

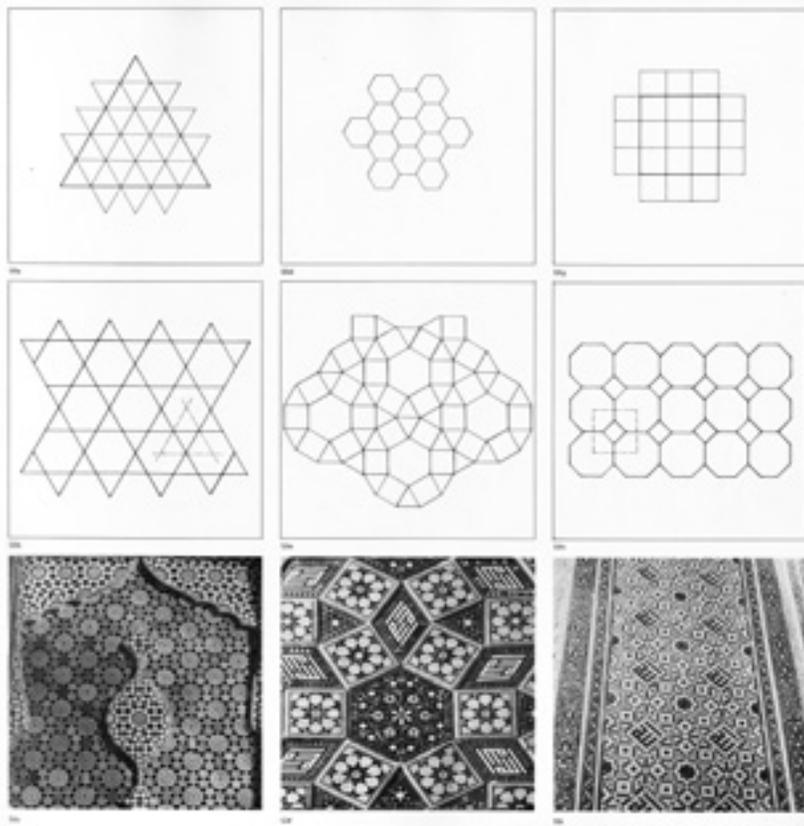
Orders and Fascinations

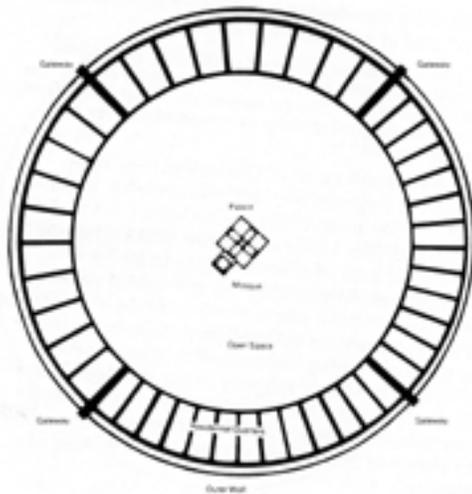
Aslı Çiçek

I. From Drawing to Sculpture

He commanded that its (the city's) outline be drawn in ashes. He then proceeded to enter through each gate and to walk among its walls, its arcades, and its courtyards, all of which were outlined in ashes... Having done that, he ordered cotton seeds placed on this outline and oil be poured on it. Then he watched as the fire flared up, seeing the city as a whole and recognising its full plan.

According to the legend, this is how the Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur founded the city of Baghdad in 762 AD. After the fire had risen he is said to have walked through the flames into his future palace in the middle of the circular city, to get a grasp of the space. The description speaks of the tremendous power of imagination; the idea has an elegant simplicity that gives an immediate impression. A city that is conceived on the ground before it is built, by the simple means of drawing that becomes a sculpture of flames remains after thousand two hundred years a stunning performance to imagine. Yet Al-Mansur's trust in the process of drawing and his need to understand his city before the first stone was even placed, explain his method. It is an outrageous approach, but it is also very practical, for the flames are simply the quickest way for making the walls rise. In fact, the act of marking the outlines of an edifice on the very ground where it will later come to stand is historically quite a common method, used by many architects. In the first century B.C. Vitruvius described this method in his book *De Architectura* as 'ichnographia,' 'ichno' meaning the 'trace' in Greek. One thousand five hundred years later the Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti noted in *De Re Aedificatoria* that the practice of outlining a building or a city on the ground with plaster or dust was still common practice. These markings on the ground were complimented by a few architectural drawings on paper, which some historians also termed ichnography. However, the intimacy between physicality and drawing indicates the close relationship between the plot and the drawn plan. Another Renaissance architect, Cesare Cesariano reflected on ichnography by comparing the architect walking the legs of the compass on paper to the architect physically walking through the plan on-site.





Plan of Baghdad, eighth century A.D.

