

UNUSUAL SHAPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *MIHRĀB* IN THE MODERN MOSQUE

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ABSTRACT

Mihrāb in arch shape has been constructed in all over the world. But in modern period (20th century) new forms and styles are introduced for the indication of *Ka'bah* which are not based on the traditional arch shape. In the present research an attempt has been made to explain the significance of unusual *mihrāb* of the Faisal Mosque, Islamabad completed in 1988. A stylized book shape *mihrāb* symbolizes Holy Qurān is constructed in the sanctuary of the mosque. The *mihrāb* in the form of an open book is a first in *mihrāb* construction.

It is one of the most unusual and dominating elements of the mosque. The study explains the structural design, stylization, symbolism and decorative techniques used for the surface decoration of the *mihrāb*. At first importance of the *mihrāb* and its historical consequence is mentioned. Secondly surface decoration such as metal engraving, marble carving and inlay work of the *mihrāb* is explained. Presence of *Kūfic* calligraphy, symbolism of *Sūra al-Raḥmān* is also a part of the study. Data is analyzed and collected through national libraries, websites, personal visit to the Faisal Mosque and interviews with experts. Fresh photographs and drawings all are by author.

KEYWORDS: Marble Carving, Metal Engraving, *Mihrāb*, Modern, Stylization, Unique Design

INTRODUCTION

Mihrāb is the one of the most important constructive elements of the mosque. From centuries its construction in the form of arch is considered a vigorous part of the sanctuary to indicate the *Ka'bah*. Different shapes in structural form and use of various surface decorations always attract the followers. Repetition of traditional features and elements such as the presence of *mihrāb* in the form of traditional decorated arch, lavish decoration of floral motifs in general are avoided for the *mihrāb* in the Faisal Mosque.

The *mihrāb* in the form of an open Holy Book for the indication of the direction of the *Ka'bah* is itself an attractive innovation. It is unsurpassed by any other example of unusual *mihrāb* in South Asia. Design elevation of it does not bear any resemblance with any historical construction. The stylized unusual design of the *mihrāb*, decorative techniques, which are used for its decoration, have never been studied ever before. This research may be an addition or commencement of information about the decorative elements of the modern religious monuments of Pakistan. Usually Sultunat and Mughal periods have been discussed but the decorative elements and stylized forms of the modern (20th century) architecture have never been discussed before.

From the brief review of the existing literature, it is apparent that the architectural decoration, design and decorative techniques of the *mihrāb* of the Faisal Mosque have never been examined closely or comprehensively studied. Researchers and scholars have concentrated on only basic information of the mosque. They give only a cursory statement about the geometrical designs of the roof structure in a few sentences. Nobody has discussed its architectural decoration and the aesthetic value of the *mihrāb*. The functional relationships and advantages of its techniques, and a study of the design patterns, all still awaited examination. Due to this lack of study and research the significance of this mosque does

not have the status in South Asia which it deserves. The purpose of the present research is to discuss the structural forms and its surface decorations from an aesthetics point of view.

UNUSUAL SYMBOLIC DESIGN OF THE *MIHRĀB*

The Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, Pakistan represents a unique design for late twentieth century mosque construction and decoration. It is located against the backdrop of the Margala Hills, on high terraced land. It is designed by a Turkish architect Vedat Dalokay. The first prayer was held on the verandah of the mosque in April 1987 but the construction was completed in 1988.

The mosque is named after its benefactor, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. The mosque has received great popularity because of its unique style, design and perfection. It represents a modern phase of architectural decoration in construction form and surface ornamentation.

The sanctuary of the Faisal Mosque has a highly unusual freestanding *mihrāb* in the form of an open Qur'ān. It is made of Thassos marble with engraved, carved and inlaid calligraphy. The book consists of two broad vertically arranged panels of white marble meeting at a 120° angle and separated by a long rectangular central part of the book ending in a point.

The Qurānic chapter *Sūra al-Rahmān* and the ninety-nine attributes of Allah are on either side of the pages. The word Allah in mirror image is on the central part of the book. They are written in four different styles of *Kāfīc* calligraphy, using three different techniques.

