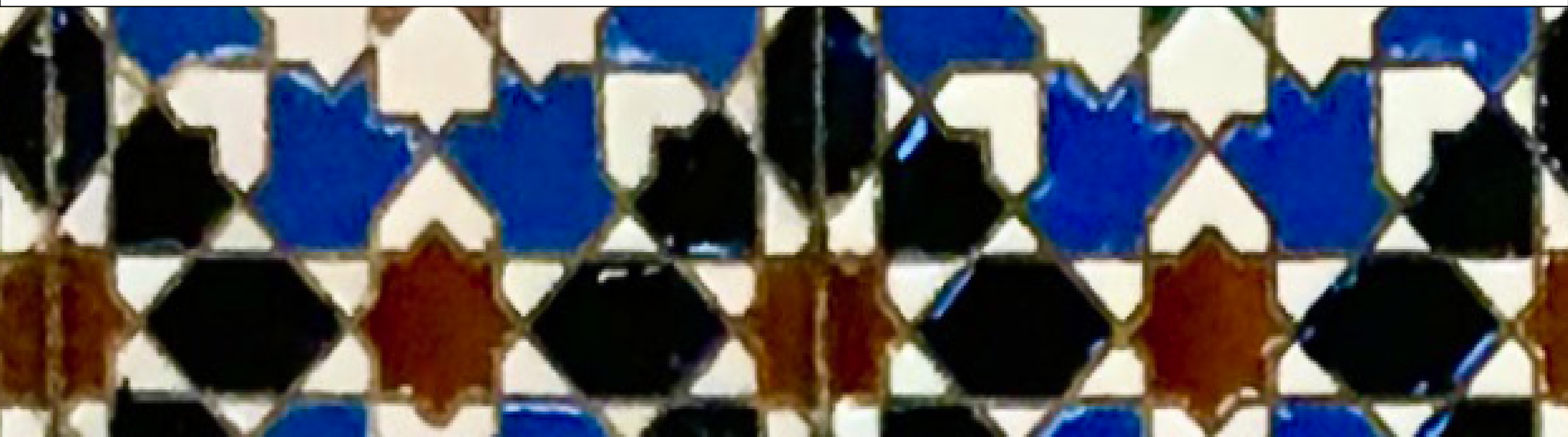
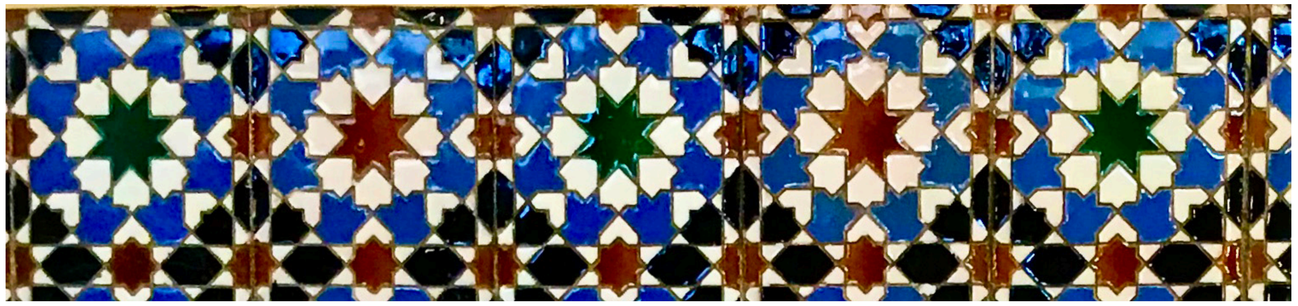
2019

Pattern Research Project: An Investigation of The Pattern And Printing Process - Islamic Tiling

Sophie Kozlowski

Islamic Tiling





An Investigation of Islamic Tiling in the Altria Theater

Sophie Kozlowski - Pattern Research Project - IDES 231/251

History of the Altria Theater

The site of the Altria Theater was purchased in 1918 by Clinton L. Williams, who was a member of the Acca Shriners. After almost ten years of construction and 1.65 million dollars later, **the building opened in 1927** as the "Mosque Theater". It was designed by head architect Marcellus Right, and associate architects Charles M. Robinson and Charles Custer Robinson, and "the ornamental tile was done by J.R. Ray of the Richmond Tile and Mosaic Works" (Brownell, 1992). The original plans included a 4,600 seat theater, 42 hotel rooms, a pool, and more.