Opposite:
Beacon of Pharo, chalcography
by Johann Bernhard Fischer von
Erlach, 1721



The practice of outlining architecture on the ground was also involved in specific rites, as in the town of Pharos, founded by Alexander the Great on an island in the River Nile. The emperor had ordered the outlines of the town as well as the light tower to be drawn with flour on the ground so that soothsayers could foretell the town's future: if birds were attracted to the edible plan thus distributed, the city would flourish, with many primary resources. In such stories there is a quality that underlines the ritual signification of imagination, making and building. But what makes the legend of Al-Mansur all the more remarkable is the direct step he takes beyond drawing into the third dimension: the drawing becomes a sculpture on the spot and then disappears as soon as the flames rise.

Like many sculptors, Gauthier Oushoorn also works with drawings in preparation for his three dimensional work. But in two recent works from 2015, drawing obtained another role in his practice. In these interventions called *Space-Filling Patterns* and *Dome* respectively, drawings became sculptures as a consequence of how they were executed. Few drawings on paper preceded these works, which he bases on *The Sense of Unity* by Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar¹, a book consisting of analytic explorations of the Sufi tradition in Islamic building history. Ardalan and Bakhtiar investigate the abstraction of Islamic architecture and

art as well as the urge of the artist (or the architect) to grasp, deal with and produce the divine, the infinite and perhaps that which cannot be proven as well. The book gives clear explanations in sequence about symbolism, geometry, elements of architecture and notions of order, and builds up a thesis about the anonymity of the author in relation to the work, all of which, the book claims, is the only way of reaching the Divine.

Geometric patterns as spatial concepts require space-filling surface-patterns or motifs which grow side by side. It is a mathematical fact that there are only three regular polygons which may be used to fill a surface where the vertices add up to 360 degrees. The three that fulfil these requirements are the triangle, the square and the hexagon (generated from two triangles connected with lines). These three regular polygons covering a surface include the only three regular lattices possible — diagonal, right-angled and circular.

(*The Sense of Unity*, p.40, Geometric Patterns, Chapter: 'Morphology of Concepts')

With *Space-Filling Patterns* Oushoorn allowed himself to be guided by a phrase from the book: 'Geometric patterns as spatial concepts require space-filling surface patterns – patterns or motifs which grow side by side. (...) The three that fulfil these requirements are the triangle, the square and the hexagon.'² With metal pins and a string for a compass he

1. *The Sense of Unity*, Nader Ardalan & Laleh Bakhtiar, University of Chicago Press, U.S.A., 1973,

2. *The Sense of Unity*, p.40, Chapter: 'The Morphology of Concepts, Geometric Patterns'

followed these strict rules of geometry to draw an invisible pattern on the ground in a backyard in Diyarbakır, a South Eastern city in Turkey. He subsequently drilled holes into the ground at the points where the patterns intersected, each pattern resulting from the previous one, growing from a hexagon touching the perimeter of a circle. Yet the pattern was left on the surface of the paper and only the holes were projected into the third dimension. Intriguingly, Oushoorn himself increasingly withdraws from his work during the process, despite being the one who conceives and executes it. His method also somehow resembles a ritual: he defines the geometry, which introduces the main order, follows it and allows it to take its course. But the same method also brings about a sculpture, albeit a negative one, in the ground as an invisible pattern, that the eye can only sense from a pattern that can grow into infinity.

Within Islamic culture the dome (gunbad) maintains its ancient imagery while providing a vivid manifestation of fundamental Islamic cosmogony. By means of symbolic transfer, the Islamic attributes of center, circle and sphere inherent in the dome are fully realised. A paramount association that received great emphasis is the idea of the Spirit, which at once surrounds and pervades all being, much as dome encompasses its enclosed space, and the vault of the sky embraces all creation. The passage of this Spirit from the vault apex, symbolising Unity, is viewed as being downward and expansive; or as upward and contractive, toward Unity.
(*The Sense of Unity*, p.74, Dome, Chapter: 'Traditional Forms')

In *Dome* Oushoorn introduces an attitude similar to Al-Mansur's outline of Baghdad and his palace in flames. The artist sawed a circle into a tiled floor between two adjacent, perpendicular walls of an abandoned site in Istanbul. His objective was to sculpt a dome, a structure that is seen in many cultures as an architectural symbol of unity because of its perfect shape. This architectural element can be seen as an attempt by man to create or embrace the sky and to define and symbolise unity by limiting its endlessness under a vault. Using the same methods as in *Space-Filling Patterns*, yet contrasting with it in its essence, Oushoorn here creates another negative sculpture. The contrast is to be found in the attempt to make space through the notion of unity and not infinity.

It is striking how human intellect can simplify these abstract terms that it introduced itself, as the ancient Buddhist notion of the Mandala tries to grasp the universe in the basic geometry of a square with four gates and a circle as a central point. While working on *Dome*,

Oushoorn produced a small work called *Circle* that can be seen as a sketch for *Dome*, to help understand the notion of the square and circle. In April 2015 the artist swam in a circle around the foundation of a bridge at the Golden Horn. The footage documenting his action shows the attempt to grasp the movement, the basic understanding of the shapes being tested against the artist's own body. The directness of the act brings to mind the intimacy between architect and drawing that Cesariano mentioned when writing about ichnography.