The sculptural book is held at an angle by low marble pedestals with the outer corners three feet from the floor. It is sited at the mid-point of the west wall. It is placed on a ten inches high by two feet six inches platform at the distance of seven feet from the western wall (fig. 1). The top of the book is fifteen feet eight inches above floor level. It is six feet six inches in length and twelve feet eight inches in width. Thickness of the every page is five inches on the sides and one foot by ten inches at the center. At night six spot lights are fixed on the book to highlight it.

The hewn solid marble stone is most ingeniously planned and has an exquisite finish. The brilliant titanium white of the *mihrāb* stand out against the colourful tile mosaics of the west wall. It presents a meaningful depiction of the holy Qur'ān affiliated with the Muslim religion, rather than a symbolic monumental arch. The tradition of an arch is no longer compulsory; in the modern mosque rather any indication is sufficient to indicate the direction of the *Ka'bah*.

The *qiblah* wall, which indicates the direction of the *Ka'bah* is the significant part of the mosque. Indication of the *qiblah* survives from very early days of the Islam. At the time of the arrival of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) in Madina, in 622 A.D. the direction for offering prayers was towards Jerusalem and was marked there by a block-like stone. In 624 A.D. the direction of *qiblah* was changed towards Mecca, and the same stone was moved to the southern wall of the *Ka'bah*, at the spot where it now stands in the *Mihrāb al-Nabī* (Prophet's niche).

In 707-709 A.D. when the mosque at Madina was rebuilt and enlarged by al-Walid, a concave *mihrāb* was introduced in the *qiblah* wall for the first time. 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz was the first who made a *mihrāb* by the order of al-Walid. The *mihrāb* of the *Masjid i-Nabvī* is the first of a long series of this liturgical decoration of the mosque.

It became a tradition, which has continued for centuries and is found in almost every mosque. Earlier mosques had a semicircular *mihrāb* in which the prayer leader (*imām*) stood. It was usually in the center of the *qiblah* wall. The *mihrāb* was given various forms and shows a variety of decorative techniques. It attracts the worshippers and becomes the center of interest of the sanctuary.



Figure 1: *Mihrāb* of the Faisal Mosque in the Form of an Open Book, Symbolizing the Holy Qurān

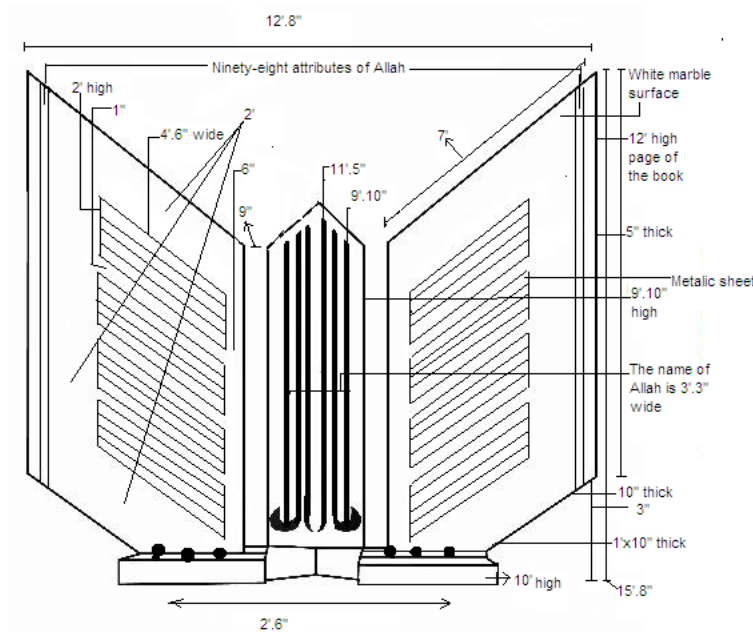


Figure 2: *Mihrāb* as an Open Book

The first mosque of the South Asia, in Daybul, had an unusual *mihrāb*. Ahmad Nabi Khan says that it was indicated by cutting a vertical niche in the inner side of the *qiblah* wall and fixing a stone slab of certify corners there. At the ruins of the ancient mosque at al-Mansūra the *mihrāb* was indicated by a recessed semi-circular arch that was five feet eight inches wide and four feet nine inches deep. For 1000 years no *mihrāb* was build separately from the *qiblah* wall. It is only in the twentieth century that the direction of Mecca was indicated in new and different ways. The *mihrāb* of the Negeri Sembilan State Mosque, Seremban, Malaysia, built in 1967, is designed in a different style of constructive form. This *mihrāb* is a solid structure with a base broader then its top. Its concave form has an unusual design: Qurānic verses are written on the top, and the concave form is cut from the center with a narrow vertical line.

