

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Qalawun Complex: Monumental Construction Filled with History

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the Qalawun complex and its architectural importance and features, shedding light on the main components of the building and architecturally analyzing how this building is designed, the purpose for its design, and some of the detailed elements and decorations possessed by the complex. It starts with a brief history of the Mamluks and the background history of the intention of building the complex. It then examines each zone's intricate social and philanthropic functions within the complex, shedding light on its multifaceted role in Mamluk society. The article offers insights into the cultural exchange and artistic innovation that characterized the Mamluk period by delving into historical records and scholarly interpretations.

Keywords: Qalawun complex, architectural features, decorative features, mausoleum

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Mamluk era is one of the most prosperous eras in Islamic history that extended from 1250 to 1517 CE during which great architecture emerged under the Mamluks and their odd ruling system (Behrens-Abouseif, 1989). The rich and diverse architectural typologies known as Mamluk architecture was a result of rapid competition to build between the amirs to showcase presence and power; and was a source of unease for the Bahri (1250–1380 CE) and Burji (1380–1517 CE) rulers. Immediately, the pattern became apparent, which led the Amirs to select the sultans. This frequently included people making a stand and rallying support, which invariably resulted in violent power battles. The son of a sultan was occasionally permitted to inherit state authority for the sake of maintaining peace. However, this was often for a short period until a more qualified candidate was chosen (Yeomans, 2006). In the case of Sultan Qalawun (1222–1290 CE), he developed an inherited dynasty, and for a certain period, the city experienced flourishing (AlSayyad, 2011).

The Qalawun complex stands as a testament to the grandeur of Egypt's Mamluk period. Sultan Qalawun built this sprawling structure in the 13th century as a hospital and educational center. Its centerpiece, the Qalawun Mausoleum, was a marvel of its time, financed by the war spoils the Qalawun acquired from war against the crusaders. Qalawun's vision extended beyond mere construction; he established a system of financial support for scholars and teachers, ensuring the mosque's role as a hub of Islamic learning. This commitment included provisions for women and widows, reflecting a forward-thinking approach to community welfare.

The mosque's significance went beyond its architectural beauty; it became a unifying force for the Muslim community. Despite enduring an earthquake in 1303, the Qalawun complex remained a symbol of resilience, embodying Qalawun's dedication to fostering religious and educational life in Egypt.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the Mamluks originated from a system of enslaved warriors who gained influence via tactics and military ability. They were raised into a powerful fighting force by assimilating Turkish and Circassian cultural elements with their newly discovered Islamic identity. Originally, they acquired children from non-Muslim homes. Due to this mixing of ethnicities, a unique Mamluk civilization emerged, known for its exoticism and military might.

However, the Mamluk era was marked by more than their military prowess; they also left a lasting impression on their realms' architectural landscapes. The Mamluks had a reputation as liberal art and architectural patrons, vying with one another to build the grandest and most intricate buildings. These structures represented the goals and aspirations of the ruling class and acted as symbols of status and authority. The Mamluk leaders commissioned architectural constructions that are still standing today, representing an important period in Islamic art and architecture.

Mamluk buildings serve as concrete reminders of their political and cultural heritage and showcase their artistic tastes, a significant characteristic of Mamluk history. Sultan Qalawun is known for reviving Egypt's artistic and architectural legacy. After a turbulent era under the Ayyubids and the fear of Mongol invasion, Qalawun inherited a country ravaged by neglect and decay and set out on a quest to restore Egypt to its former splendor.

2.1 Significance of the Qalawun Complex Mosque

The Qalawun complex is a beacon of historical significance among a tapestry of old monuments in the middle of Cairo's busy cityscape. This architectural monument is a true representation of the strength of the sultan it was named after; it was Qalawun and Baybars who fought in the Battle of Ain Galout under Qutuz rule and were innovative in their battles (Rabbat, 2010).

This early Mamluk-era architectural wonder has withstood the ages with amazing persistence, retaining its majesty for investigation in the present era. The Qalawun complex is unique (Figure 1), not just because of its long history but also the abundance of knowledge and stories engraved onto its stones. Its founder, Sultan al-Malik al-Mansur Saif al-Din Qalawun (1280–1290 CE; Rabbat, 2010), and the mysterious Al-Mansur Amirs who were instrumental in its founding, are at the core of a complex fabric of narratives that engulf researchers studying its past.

