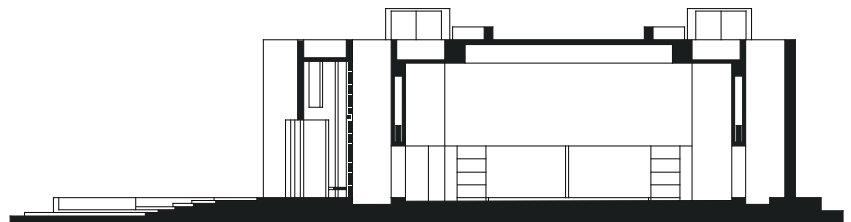
Fabrizio Arrigoni

La “Casa del Compassionevole”, *Bait Ur Rouf*, sorge a Faidabad Uttara un *urban village* di Dacca, in uno di quei densi distretti periferici che avvolgono la capitale del Bangladesh. La moschea, disegnata tra il 2005 e il 2006 da Marina Tabassum, ha chiuso il proprio cantiere solo nel 2012. Selezionato su diciannove opere<sup>1</sup>, l’edificio è tra i sei insigniti dal prestigioso *Aga Khan Award for Architecture* per il ciclo 2014-2016<sup>2</sup>. Marina Tabassum ha studiato presso la *Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology* (BUET); nel 1995 ha fondato con Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury URBANA col quale ha vinto il concorso nazionale per la progettazione del Monumento all’Indipendenza del Bangladesh e del Museo della Guerra di Liberazione. Nel 2005 ha aperto MTA, il proprio atelier nella città; direttrice del Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements è stata *visiting professor* presso la University of Texas.

La vicenda della moschea è profondamente intrecciata alla biografia della sua autrice. Nel 2002 la signora Sufia Khatun, come atto riparatore per la perdita di due sue figlie, commissiona alla nipote architetto il progetto di una moschea, donando il terreno e impegnandosi per la raccolta dei fondi indispensabili a coprire i costi della futura realizzazione. Ricorda Tabassum: «She asked me to design it because I am an architect and she could also sense my suffering. In a way, designing the mosque became a kind of a healing process for both of us»<sup>3</sup>. Nel volgere di un anno, tra il 2005 e il 2006, le condizioni di salute della committente precipitano e alla morte della nonna è la stessa Marina a divenire la prima responsabile nel reperimento delle risorse necessarie al completamento dell’impresa. Un sovvenzionamento

The “House of the Compassionate”, *Bait Ur Rouf*, stands in Faidabad Uttara, an *urban village* in Dacca, in one of those dense districts in the outskirts surrounding the capital of Bangladesh. The Mosque, designed between 2005 and 2006 by Marina Tabassum, was completed only in 2012. Selected among nineteen works<sup>1</sup>, the building is among six which received the prestigious *Aga Khan Award for Architecture* during the period 2014-2016<sup>2</sup>. Marina Tabassum studied at the *Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology* (BUET); in 1995 she founded, together with Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury, URBANA, with which she won the national competition for the design of the Monument to the Independence of Bangladesh and of the Museum of the War of Liberation. In 2005 she opened her own studio, MTA, in the city; she is the director of the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements and was *visiting professor* at the University of Texas.

The story of the Mosque is deeply entwined with the biography of its designer. In 2002 Ms. Sufia Khatun, after the loss of two of her daughters, commissioned her architect granddaughter the project of a Mosque, donating the land and undertaking a fund-raising campaign for covering the expenses of the future construction. Tabassum recalls: «She asked me to design it because I am an architect and she could also sense my suffering. In a way, designing the mosque became a kind of a healing process for both of us»<sup>3</sup>. In the space of a year, between 2005 and 2006, the health condition of the client declined and at the death of her grandmother Marina herself was in charge of obtaining the necessary funds for completing the project. The Mosque, in accordance with an ancient tradition, would be funded by the entire community of the neighbourhood,



Moschea Bait Ur Rouf  
Dacca, Bangladesh  
2005-2012

*Progetto:* Marina Tabassum Architects  
Marina Tabassum  
*con:* Asaduzzaman Chowdhury, Tomal, Chowdhury,  
Hysum Mohammad Neville, Nazmus Saquib Chowdhury,  
Sabrina Aftab, Kaniz Saima Tuly, Shawly Samira, Sadia Afroze,  
Hassan Mohammad Rakib, Rahfatun Nisa Nova