The city of Richmond bought the Mosque Theater in 1940, but by the mid 1990s, it was in need of a restoration; the repair work carried out in 1994-96 by original architects Wright and the Robinson's was mostly cosmetic. Once these restorations were complete, the city renamed the building the "Landmark Theater".

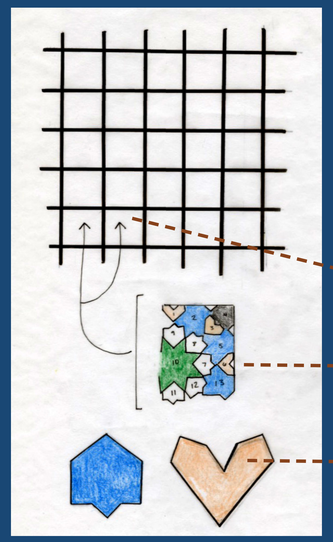
Since there was no structural renovation done at this time, by 2002 the theater was in critical need for more updates. According to **Wilson Butler Architects** (2018), the company "was hired by the City of Richmond to complete a comprehensive citywide arts master plan, leading the way to a decade of reinvestment in art programming, facilities, and partnerships". This began a 63 million dollar restoration, consisting of infrastructural updates as well as refurbishing original details. All of the building's "Moorish Revival style exterior minarets, paintings, and decorative tile work were **authentically restored**" (Bear, 2017) based on historic photographs, making sure these features retained their original 1920s appearance.

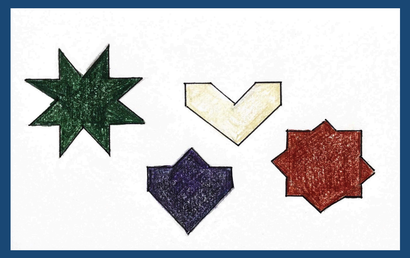
Wilson Butler Architects' main goal was to bring the building into the modern day without taking away its original elements. In 2014, after the renovations were complete, the building was **renamed once again to the Altria Theater**, and is currently one of the most well known and astonishing buildings in Richmond.

The exterior of the Altria Theater
https://historiccredit.com/news-items/the-altria-theater-richmond-va/

Lobby of the theater showing extensive tilework
http://www.wilsonbutler.com/project/altria-theater/

Craft Study





The tiles are placed in a grid system, creating the pattern.

The tesserae are arranged to form tiles, each with an 8-pointed star in its center. These tiles are grouted together making the 6x6" squares - the physical samples that could be held.

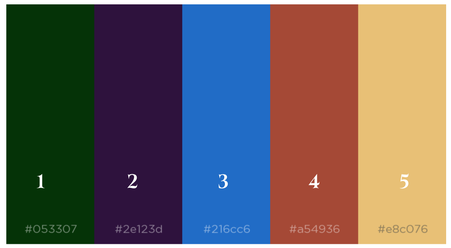
Individual pieces of the mosaic called tesserae (also pictured above).

Left : The first stage of creating ceramic tile.
http://www.horseshoemountainpottery.com/joe/blog/?tag=slab-made-pottery

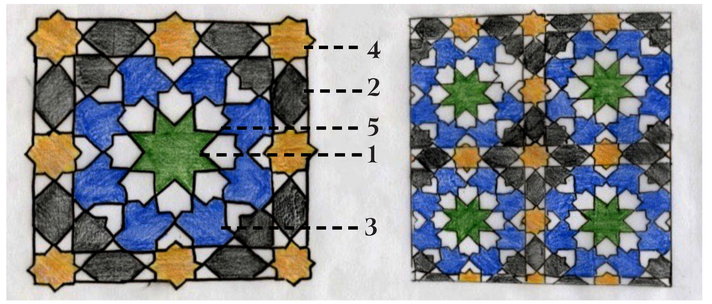
Lower Left : An electric kiln. These were invented in the early 20th century, and were most likely the type of kiln used for the ceramic tile in the Altria.
https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/daily/firing-techniques/electric-kiln-firing/introduction-electric-pottery-kilns/

Below : The finished product, tiling on a column in the Altria.