There are hints of a past time when culture and power interacted in intriguing ways within the complex's walls. Every stone in this location has a whisper of victory and hardship, providing a glimpse into the vibrant world of medieval Cairo. The Qalawun complex, with its maze-like passageways and courtyards, presents itself as more than simply a monument; it is a dynamic example of the tenacity of history, calling inquisitive minds to decipher its riddles and learn about its past (Abdulfattah, 2020).

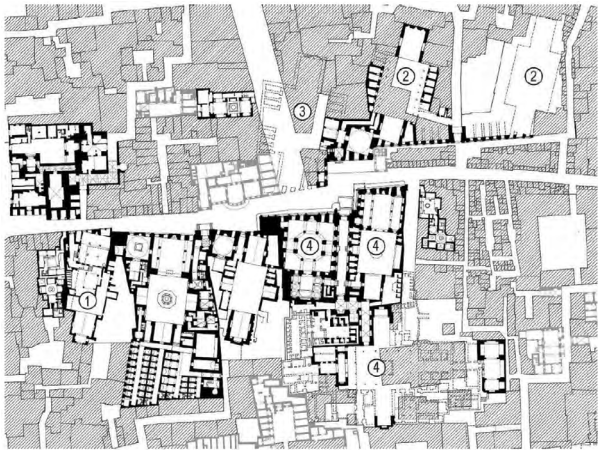


Figure 1. The area of Bayn Al-Qasrayn and its surrounding monuments. (4) Qalawun complex. Source: Qalawun VR Projects.

3. ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

3.1 Layout and Design

The layout is designed on the west side of the street, where the entrance corridor separates the madrasa and the mausoleum; this entrance corridor leads directly to the hospital at the rear.

The entrance portal of the building (Figure 2) is understated in its architectural design, featuring a shallow recess adorned with marble paneling. However, what distinguishes it is the prominent horseshoe arch within this recess, contrasting with the prevalent pointed arches seen throughout the facade. This unique arch is embellished with intricate black and white strapwork on its spandrels, adding to its visual appeal. Above the doorway, a triple window is adorned with a wrought iron grille.

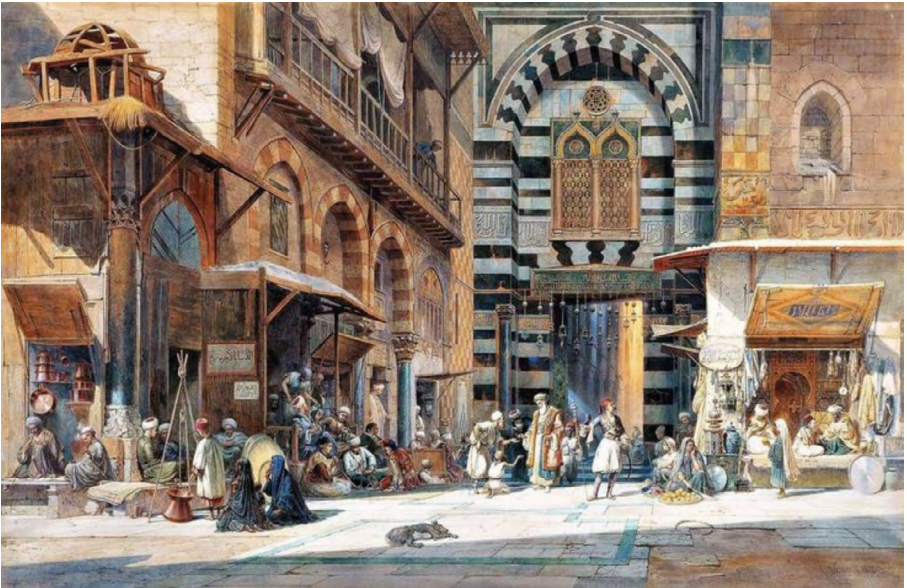


Figure 2. “The Complex of Sultan Al-Mansur Qalawun in Cairo.” Source: Carl Werner

Beyond the entrance lies a lengthy passage flanked by the madrasa and the mausoleum, covered by a wooden ceiling that appears to be a later addition. The absence of original support for this ceiling suggests it was installed post-construction. Interestingly, the ceiling disrupts the arched windows along the passage’s side walls, indicating its later addition. Removing the ceiling would allow more natural light into the mausoleum, which currently suffers from dimness.

Adjacent to the portal, on the upper floor, is an apartment that was designated for a guardian strategically positioned to oversee the entrance. This living space would have

spanned the initial portion of the passage. Alongside the madrasa, living quarters for students overlooked the passage, creating a bustling hub of activity and communal living within the complex (Abouseif, 2007).