The Faisal Mosque with its *mihrāb* in the form of an open book is a first in *mihrāb* construction. It is one of the most unusual and dominating elements of the mosque. It is a conscious choice of its architect Vedat Dalokay and *Kūfic* calligraphy of the *mihrāb* is designed by Gulgee. The artist Gulgee born in 1926 and died in 2007 was famous as an abstract artist. He used calligraphy in cursive or curvilinear scripts as a major part of his numerous paintings. Prior to the

calligraphy of the *mihrāb* he designed his two major projects in *Kūfic* calligraphy. The first was a bronze sculpture developed in 1973, *Sūra al-Raḥmān* in eastern *Kūfic* and Qur'ānic verses in different scripts were written in classical calligraphic style. On a second sculpture *Sūra al-Raḥmān* in square *Kūfic*, Qur'ānic verses and symbols were designed. It means *Sūra al-Raḥmān* was favorite *sūra* of Gulgee and had been selected before for major art projects.



Figure 3: Metal engraving of *Sūra al-Raḥmān* on the *Mihrāb*

METAL ENGRAVING

On the *mihrāb* *Sūra al-Raḥmān* is not engraved into the marble page rather it rendered on metal attached to the marble. Four metallic sheets are fixed on each page with the total number of eight sheets (fig. 3). For engraving gold plated copper sheets were fixed on the white marble surface. The sheets are engraved in a hard-pressed manner below the surface, resulting in an intaglio impression for the *Kūfic* calligraphy. The writing is thus one sixteenth of an inch below the surface. Every metallic sheet is two feet high and four feet six inches wide. The distance between every sheet is one inch. These sheets are set at a distance of two feet from the upper, lower and right edges of the page but six inches from the left edge. The same treatment is given to the other page but with reverse measurements (two feet distance from upper, lower and left but six inches from the right side).

The sheets were covered with white enamel paint, which matched the colour and shine of marble. At a distance, no one is aware of the difference between metal and marble because of the matching white colour. The sheet is a golden brass colour. The artisans engraved the words on the surface of the brass sheets and a thin layer of gold paint is laid over the surface to get a more shimmering effect to the words. The thickness of metallic sheet is three sixteenth of an inch and the engraving, is one sixteenth of an inch. The *Kūfic* calligraphy of the *Sūra al-Raḥmān* is in forty diagonal lines. Every line is four feet and seven inches in length and six inches high.

On the *mihrāb*, *Sūra al-Raḥmān* is engraved on the metallic sheets with sharp metallic tools. Engraving means to create a picture with cuts and to incise the decorative forms with sharp tools on a hard surface. For metal engraving usually soft metals like copper, brass, gold and silver are preferred. Carving and engraving have very little difference between them: “Engraving is always done with cutting tools with the pressure from the hand. When the pressure is applied with a

hammer, the process is called carving”. For accurate engraving, affix the four corners of the tracing of the decoration on a metal sheet and transfer the image. Take a designer tool or pointed pen and press over the traced outline turning ones wrist to the right and left during each press. An outline appears on the metal sheet. Scrape off the excess metal neatly towards one direction without spoiling the outline.

Stone engraving began in the Paleolithic period. Several examples of drawings and engravings are given, “Prehistoric Cave Paintings”. But metal engraving started as a decorative technique only around the fifth century B.C. Hand engraving was particularly popular in Greece during the third and fourth century B.C. the technique was continue and during the fifteenth century A.D it reached its climax.

The technique was also practiced by Muslim craftsmen. During the early Islamic period some companions of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) learned the art of engraving on stone slabs. Early calligraphy was engraved on copper or bronze too. Especially in Turkish history *Thuluth*, *Kūfic* and *Ta’līq* calligraphy were engraved in fine quality. Papadopoulo writes that, “the arts of metalwork with engraved, inlaid or modeled decoration were much appreciated by the Syrians, chiefly in Damascus, along with the Persians, which later led to specializing in silverwork, and has often been identified erroneously as Sassanid. Remarkable works had been produced in Central Asia, Egypt and Spain”. “In Iran engraved copper provided a basic decorative motif for innumerable objects and stucco or stone were cut for all sorts of architectural relief panels”.

