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Special
Problems
in Islamic &
Nonwestern
Architecture

**City as
Palimpsest:
The
Islamic City
from the
Pre-modern
to Post-modern**

The concept of city has been an important yet difficult one for architectural history. A rigorous definition of the Islamic city has also proven uneasy, for the tendency to speak in terms of a distinct phenomenon is still strong in historical discourses. Disentangling the essentializing rhetoric of the Islamic city as this or that, or simply non-Western, the aim of this course is to problematize the palimpsest quality of cities through a genealogical approach to their architectural fabric. This course will examine the architecture of several major cities – Baghdad, Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, Istanbul, Aleppo, Isfahan, Tehran, and Ankara, among others – under the category of the palimpsest, which can be defined as an urban structure where layers of historical density become a cultural topography. We will seek to understand how such layers of the palimpsest are organised and how they interact with one another to form a coherent ‘whole’– such as a ‘city’ – while at the same time remaining distinct from each other. To achieve this goal we will focus on the intrinsic relationship existing between the city and a particular architectural feature that has come to characterise it, at a particular moment in the city’s narrative (such as the citadel; the palace; the mosque; the garden; the monument; the house; etc.). The theoretical underpinning of this course is associated most strongly with critical theories of Gérard Genette, Giles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard.

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