With its three zones, the complex brought a whole new architectural style to the city. It integrated a *bimaristan*, a communal hospital, with educational and religious activities. One of the most astonishing achievements of the Qalawun complex is the fact that it was built in 13 months; this is a record pace for a project of this size, especially at the time. Historians, like Shihab Al-Din Al-Nuairi, state:

When Sultan al-Malik al-Mansūr saw the turba [mausoleum] of Sultan al-Sālih [Najm al-Dīn], he ordered that there should be built a turba, a madrasa, a *bīmāristān*, and amaktab sabīl. So the Dār al-Qutbiyya and the adjacent buildings, which are in Bayn al-Qasryan, were bought out of the Sultan's own private means, and the residents in Dār al-Qutbiyya were given in exchange for the palace known as Qasr al-Zumurrud, on the 12 of Ramadān of the year 682 [4 December 1283]. The Emir Alam al-Dīn Sanjar al-Shujā' I was made supervisor of the building and displayed unheard of care and zeal, that it was finished in the shortest period of time. (AlSayyad, 2011)

Additionally, this expedited construction of the Qalawun complex was made possible by using hundreds of Mongol prisoners of war as laborers and dedicating all Cairo-based builders to the project. Historians also claim that the facility was constructed on land that was unlawfully taken when Qalawun drove out the occupants of the Qutbiyya palace to make room for the hospital. Religious academics have questioned its validity as a spiritual organization because of these factors (AlSayyad, 2011).

The plan of the complex is divided into three main zones: the hospital, the madrasa, and the mausoleum (Figure 3). Beyond its architectural significance, the complex served a profound social and philanthropic purpose, extending its hospitality to Muslims of all genders and social statuses. Its exterior facade is intricately designed, featuring segmented panels adorned with pointed-arch recesses and three tiers of windows. Scholars have suggested that this architectural motif bears a resemblance to stylistic elements observed in Western European traditions. Specifically, the arrangement of triple windows, comprising two arched apertures surmounted by a circular opening, mirrors a design convention commonly associated with Gothic churches (AlSayyad, 2011).



Figure 3. Plan of the complex. (1) The mausoleum, (2) the madrasa, and (3) bimaristan. Source: Qalawun VR Projects

The mausoleum

The mausoleum's entrance (Figure 4) was thoughtfully designed to direct pilgrims east from the corridor that runs between the mausoleum and the nearby hospital to the west. They walk through an antechamber on this route before arriving at the mausoleum's main chamber. Furthermore, direct access from the complex's main entry corridor is now made possible for guests via a secondary entrance with a modest stairway. A square design is used in the main hall, with eight large columns grouped in an octagonal configuration to hold up the stately dome over the center. The floor is surrounded by wooden lattice panels in the middle, where a simple wooden cenotaph symbolically represents the bodies buried below.

In contrast to the older dome of al-Salih, which represented loyalty to the Ayyubid ancestors, the dome of Qalawun represented a new period of Mamluk dominance and dynastic continuity. In contrast to subsequent funeral structures, as mentioned earlier, the Qalawun tomb and madrasa are divided by the entrance corridor rather than being next to one other. The old dome, demolished during repair in the 18th century, was replaced with the current dome, which the Comité recreated in 1903 (AlSayyad, 2011). The entrance to the tomb was originally on the west via a distinctive porticoed courtyard with small brick domes covering the eastern and western arcades. With a single arch facing the courtyard, the northern portico led to the tomb entrance, while the southern side had ornate stucco sculptures.



Figure 4. The mausoleum’s wooden partition. Source: Qalawun VR Projects.

The bimaristan

The hospital section has not survived. The complexity of the structure of the bimaristan was remarkable, not solely for its considerable dimensions—standing at 20.2 metres tall and spanning 35.1 metres in length—but also for the innovative nature of its functions and embellishments. The Qalawun Hospital had a very interesting inclusive policy, welcoming all Muslims, whether they were part of the military or civilians, for medical treatment. Importantly, there were no restrictions on the duration of their stay at the hospital. Upon discharge, patients were not only congratulated but also provided with financial assistance and clothing. In case of a patient’s demise, their family received monetary support to cover funeral expenses.

This demonstrates that the Qalawun Hospital served as a medical facility and played a significant social welfare role by offering financial aid to those in need. During that period, however, individuals categorized as “protected persons” (dhimmī), such as Jews and Christians, were not allowed admission to the hospital, access to advanced medical care provided by hospitals with chief physicians, and were strictly forbidden from involvement in its management, which was exclusively reserved for the Islamic community (Qalawun VR Project, 2019).