*Strutture:* Daud Khalid Sarwar  
*Impianti elettrici:* Mohammad Rafiqul Islam  
*Progetto ambientale:* Bazlur Rahman  
*Opere murarie in laterizio e cemento:* Shariful Islam  
*Pavimentazione in terrazzo:* Mohammad Esharul

*Fotografie:* AKTC/Rajesh Vora

p. 27  
 Aula della preghiera in direzione della Qibla  
 Sezione AA  
 Pianta piano terra  
 pp. 28-29  
 Aula della preghiera  
 p. 30  
 Il Rivaq di ingresso  
 Un accesso all'aula della preghiera  
 p. 31  
 Una delle quattro torri d'angolo  
 La corte di luce sul lato della Qibla



che, secondo antica abitudine, coinvolgerà l'intera comunità del quartiere e che tuttavia ha ostacolato qualsiasi programma certo nella cronologia dei lavori: «But you can't really forecast when you are going to get some fund to keep it going. So, at times we had to stop construction for some months because there was no material to go on building».

La moschea occupa un lotto trapezoidale. L'inizio sta nel fissare uno zoccolo, un suolo artificiale su cui *elevare* e *concludere*. Certamente è azione che garantisce l'opportuna protezione dalle acque piovane – il podio spicca dalla terra rossa di una strada mal messa – ma prima ancora è l'antichissimo accorgimento adottato per *tagliare* dal suo intorno l'evento architettonico. Il dispositivo planimetrico è generato dal gioco di tre figure regolari: a un perimetro esterno quadrato – lato 23 m. – succede un'area di sagoma circolare su cui si incastra un ultimo recinto quadrato. Se le forme base risultano immote nella loro perfetta geometria, articolata è la loro mutua combinazione: slittando dal baricentro e disponendosi tangente ai fianchi occidentale e settentrionale l'ampio cerchio si distacca dai due rimanenti, permettendo che nello scarto creatosi

although this in some ways hindered the building programme in terms of the chronology of the works: «But you can't really forecast when you are going to get some fund to keep it going. So, at times we had to stop construction for some months because there was no material to go on building».

The Mosque stands on a trapezoidal lot. The first step was to establish a base, an artificial ground on which to *elevate* and *conclude*. This is certainly an action which ensures due protection from rainwater – the podium raises from the red earth of a run-down street – yet prior to this is the very ancient method used for *cutting* the architectural event from its surroundings. The planimetric device is generated by the play between three regular figures: a square external perimeter – side 23 m – is succeeded by a circular outline in which a last square enclosure is fitted. If the low forms are motionless in their perfect geometry, their combinations are articulated: shifting from the centre of gravity and placing itself tangentially to the western and northern flanks, the wide circle separates from the two remaining forms, thus allowing the services areas to be located in the resulting space. The interior square – side 16,75 m. – coincides entirely with the prayer



trovino sede gli ambienti di servizio. Il quadrato interno – lato 16,75 m. – coincide per intero con la sala della preghiera ed è ruotato di 13 gradi rispetto al suo omologo maggiore al fine di un corretto orientamento della *Ṣalāt* verso il santuario della *Ka'ba*. Otto tozzi pilastri di cemento armato a vista ne definiscono il bordo; un lieve ribasso rispetto alla quota di ciò che lo circonda, l'inserimento di una pavimentazione in terrazzo bianco montata con rigorosa regolarità, e l'altezza complessiva – 10,60 m. – definiscono inequivocabilmente questo luogo come il cuore gerarchico del complesso. Vale sottolineare come in un impianto così finemente allestito si diano menome differenze dimensionali, inappariscenti dissimmetrie, reiterate disgiunzioni volumetriche; un'intelligenza empirica che fa vibrare l'astrazione logica del comporre senza comprometterne l'ordinamento. Il meccanismo di pianta è ribadito nel suo svolgersi tridimensionale: un primo volume fissa a 7,60 m. l'altezza base della fabbrica; su di esso insiste il cilindro, lasciato cavo, la cui muratura si arresta a un'altezza intermedia; infine quattro torri angolari a sancire l'altezza massima, là dove lo spazio dell'aula di culto va a innestarsi sul circolo.