Color Study



#1 : Forest Green
#2 : Dark Purple
#3 : Bright, Royal Blue
#4 : Burnt Orange/Red
#5 : Cream/Beige

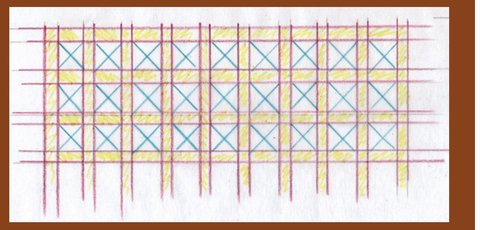


Design Study

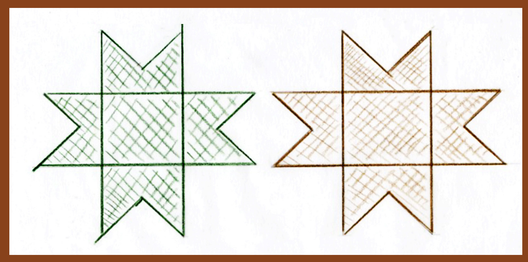
Grid Analysis

Pink : Indicates the vertical and horizontal lines that make up the grid.

Yellow : This shows the outlines of the individual squares, which are made up of the dark purple and burnt orange/red tesserae.



Blue : Indicates each of the square tiles with a star in its center.



8-Pointed Star

A key element to this design is the 8-pointed star (pictured above), which is at the center of each tile, and identifies the repeat . It draws in the viewer's eye and crystallizes the pattern for them.

Pattern Repeat :

This pattern repeats with **every 6x6" square**, as shown below outlined in red. Each of these squares alternates between a red or green central star.

Color

This pattern features five different colors on the individual tesserae that make up the larger tile. These colors are formed by applying glaze to ceramic tile, and then firing the tiles again to give them their rich, glassy colors.

Craft & Materiality

Islamic mosaics like this one are made up of small pieces of glass, stone, or in this case, natural clay, which are referred to as **"tesserae"**. To make these tiny pieces, clay is first rolled out into large slabs about the width of a pinky finger. Next, the clay is pressed into molds to create hundreds of identical pieces. The makers of this particular pattern would have used molds of diamonds, stars, and other geometric shapes. Next, the molded pieces are fired in kilns at approximately 1,000 degrees fahrenheit. After this initial firing, the now-hardened tesserae are covered with a glaze that will provide color and protection against the elements for walls in a building. Next, the pieces are fired again, chemically bonding the color to the clay.

After the second firing, the tesserae are removed from the kilns and **arranged in their desired pattern** face down. When all of the pieces are in place, plaster is poured over the back and between all of the cracks, bonding all of the pieces together. Then, once the plaster or grouting has dried, the finished tile can be lifted and placed into position on a wall. In this pattern, tesserae are arranged into the 6x6" squares which are plastered together. These would have been the tiles that were placed onto the columns in the lobby of the Altria.

Design

This pattern consists of **repeating 6x6" square tiles**. These squares are each made up of individual tesserae that come together to form the pattern's repeat. All the shapes in these tiles are varying geometries, meaning it is a **tessellation**, which is defined as "an arrangement of shapes closely fitted together, especially of polygons in a repeated pattern without gaps or overlapping".

This pattern is arranged on a **basic grid**, which can easily be seen as each tile or square is in its own grid "cell". All of the six-inch squares are outlined by vertical and horizontal elements that contain a diamond and an eight-pointed star, highlighting the lines of the grid. Each of the tiles also has a green or burnt orangey/red star in its center, making the squares and the pattern repeat easily identifiable for the viewer.

Use

The original users of this facility were the Acca Shriners, who designed this building to look like a mosque, hence the great presence of Islamic tiling and **Moorish Revival style**. Instead of changing the building's theme, the tiling has been restored throughout the years, remaining the same since its original contruction. Today, people from all over the country experience this pattern when attending plays, musicals, and concerts at the Altria Theater.

History & Culture

Geometric patterns such as this one are closely associated with Islamic art, largely because of their **aniconic qualities.** Although not officially prohibited, iconography was frowned upon in the Islamic religion, as "Islamic art focuses on the spiritual representation of objects and beings, and not their physical qualities" (BBC, 2009). This particular pattern is a tile mosaic. The elaborate and time-consuming technique of creating these mosaics was first used and developed substantially in Anatolia in the 13th and 14th centuries, and has since spread to much of Asia and Europe.

This particular mosaic located in the lobby of the Altria theater is **typical of Islamic design**, combining, duplicating, and arranging geometric shapes into a pattern. It also features some of the most popular Islamic motifs, including the eight-pointed star, representing light and knowledge.

Tilework like this specific pattern has been a "favorite means of decorating architecture throughout the Islamic lands" (Porter, 2008, p. 8) for centuries, and continues to bring color and luxurious designs to mosques and shrines to this day.