The madrasa

Last, the madrasa is located on the left side of the entrance. According to Maqrizi, a 15th-century historian and a contemporary of the Mamluks, the madrasa was established

to impart knowledge in the four schools of Islamic law, hadith studies, and medicine. Although a fragmentary waqf document provides a detailed account of the madrasa's architectural features and restoration efforts, it does not explicitly mention its educational function.

The madrasa's layout comprises two unequal major *iwans* (vaulted hall that is open on one side) and two recesses referred to as *suffa* in the waqf deed, indicating their recessed nature. This design deviates from the cruciform plan of the Baybars madrasa but aligns more closely with the configuration of al-Salih Najm al-Din madrasa, featuring two blocks, each containing two iwans, arranged around a courtyard with cells along the lateral sides. Notably, the document describes the courtyard as *durqa'a*, a term commonly associated with the central space of a residential hall, rather than *sahn*, typically used for an open courtyard. This choice of terminology suggests a residential Cairene influence on the layout, possibly inspired by the Fatimid Palace that previously occupied the site (Soliman & Elkhateeb, 2022).

This blend of educational and residential elements in the madrasa's design reflects its multifaceted purpose, serving as both a center of learning and a place of communal living for students. The architectural features highlighted in the waqf document underscore the meticulous planning and attention to detail invested in the construction and maintenance of this institution, emphasizing its significance within the intellectual and social fabric of medieval Cairo (Abouseif, 2007).

3.2 DECORATIVE ELEMENTS

The Qalawun complex is filled with details that the eyes cannot process at one glance; the stunning features start with the massiveness of the building from the exterior. A noticeable exterior feature is the window (Qalawun Set), which consists of two arched window openings, topped by a *qamaria*—a rounded window that is usually covered with coloured glass. This window design gives a bit of reference to the Gothic window style (Figure 5).

The mausoleum's inner walls are distinguished by a marble veneer set with exquisite mother-of-pearl, which is regarded as some of the best ornamental marble found in Egyptian Islamic architecture. The pattern on the entrance door is one of the earliest eight-pattern stars; the intricacy of the work established in this complex set the benchmark for the mamluk architecture and decoration, as it was one of the earliest Mamluk monuments (Figure 6); the door itself is made of wood that is covered with brass (Ghunaim, 2023).

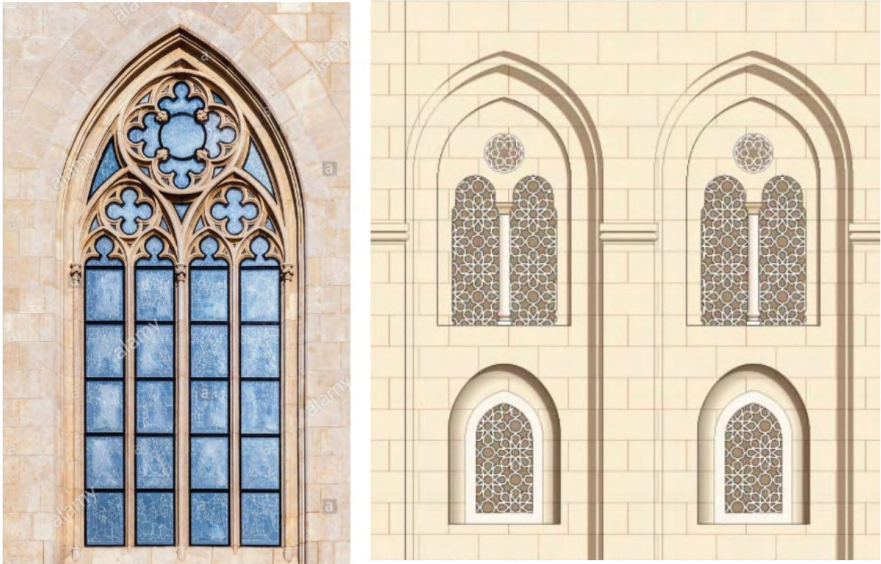


Figure 5. A Gothic window design (left). Elevation represents the Qalawun complex by Ahmed Hafez (right) Source: Hafez, 2021.