hall and is rotated at a 13 degree angle relative to the larger square, so as to provide a correct orientation of *Ṣalāt* in the direction of the sanctuary of the *Ka'ba*. Eight thick exposed reinforced concrete pillars mark its outer edges; slightly lower than its surroundings, the insertion of a white terraced paving set with rigorous regularity, and its height – 10,60 m. – unmistakably define this place as the hierarchical core of the complex. It is worth underlining how in such a finely fitted installation there are few size differences, displeasing dissimmetries, or repeated volumetric disjunctions; an empirical intelligence which makes the logical abstraction of composing vibrate without however putting the order at risk. The mechanism of the plan is underlined in its tri-dimensional development: a first volume fixes at 7,60 m. the base of the building; on it is placed the hollow cylinder whose walls stop at an intermediate height; and finally four angular towers provide the maximum height, at the place where the space of the prayer hall is inserted into the circle. From the south, after climbing five steps one reaches the *riwaq*, or entrance portico; from here through two spaces to the corners of the building; the rooms, all of which are square, are a part of a system of



Giungendo da meridione e superati cinque gradoni si accede al *rwaq*, il portico di ingresso; da qui si procede in direzione di due vani agli angoli della fabbrica; le stanze, tutte di impronta quadrata, fanno parte di un sistema di quattro e le si possono intendere talvolta come luoghi della soglia, talvolta come fuochi percettivi, talvolta come snodi dove allocare la distribuzione verticale – è il caso della stanza più ampia a sud-est che immette nella manica con i lavatoi per le abluzioni e dove una scala metallica serve un ballatoio che nel futuro ospiterà una piccola biblioteca. Seppur edificio di contenute dimensioni complessive, l'alternarsi dei molteplici recinti favorisce nell'ospite una fugace impressione di spaesamento; uno smarrimento propedeutico alla seclusione e all'intimità che sono la cifra e il carattere più propri di questo interno: una separazione e una sospensione tese a distanziare, allontanare, il momento del culto dal disordinato puzzle urbano che lo assedia<sup>4</sup>. L'aula è spoglia, cubica, possente e la si attinge secondo scorci visuali affatto ripetuti; una breccia aperta sulla muraglia curva di ponente indica la *Qibla*; la strombatura, profonda e sghemba, permette alla luce di passare ma riduce l'effettiva trasparenza. Da un'intervista rilasciata a Rowena Hockin sappiamo che il contesto – fisico quanto temporale – e la funzione – nei suoi portati semantici più numerosi – sono i nuclei concettuali che

four and can be interpreted some times as thresholds, and others as perceptive focus points, or finally as junctions for allocating the vertical distribution – this is the case of the largest room to the south-east which leads into the ablution facilities and where a metal staircase serves a gallery which in the future will house a small library. Although it is not a large structure, the alternation of a series of enclosures generates in the visitor a fleeting sense of disorientation; a feeling of loss which is preparatory for the seclusion and intimacy which are the main features and character of this interior: a separation and a suspension aimed at distancing and removing the moment of prayer from the chaotic urban puzzle that besieges it<sup>4</sup>. The hall is bare, cubic and powerful, and it is perceived through different visual perspectives; an opening on the curved western wall indicates the *Qibla*; the splayed window, deep and at an angle, allows the passage of light but reduces its transparency. From an interview with Rowena Hockin we know that the context – both material and temporal – and the function – in its multiple meanings – are the conceptual nuclei that have fed the design: «First to site. This is the most important to me, spending time to connect with the site, and around the site. This gives you a lot of answers. And then program: we try to dissect the program. One way of my work is, if I take a mosque [...] I would go back to the first stage of what was a mosque? How did it come into



hanno nutrito il disegno: «First to site. This is the most important to me, spending time to connect with the site, and around the site. This gives you a lot of answers. And then program: we try to dissect the program. One way of my work is, if I take a mosque [...] I would go back to the first stage of what was a mosque? How did it come into being, what was the function? Then you can let go of all the extra liturgies that are associated with those things, go back to the beginning and start something interesting. That is not to underestimate the history or legacy of mosque making, it's a rich legacy, but they have to come together at some point and only then it becomes relevant. I feel that we are just updating ourselves through time [...]. So if you want to update then you have to follow through the history»<sup>5</sup>. Associamo a queste prime mosse la precisa consapevolezza del destino materiato della *fabbrica*, il suo crescere consustanziale a un'*ars aedificatoria*. Di assoluto nitore la *ratio* costruttiva espressa: murature portanti con rustici mattoni fatti a mano e limitati inserti in cemento armato quando occorrono (si valuti a tal proposito le due travi di calcestruzzo che corrono estroflesse lungo le diagonali della sala per irrigidire il solaio di copertura): «I've used a lot of brick predominantly because it is the only material we have. We don't have stone and we have a labour force that it is very cheap, so when we have budget project

