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## Memories are made of this

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### ARCHITECTURE



**Title:** The Complete Taj Mahal and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra

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Andrew Robinson lauds the timeless appeal of a great monument

In one of his celebrated poems, "Shah Jahan", Rabindranath Tagore speaks of the 17th-century Mughal Emperor and his immortal creation, the Taj Mahal. "This fact you knew, Emperor of Ind, Shah Jahan,/ That Time's stream carries off life, youth, riches, renown./ Only your heart's grief/ Could be eternal, that was your majesty's true belief./ Your royal might, adamantine,/ Would fade into oblivion like the crimson of the setting sun;/ Simply one great sigh/ Would stay, forever-impassioned, rending the sky - / That was your prayer./ Diamonds, pearls, rubies glisten/ Like the trickery of a rainbow on the empty horizon,/ Soon to vanish like mist/ Shedding just/ One tear droplet/ On the cheek of Time, shining and undefiled - / This Taj Mahal."

Shah Jahan fully intended the marble mausoleum of his favourite queen Mumtaz Mahal at Agra to become a world-famous symbol of undying love when he built it in 1631-43; and he has got his way with posterity. "The image of the Taj Mahal has been reproduced more often than that of any other building. It has become a symbol of India, despite India's uneasiness with its Islamic past and despite being a tomb, which has no place in the Hindu tradition," the scholar Ebba Koch notes at the end of her monumental and magnificent book on the Taj - the fruit of three decades of study.

Amazingly, as she observes in the preface, for all its fame the Taj Mahal "has been very little studied". Almost from the beginning of the British Raj in the mid-18th century, British visitors to India made a point of calling at Agra to see the Taj. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy whose chief memorial is his deep dedication to preserving India's architecture and art, personally supervised every detail of the restoration of the Taj complex and gardens a century ago, including the manufacture in Cairo of a bronze lamp inlaid with gold and silver modelled on an early 14th-century lamp in the tomb of a Mamluk sultan, which today hangs in the tomb chamber of the Taj, above the gorgeously decorated cenotaphs of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. Yet the Archaeological Survey of India, founded in 1861, has never devoted a publication to the Taj Mahal - "not even a guidebook was issued".

Part of the reason for this astonishing lacuna, which Koch's book at long last brilliantly fills, must be that Shah Jahan recorded nothing in writing about how the Taj Mahal was built. So scholars have had no plans or written architectural theory to examine, unlike with the almost contemporaneous St Paul's Cathedral. Not even the name(s) of the Taj Mahal's architect is (are) securely known - in the sense of being credited with the work in the official chronicles vetted by the Emperor. Two architects, Ustad Ahmad Lahauri and Mir Abdul Karim, together with the administrator Makramat Khan, appear to have been most responsible, but neither is acknowledged as such in Shah Jahan's *Padshahnama*.

In the absence of information, inevitably we have myth and legend, much touted by tour guides. Shah Jahan is said to have had the architect and workers killed or maimed so that they could not build another Taj - a story for which there is absolutely no evidence. The architect is said to have been a Turk, Ustad Isa, or a Venetian, Geronimo Veroneo, who is indeed buried in the Catholic cemetery in Agra - an idea with obvious appeal to European visitors convinced that the Taj could not have been the work of Indians. This story began with a Spanish friar who visited Agra in 1640-41, but there is no solid evidence for it (though it is true that the

exquisite floral *pietra dura* gemstone decoration of the Taj was inspired by Florentine *pietra dura*). As Koch demonstrates with great clarity, the Taj Mahal belongs to a long tradition of Mughal and pre-Mughal Islamic architecture. It may seem magical and ethereal, but it is securely rooted, not an alien intrusion.