This formal relationship between the circle and the square, which the artist gauged against his own body, was literally taken into the construction of domes which rest on square bases with pillars or atop adjacent walls, following the principles stated in *The Sense of Unity*: '...its (the dome's) shape is a 'container' built according to the objective laws of mathematics and statics'.³ This objectivity is what led Oushoorn to realise the works in their eventual appearance, by conceiving methods — based in the relative neutrality of archetypal, geometric forms — that allow him to evacuate his individuality from the work. To sculpt a dome in the ground he introduces a grid into the circle. This is a purely practical decision like the one Al-Mansur took with his outlined city that rose in flames. Everything that is deployed for making the work is fused into one, including the artist, who at a certain point becomes a tool himself. The poetry of the work is a result of constraints Oushoorn defines through balanced decisions, whether they are conceptual or practical. However, and this is different from the artist's previous works, in *Dome* the act of sculpting results in the loss of the drawing.

It is no coincidence that in another work the theme of the negative sculpture deriving from a drawing reappears. The intervention is called *Afgeknotte Kegel*, which translates as 'Truncated Cone'. It was made in a garage box in Belgium, together with the photographer Max Pinckers, following the period Oushoorn spent in Turkey. Here the drawing defines the intervention differently, namely by staying on the paper instead of being projected directly into the surface of the sculpture. A hole of 62 cm diameter in the ground is the first and last thing that is offered to the viewer. The sculpture itself is an optical illusion, for the hole reaches 2,55 m deeper into the ground, resulting in a circle submerged in the soil that is twice as large as the one visible on the concrete surface. The intervention is simple and the drawing it derives from even more. Yet once the eye captures this illusion, the cone is not far off and its top is truncated. The work draws a parallel to *Space-Filling Patterns* where the patterns are not visible. It also relates to *Dome*, which is carved out of the ground. From drawing

3. *The Sense of Unity*, p.7, Chapter: 'The Morphology of Concepts, The Creative Man'

to sculpture the step is immediate, even if they do not exist on the same plane. But *Afgeknotte kegel* also bears the appeal of the barely visible yet utterly existent optical illusion, which steers the intervention towards the sculpture in the ground.

The minaret assumes the distinct physical shape of the mil in Iran, differing significantly in this respect from the hollowed-tower or room-like minarets that evolved in the Arab countries. These positive vertical shapes serve as exoteric landmarks leading to significant esoteric places. In the total urban composition, these minarets stand as the vertical strokes of Arabic script, corresponding to the permanent transcendent essences of things, while the horizontal development of cities expresses the continuous, material creations of man linked in a total composition that expresses Unity. This analogy can attain greater richness if the minaret is viewed as the number 1 related to the first letter of script, alif. Then, in the macroscale, alif or manara becomes synonymous with the Creator and, in the microscale, with His reflection — man.

(*The Sense of Unity*, p.73, Minaret, Chapter: 'Traditional Forms')

Such unpredictable fascinations imply endless directions that precede the work, as is the case with *Minaret*. Reading *The Sense of Unity* over and over, Oushoorn meandered into the calm world of Sufism, not necessarily from a religious interest but rather from the definition of Sufism as being the Islamic face of the perennial philosophy. This wandering led the artist to the legend of Simeon Stylites, as powerful in its imagery as Al-Mansur's city of flames: Stylites was a Christian ascetic who is said to have lived in the 5th century A.D. near Aleppo for 37 years on top of an ancient column. He chose to break free from the world in the vertical direction, since he found that on the horizontal plane he couldn't escape the worldly pleasures he radically refused in order to become one with God. The image of such a human being, sitting atop a column, surviving thanks to the aid of his admirers, is striking. The narrative depends also on the single element of a column, the remnant of a building that once existed. With architecture being a constant source from which Oushoorn takes his references, it is not surprising that the fascination for Stylites led to the 9,5 m high *Minaret*. Different from *Space-Filling Patterns*, *Dome* and *Afgeknotte kegel*, *Minaret* is a very visible sculpture Oushoorn installs in the garden of Centre d'innovation et de design in Belgian Grand Hornu. He did not replicate Simeon's column but transformed the idea of escaping into verticality into a structure where the walls of the minaret are left out. The piece derives from a drawing that is essential to the work: starting with a segmented circular base, then



Icon of Simeon, anonymous, date unknown

successively transitioning into a nonagon, a heptagon and ending in a square, an elegant column rises to the sky, with steps winding up around it. At first glance, the drawing looks complex; the golden mean was used for the vertical proportions, with the diameter of the column holding the shapes inside. Yet the use of sacred geometric proportions lends coherence to the work. Made out of oak, the wooden structure refers to the early timber minarets and the different shapes they take according to their region, from the African minarets with towers with a square base to the later Ottoman designs with circular forms. The carefully constructed *Minaret* also carries the descriptions from *The Sense of Unity* along with it. Most importantly, the title gives the clearest clue: the term minaret derives from the Arabic word 'manarah' which translates as 'beacon'. Oushoorn's *Minaret* throws light on the geometric order of drawing that is drawn into the air by building a structure.