being, what was the function? Then you can let go of all the extra liturgies that are associated with those things, go back to the beginning and start something interesting. That is not to underestimate the history or legacy of mosque making, it's a rich legacy, but they have to come together at some point and only then it becomes relevant. I feel that we are just updating ourselves through time [...]. So if you want to update then you have to follow through the history»<sup>5</sup>. We associate to these first stages the precise awareness of the material destiny of the *building*, its consubstantial development into an *ars aedificatoria*. The expressed constructive *ratio* is absolutely clear: load-bearing walls with rustic hand-made bricks inserted into reinforced concrete when necessary (consider in that respect the two cement beams that run extroflesse along the diagonals of the hall for reinforcing the roof): «I've used a lot of brick predominantly because it is the only material we have. We don't have stone and we have a labour force that it is very cheap, so when we have budget project [...] brick is what we use. You can take a very simple material and by the action of your own creativity and innovation take that to any level you like [...] the mosque has a prayer space in concrete because it has a large span and couldn't be done in any other way»<sup>6</sup>. It is through its *res extensa* that the building weaves the web of ancestry, of the debts with tradition<sup>7</sup>: the magnificent vestiges

Vista dell'angolo sud-ovest  
Dettaglio del pattern murario



[...] brick is what we use. You can take a very simple material and by the action of your own creativity and innovation take that to any level you like [...] the mosque has a prayer space in concrete because it has a large span and couldn't be done in any other way»<sup>6</sup>. E per tramite della sua *res extensa* l'edificio tesse la tela delle discendenze, dei debiti contratti con la tradizione<sup>7</sup>: le magnifiche vestigia del Sultanato, tra XIII e XIV secolo<sup>8</sup>. «L'architettura è un gesto del pensiero» ha scritto Livio Vacchini<sup>9</sup>. Ma pensiero situato, aggiungiamo, *questione mentale* spazializzata; e dunque da saggiare – nel volgere delle stagioni tra nuvole e acqua, aria e calore, bagliori e ombre, terre e polveri – il conforto dello stare, del risiedere. Umile e spartana nel suo abito materico *Bait Ur Rouf* rinuncia a qualsivoglia *ornamentum*; ciò comporta che il suo unico splendore sia affidato alla luce, *formam primam corporalem*, e alla sua variata sintassi: luce franta tra i conci ruotati, luce diffusa sulla muraglia del cilindro, luce solida quando, trapassando le oltre duecento forature distribuite sul soffitto, proietta un mobilissimo *decus* sul pavimento lucido della preghiera.

La ricerca progettuale ha comportato l'indagine sul tipo, l'analisi del suo divenire, del suo progressivo costituirsi: «I researched the first mosque in Islam to find out why it came into being. It was conceived as a place of congregation. Muslims gathered in brotherhood, all as equal, in complete submission to one omnipresent God [...]. There was no symbol, no ritual, only intense devotion and spirituality that connected man to divine»<sup>10</sup>. Giovandosi della mancanza di una precettistica a riguardo, Tabassum ha infranto quell'*usus scribendi* che nella vulgata connota la *masjid*: assenti il *mihṛāb* (nicchia), il *minbar* (pulpito), il *manār* (minareto) e la stessa cupola, stilema distintivo sin dal XIII secolo di questa regione. Una spoliazione finalizzata a raggiungere uno stato di quiete privo di aggettivi: «domes and minarets are symbolic gestures [and] symbols are not the essence of devotion or faith. At times they can detract from the main essence of Islam, which is about complete submission to one God omnipresent. To be in complete communion with God one needs a space that evokes a feeling of spirituality, a space where people can connect with the divine»<sup>11</sup>. Una considerazione finale. Abbiamo valutato come in questa prassi il sentimento della contemporaneità si accompagni al restauro delle fonti. È questa la cornice che giustifica la volontà di interpretare la moschea come uno spazio offerto alla vita quotidiana della *communitas* cui si volge; ed è stato il tema che le trenta fotografie presentate l'8 maggio 2017 da Shahidul Alam<sup>12</sup> nel suo *Embracing the Other* hanno con grazia reso tangibile. Come la casa del Profeta anche la casa approntata da MTA vuol essere il ricovero per l'incontro e lo scambio sociale, per l'istruzione e il riposo, per la cura e la salute del corpo, per l'assistenza e il sostegno ai deboli, per la meditazione e il colloquio trascendente.

<sup>1</sup> Un primo livello di scelta aveva riunito 348 edifici provenienti da 69 paesi.