In the later Mamlūk period inlay technique was neglected and engraving was developed. It was introduced through out the land of the Near East by Saljuqs and later adopted by Ottomans. Calligraphy was done in different character of inscriptions. Metal engraving of the Ottoman period can be divided into four schools. These are Istanbul, Van, Caucasia and Bosnia. Bosnia engraving is easily distinguished from that of other areas because of the uniform depth of the incisions and simplicity of the motifs.

In South Asia brass with engraved or embossed designs is preferred. “The school of engraving and enameling is called Muradabadi which is being continued in Pakistan by craftsmen who migrated from Uttar Pradesh in India. Two types of engraving are common. First called *naqqashi* (sketching), patterns are etched with steel point. The second called *khudai* (scraping), the ground is scraped and the pattern left to stand out. Muradabadi craftsmen make decorations in golden colour on a surface made white by tin polishing”.

This Muradabadi style of engraving or scraping is exactly similar with the treatment of the *Kūfic* calligraphy of the *mihrāb* in the Faisal Mosque. It is dominated with golden colour, but the entire surface without calligraphy is enameled in white colour.

Sūra al-Raḥmān was selected for the text of the *mihrāb* inscription because it contains all the knowledge of the creation of earth, human beings, the beauty of nature and the blessings of God. The entire concept of the *sūra* is symbolized in the architectural and surface decoration of the Faisal Mosque both exterior and interior.

Sūra al-Raḥmān discusses the concept and appearance of *jannat* (heaven) where beautiful mates will given to true Muslims, who lived their life according to the sayings of Allah (and hell is for those who deny the teachings and blessings of Allah). The concept of these verses reflects the fundamentals of Islam. Verse 55:2 says that God is the instructor of the Qur’ān and every Muslim should spend his life living according to its principles. This is a real guideline to life according to Allah’s will. Verses 55:3 and 55:4 record that God created human beings and He taught them speech and gave them intelligence. God is the lord of all creativity. In the Faisal Mosque the combination of design, style and colour in which traditional techniques and modern concepts are interwoven, all is produced by man’s mind and God is the creator of the

mind. God is the real owner of the thought and concept which is created by a man. A human being himself and his mind is a great blessing of God, because it creates new concepts and designs having a different look from the traditional representation of monumental designs. All visual things, which help to create the designs of the mosque, are helping to support the human being to explore his creativity, which is God gift. He is the real creator of everything. In the Verse 55:5 the sun and moon, in Verse 55:6 the stars and trees; 55:10 the creation of earth; 55:11 fruits; 55:12 grains and spices, 55:50, 55:52, 55:54, 55:62 and 55:76 vegetation, growth and the creation of earth are mentioned. In this *sūra*, side by side with the explanation of the blessings of God, a question is raised thirty times for humans and *jinnāt* (plural of *jin*) ‘which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?’

These blessings of God are illustrated on the entire west wall of the sanctuary in the form of an abstract mural in glazed mosaic tile. They give a colourful symbolic representation of the blessings of God on earth in the form of earth vegetation and sky with the calligraphy of *Kalīmā-yī Tauhīd* superimposed on it.

On the *mihrāb* a circle marks at the end of every verse (fig. 4). These circles are engraved with *Kūfic* calligraphy. In every circle the *Kalīmā* is written four times with its reflections. The total number of circles is seventy-eight and the *Kalīmā-yī Tawhīd* is thus written 312 times. There are a variety of shapes according to the cuts and forms of the words of the *Sūra al-Raḥmān* and *Kalīmā-yī Tawhīd*.

Several mosques are adorned with the *Kalīmā-yī Tauhīd*. Ahmad Nabi Khan writes that in the Mosque of Mariam Zamani also called Begum Shahi Mosque built in 1614, its *mihrāb* in the shape of arched-niche has *Kalīmā-yī Tauhīd*. *Kalīmā-yī Tauhīd* is also written in the Masjid Wazir Khan, Lahore built in 1634-1635 on *mihrāb*. In the Badshahi Mosque, Lahore, built in



Figure 4: *Kalīmā-yī Tauhīd* Repeated four Times in a Circle Engraved after Every *āyat* of the *Sūra al-Raḥmān*

1674, it is inlaid on the top of the central arch of the *mihrāb* on a marble panel. At the Begum Shahi Mosque, Lahore, rebuilt during middle of eighteenth century, the facade of the sanctuary has the *Kalīmā* on glazed tiles.