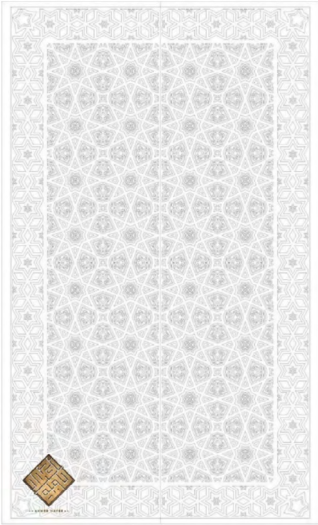


Figure 6. The detailed pattern on the complex entrance door by Ahmed Hafez. Source: Hafez, 2021.

Considering the grand scale of the complex and the pressing requirement for a sizable labor force, a stucco factory was carefully set up on a vacant Dar al-Qutbiyya property (Ghunaim, 2023). This move, which Amir al-Shuja probably made, was both economically sensible and helpful in increasing the craftsmen's productivity. The complex's extensive use of finely carved stucco decorations—most notably in the mausoleum—emphasizes this workshop's role in providing the required ornamentation. The workshop's proximity to the building site allowed for quick access to materials and promoted close coordination between the builders and artisans. Stucco decorations were fabricated close to the complex, reducing shipping costs and easing logistical issues.

Furthermore, it is possible that the workshop functioned as a center for creativity and invention, encouraging a cooperative atmosphere where craftspeople could improve their methods and create exquisite stucco embellishments. In addition, the choice to locate the workshop on Dar al-Qutbiyya's adjoining property demonstrates meticulous resource management and planning. The building project moved on easily and effectively because it made the most of the available space and the infrastructure already in place. In addition to saving time and money, this calculated move enhanced the Qalawun complex's overall success and grandeur, leaving a lasting testament to its superb architectural design and artistic skill (Abdulfattah, 2020).

The patterned designs on the interior walls of the mausoleum are said to be inspired by craftsmen from Sicily; Qalawun's role in the fast-moving building of the complex within the short 14-month timeframe seems to have been minimal, with al-Shuja taking on a large portion of the decision-making duties. Al-Shuja's influence may also be seen in the experimental ornamental elements and the integration of diverse spolia from various sources. Certain elements, like the dado in the tomb and the Cosmatesque pavement, came to define high Mamluk architecture. These decorations, with their comparable color schemes and geometric patterns, are reminiscent of Siculo-Norman interiors seen in Palermo in the 12th century, especially in buildings like the Cathedral of Monreale and Cappella Palatine. This resemblance, even though a century separated them, is frequently ascribed to the existence of itinerant artisans under al-Shuja's supervision (Abdulfattah, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

The Qalawun complex stands as a remarkable testament to the architectural and social achievements of Egypt's Mamluk era. Divided into three main zones—the bimaristan, the madrasa, and the mausoleum—the complex served not only as a center of learning and worship but also as a hub of charity, medical care, and financial support to Muslims of all backgrounds, which ultimately redefines the typology of an ordinary funerary/madrasa complex. Its exterior facade, designed with intricate decorative elements, reflects a blend of Islamic and Western architectural influences, suggesting a rich cultural exchange during the Mamluk period.

The mausoleum, with its carefully designed entrance and symbolic wooden cenotaph, embodies the transition from Ayyubid to Mamluk rule, symbolized by the replacement of

the old dome with a new one under Qalawun's reign. The hospital's inclusive policy and innovative features, such as financial assistance for patients, highlight the complex's commitment to social welfare. Meanwhile, the madrasa's layout and architectural elements reveal a blend of educational and residential functions, reflecting its multifaceted role in medieval Cairo.

The decorative elements found throughout the complex, from the intricate marble veneer to the Gothic-inspired Qalawun Set window, showcase the exquisite craftsmanship and artistic innovation of the Mamluk period. The establishment of a stucco workshop adjacent to the site further emphasizes the meticulous planning and resource management behind the complex's construction, underlining its significance as a masterpiece of architectural design and cultural exchange.

In conclusion, the Qalawun complex is a testament to the ingenuity, vision, and philanthropy of Sultan Qalawun and the Mamluk rulers of Egypt. Its architectural and social significance transcends time, offering a window into the rich history and cultural heritage of medieval Cairo.

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Haithm Galal Mohammed is a graduate of the Master of Science program in Islamic Art, Architecture, and Urbanism (Class of 2025) at the College of Islamic Studies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, with a bachelor's degree in Architectural Engineering. His main scope of interest revolves around vernacular and Islamic architecture. He has been involved in various initiative that advocates traditional building. He is particularly interested in contemporary approaches to designing domestic and sacred architecture inspired by traditional architecture in Muslim communities.

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