<sup>2</sup> Il premio istituito nel 1977 ha come suo scopo «to identify and encourage building concepts that successfully addressed the needs and aspirations of communities in which Muslims have a significant presence».

<sup>3</sup> N. Leech, *Architect Marina Tabassum on her Aga Khan Award-winning design for the Bait Ur Rouf mosque in Dhaka*, in «The National», October 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. C. Hinterseer, *Urban Tale*, China Daily, Asia Pacific; <https://scroll.in/video/837208/watch-how-bangladeshs-marina-tabassum-built-a-mosque-against-all-odds>.

<sup>5</sup> R. Hockin, *Marina Tabassum: Ideas over gender*, in «Architecture AU», 17 Jun 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. Griffiths, *Daylight filters in through the roof and walls of Bangladeshi mosque by Marina Tabassum*, in «de zeen», 5 March 2017.

<sup>8</sup> P. Hasan, *Sultan and Mosques. The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh*, I. B. Tauris, London New York 2007.

<sup>9</sup> L. Vacchini, *Capolavori*, Umberto Allemandi, Torino 2007, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> J. Cary, *Design for Good. A New Era of Architecture for Everyone*, Island Press, Washington/Covelo/London 2017, p. 208.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi.

<sup>12</sup> Shahidul Alam è vincitore del Shilpakala Award; sue produzioni sono state esposte al MOMA di New York, al Centre Georges Pompidou di Parigi e alla Tate Modern di Londra. Invitato presso molte istituzioni (Harvard, Stanford, UCLA, Oxford e Cambridge), Alam è Honorary Fellow of the British Royal Photographic Society e visiting professor alla Sunderland University.

of the Sultanate, between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. «Architecture is a gesture of thought», wrote Livio Vacchini<sup>9</sup>. A situated thought, however, we may add, a spacialised *mental question*; and therefore to be tested – in the passage of the seasons between clouds and water, air and heat, earth and dust – the comfort of being, of residing. Humble and spartan in its material attire, Bait Ur Rouf gives up any *ornamentum*; this entails that its only splendour is entrusted to light, *formam primam corporalem*, and to its varied syntax: light broken by rotated stones, light that becomes solid when, after passing through the more than two hundred holes in the roof, it projects a very mobile *decus* on the shiny paving of the prayer hall.

The project-related research investigated the type, analysed its development, its progressive becoming established: «I researched the first mosque in Islam to find out why it came into being. It was conceived as a place of congregation. Muslims gathered in brotherhood, all as equal, in complete submission to one omnipresent God [...]. There was no symbol, no ritual, only intense devotion and spirituality that connected man to divine»<sup>10</sup>. Taking advantage of the absence of precepts in this respect, Tabassum broke that *usus scribendi* which commonly connotes the *masjid*: there is no *mihṛāb* (niche), *minbar* (pulpit), *manār* (minaret), as well as the cupola, which has been a stylistic emblem of Mosques in this region since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. An emptiness which is aimed at obtaining a state of quietness without adjectives: «domes and minarets are symbolic gestures [and] symbols are not the essence of devotion or faith. At times they can detract from the main essence of Islam, which is about complete submission to one God omnipresent. To be in complete communion with God one needs a space that evokes a feeling of spirituality, a space where people can connect with the divine»<sup>11</sup>. A final consideration. We have evaluated how in this praxis the feeling of contemporariness goes hand by hand with that of the restoration of sources. This is the framework that justifies the desire to interpret the Mosque as a space offered to the everyday life of the *communitas*; this was the topic which the thirty photographs presented on May 8, 2017, by Shahidul Alam<sup>12</sup> in his *Embracing the Other*, have so gracefully made tangible. Like the home of the Prophet, also the house built by MTA aims to be a haven for social interaction, for education and rest, for the care and health of the body, for the welfare and support of the weak, for meditation and transcendental conversation.

*Translation by Luis Gatt*

<sup>1</sup> A first level of the process had included 348 buildings in 69 countries.

<sup>2</sup> The award, established in 1977, has as its purpose «to identify and encourage building concepts that successfully addressed the needs and aspirations of communities in which Muslims have a significant presence».

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<sup>11</sup> Ivi.

<sup>12</sup> Shahidul Alam is the winner of the Shilpakala Award; his work has been exhibited at the MOMA in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and at the Tate Modern in London. He has been invited by many institutions (Harvard, Stanford, UCLA, Oxford and Cambridge), and is a Honorary Fellow of the British Royal Photographic Society and visiting professor at the University of Sunderland.