But the usages of the *Kalīmā-yī Tauhīd* in the Faisal Mosque are different: is written in circles at the end of the *sūra* verses on the *mihrāb* and on the west wall in tile mosaic. Both serve as a part of geometric design. The writing of *Kalīmā-yī Tauhīd* on the *mihrāb* is not new but the style of writing and its design is new. For the *Kalīmā-yī Tauhīd* the design has simple linear forms with richly neat finishing. Metal engraving had never been used for the decoration of a Pakistani mosque in the twentieth century.

MARBLE CARVING

The ninety-eight attributes of Allah are carved on the side edges of the *mihrāb* pages (fig. 5). They are arranged in vertical bands six inches wide and twelve feet four inches high. The letters stand in low relief with sharp edges instead of soft contours. Stone carving is an act of shaping or incising the stone by hitting or scraping and also rubbing with hand tools on the stone surface to remove the unwanted area. It is of particular significance for creating or producing sculpture. In late Paleolithic period, stone carving was introduced for the first time. The “writing” or way of communication of Paleolithic man consisted of scratched lines in picture form. These scratched and carved lines took the shape of different living things in the form of animals and figures. Their art consisted of carvings in round and in relief form. In the Solutrean Era, sculptures became flatter and were carved in relief on both sides of bones and stones while incised lines were used to indicate eyes, hair, etc.

Stone carving has existed in all civilizations. It was present at Madina during the life time of the Prophet *Hadrat* Muhammad (peace be upon him) before 623A.D. in the form of idols. Stone carving was usually used throughout Muslim history for the decoration of *mihrābs*. Kuhnel writes, earliest prayer niches from a *mihrab*, which was discovered in a small sanctuary of later date in Baghdad and was probably brought from Syria by the Caliph Mansūr for his first, still very modest mosque. It is made from a single block of marble with a lovely conch upheld by engaged columns, and central ornamental band.



Figure 5: Marble Carving of the Ninety-Eight Attributes of Allah

The Great Mosque at Damascus, made at the order of Caliph Mansūr has a marble *mihrāb*, carved from a single block and still stands as an example of Umayyad style. Marble panels and glass mosaic work were adopted for the decoration of ‘Abbasid mosques at Sāmarrā.

Stone carving, calligraphy in *Kūfic* were a part of the decoration of Fatimid period. Stone carving was also favoured by the Saljuq Turks in Anatolia. In the Atabek period, marble pavement of courtyard and coloured marble inlay were impressive decorations of the mosques. All these decorations were continued in the Ayubid period.

Stone and marble carving is one of the decorative techniques used by Muslims of the South Asia. In South Asia, the first evidence of carved *Kūfic* and carved floriated *Kūfic* character is found from the mosque at Daybul (the earliest being dated 727 A.D and the latest 906 A.D) one of the oldest mosque in Pakistani history.

White marble, broad bands of Islamic calligraphy and profuse low-relief decoration on red and grey stone are part of the decoration of *Qutb Minar* completed in 1199. It is profusely ornamented with low-relief carving which is less sharp in prominence. Carved decorative bands of floral motifs and calligraphy are appeared on the plain surface. The ‘Ala’i *Darwaza* of Qūwat ul-Islam Mosque was built by ‘Alauddin Khilji in 1311. Its ornamentation is a combination of red-sand stone, white marble and including calligraphic bands in low relief carving.

In the Adina Mosque at Pandua in Bengal, 1358-1359 the arched niches of the mosques are decorated in different techniques, carving is one of them. There was a profuse use of marble decoration in Mughal period with inlay work and marble carving at the top of the list. During the period of Shahjahan white marble was preferred for building material and carving was done in this material. In his period, both method of carving, intaglio and cameo, was adopted for decorations.

The Badshahi Mosque Lahore is the most prominent example of the combination of delicate carving and inlay work of white marble in red sand stone. Marble carving continues in modern times, for the surface decorations of mosques.