Perhaps another reason for lack of scholarly study is a certain ambivalence towards the purpose of the Taj. Everyone knows it is the ultimate monument to love, a universal emotion transcending cultures and religions. But it is also, very plainly, a Muslim monument, an evocation of Mumtaz Mahal's abode in paradise, as described in the Koran, verses of which are beautifully inscribed on its walls. Non-Muslim Westerners - especially since the onset of Islamist terrorism - cannot be expected to appreciate this aspect. Still less so, India's Hindu population. The most extreme Hindu fundamentalists even go to the extent of claiming that all so-called Muslim structures in India are really the work of Hindus. "That the Taj was founded as a Hindu temple is now the firm belief of many a visitor, who is at pains to put his foreign fellow visitors right about the origin of the building," writes Koch in a disturbing sentence. "The Taj Mahal is really 'Tejo-Mahalaya', a Shiva temple."

The ambivalence extends to some Muslims, too. "In the Islamic tradition, tombs were from the beginning a controversial issue. A large number of *hadis* (hadiths) - recorded sayings and actions of the prophet Muhammad, which with the Koran form the basis of Islamic law - declare tombs to be irreligious, heathen, and non-Islamic: they forbid praying at tombs as polytheism, are critical of distinguishing tombs by inscriptions, and speak against raising buildings over tombs because these might give rise to a cult of the dead and to idolatrous worship." In the light of this, Koch compares the tombs of the different Mughal Emperors most interestingly.

Babur, the great-great-grandfather of Shah Jahan, was buried in Kabul in a simple tomb open to the sky, perhaps within a stone screen. But his son Humayun was buried in Delhi in a domed mausoleum that is one of the city's grandest pre-British buildings, especially since its recent restoration.

Shah Jahan's own son, Aurangzeb, the last of the Great Mughals and a strictly orthodox Muslim who had his own brother executed for heresy, directed that he be interred under a simple stepped stone slab filled with earth and enclosed by a screen, like Babur. Likewise, Shah Jahan's daughter Jahanara lies beneath a marble cenotaph in Delhi with grass in its top and an inscription that reads: "Let nothing cover my tomb save the green grass, for grass suffices well as a covering for the grave of the lowly."

Thus the Taj Mahal is Islamic in inspiration, but it is certainly not orthodox. Is it ostentatious? Opinions differ. It is certainly a symbol of luxury. The grandest hotel in Bombay is named after the Taj Mahal, and the property mogul Donald Trump built his Trump Taj Mahal, a casino resort in New Jersey with detailed reconstructions of the Taj, and Shah Jahan's palace and garden architecture.

Aldous Huxley thought the Taj showy: on a visit in the 1920s he criticised its "expensiveness and picturesqueness" and judged the architecture to be "the product of a deficiency of fancy, a poverty of imagination". Some visitors to Agra prefer the tomb of Itimad-ud-Daula ("Pillar of the Empire"), the highest minister of the Emperor Jahangir, father of Shah Jahan. This has been well preserved, as described in detail by Koch along with dozens of other buildings from the Mughal time, some vanished, most in a state of disrepair. Perhaps Itimad-ud-Daula's reputation as a "pleasant and even-tempered man who was opposed to cruelty and held no ill-feelings towards anybody" lived on in the public mind and discouraged vandalism of his tomb.

Koch goes to infinite trouble to explain and illustrate, with her own excellent photographs - not to mention copious period illustrations, maps and architectural drawings - the aesthetic context of the Taj Mahal, both within the Mughal building tradition and within the city of Agra. Her book is decidedly not about the Taj Mahal alone: it covers the wonders of the Agra Fort, with its Halls of Public and Private Audience, and the many other buildings and gardens that once lined the River Yamuna, making Agra briefly one of the world's great cities, before Shah Jahan moved his court to Delhi (Shahjahanabad) in 1648. "The aim is to arrive at an understanding of the ethos of the Mughal court in the 17th century," she states in her preface - an aim in which she triumphantly succeeds. Anyone interested in the Mughals will strongly desire to own this book. It is a winning "fusion of the intellectual and the sensuous" - the characteristic that gives the Taj Mahal its (almost) universal appeal.

Andrew Robinson, literary editor of *The Times Higher*, is a visiting fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge. He is the author of several books on Indian culture, including biographies of Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray.

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