In the Faisal Mosque, marble is carved in low-relief for the writing of ninety-eight attributes of Allah on the *mihrāb*, (forty-nine on the outer margins of the pages). The words are in *Kūfic* script. After carving the attributes were painted with gold. Unfortunately the painting was not properly done and does not match the splendid neatness of the carving.

From 1225 to 1226 magnificent *mihrābs* were decorated with calligraphy in relief and tiles painted in luster and blue. The arched-niches decoration of the Adina Mosque Pandua, Malda District has arabesque designs and Qurānic verses. For the decoration of the *mihrāb* of the *Masjid al-Shuhada’* in Lahore, built in 1970, Qurānic inscriptions are carved in relief on white marble (plate 6). Relief work in cursive calligraphy and geometric designs can be seen all around the *mihrāb*, and some words are made prominent with golden paint.

INLAY WORK

In Faisal Mosque on the central part of the book the ninety-ninth name of “Allah” is inlaid in marble with semi-precious stone *lapis lazuli* in flat manner and flush with the white marble surface. It is prominent among his other ninety-eight attributes. The letters are three feet three inches wide and eleven feet five inches high from the center and nine feet ten inches high from both sides. Every engraved line of the names of Allah is outlined with a half-inch wide band of golden metal in concave form. It is in *muthanna* or mirror reflection style. The name of Allah should be on the right side and its reflection on the left but here Allah is written on the left side and its reflection is on right.

The name of Allah is commonly written in mosques through out the centuries. In Badaun mosque built by Shamsud din al-Tutmaṣh in 1223 A.D. its *mihrāb* was embellished with the name of Allah and it was repeated more than

three times with geometrical floriated motifs in brickwork. This is the first evidence of the presence of the name of Allah as architectural surface decoration of the mosque of subcontinent. In Shahi Mosque Rohtas (Jhelum) built in the Suri period the merlons are decorated with the name of Allah, which is carved in bold-relief. The Grand Mosque of Kuwait (1979-1986) opposite Al-Saif palace of the Amīr of Kuwait, was designed according to the traditional Arabic mosque construction. It is ornamented with the attributes of Allah in Arabic calligraphy made of Isfahān ceramics.

The use of the intensely blue stone *lapis lazuli* for inlay work dates from ancient times. The Egyptians, Sumerians and Greeks inlaid *lapis lazuli* in collage paintings and sculptural decorations and also used it as a painting pigment.

At first inlay work with lapis lazuli was introduced in Sumerian Art. Then the technique was used by the artisans of late Gothic art in Italy. In twelfth and thirteenth century the technique was developed in Saljuq, Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Then the technique was favorably adopted by the Seljuks of Anatolia. In South Asia mostly Mughal Monuments were embellished with inlay decoration. In the Faisal Mosque careful and neat finishing of flat inlay in lapis lazuli reveals artistic merit and gives a colour to the white and golden of the *mihrāb*. An artistic and aesthetic effect of the *mihrāb* of the Faisal Mosque is obtained by its elevation, proportionate and the symmetry.

CONCLUSIONS

The *mihrāb* in the form of an open Holy Book for the indication of the direction of the *Ka'bah* is itself an attractive innovation. It is unsurpassed by any other example of unusual *mihrāb* in South Asia. An artistic and aesthetic effect of the *mihrāb* is obtained by its elevation, proportionate and the symmetry. It is well designed and well fitted into the huge interior. It has uniqueness, stylization and abstract representation. Inlay work, marble carving, metal engraving and *Kūfic* calligraphy is selected for its decoration. Inlay work on marble, marble carving and metal engraving is involved for its decoration. All these techniques show their technicality with aesthetic approach through calligraphy. The entire composition of the *mihrāb* displays the mastery of play of lines which combine every technique and create a strong relation between them through calligraphy. The chevron-shape of the *mihrāb* is an abstract and symbolic reference to the open book (of the Holy Qurān). Its colour scheme of gold, white and blue is aesthetically pleasing. The drawing and design of the *mihrāb* in book shape is harmonized with the design of the *minbar*, ceramic tiles used on the walls of the sanctuary and the design of the ceiling. A number of decorative effects have deep aesthetic value.

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