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

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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 1926 by Clinton C. Williams, who was a member of the Acna Shriners. Almost ten years of construction and 55 million dollars later, the building opened in 1937 as the "Mosque Theater." It was designed by head architect Marcellus Wright and associate architect Charles W. Robinson and Charles Custer Robinson, and the monumental site was done by H. Say of the Richmond H & Mbps Works (Browning, 1993). The original design included a 6000 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, in 2003 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 degree of resourceful in art programming, facilities, and partnerships. This began a 63 million dollar restoration consisting of infrastructural updates as well as refurbishing partnerships. All of the building’s Moorish Revival style exterior mosaics, 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 astounding buildings in Richmond.

Use
The original users of this facility were the Acca Shriners, who designed that 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 as its original construction. 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. In Islam, are depicted in the spiritual representations of objects and beings, and not their physical qualities (BBC, 2009). This particular pattern is a tile mosaic. The technique and time-consuming technique of creating these mosaics was first invented and developed substantially in Andalusia in the 12th and 13th 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.

This type of pattern features five different colors on the individual tiles that come together to form the pattern repeat. All the shapes in these tiles are varying geometries, making it a tessellation, which is defined as an arrangement of shapes closely fitted together, especially polygons in a repeated pattern without gaps or overlapping. This pattern is arranged in a basic grid which can easily be represented in squares in its own grid cell. All of the small squares are outlined by vertical and horizontal elements that make the grid and an eight-pointed star. Highlighting the lines of the grid, each of the tiles also has a green or burnt orange red dot in its center making the squares and the pattern easy to identify for the viewer.

Color
Islamic mosaic tiles 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 long slabs about the width of a pinky finger. Next, the clay is pressed into molds to make hundreds of identical pieces. The makers of this particular pattern would have used natural colors of earth and other pigments. Next, these molded pieces are fired in kilns at approximately 1000 degrees Fahrenheit. After the final firing, the tiles are then cleaned or covered with a glaze that will provide color and protection against the elements to stick on a building. Next, the pieces are cut out again, chemically breaking the color in 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 is poured, the tiles are left in their lifted and placed into position on a wall. In this pattern, tesserae are arranged into the final squares which are plastered together to create the individual 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 repeat. All the shapes in these tiles are varying geometries, making it a tessellation, which is defined as an arrangement of shapes closely fitted together, especially polygons in a repeated pattern without gaps or overlapping. This pattern is arranged in a basic grid which can easily be represented in squares in its own grid cell. All of the small squares are outlined by vertical and horizontal elements that make the grid and an eight-pointed star. Highlighting the lines of the grid, each of the tiles also has a green or burnt orange red dot in its center making the squares and the pattern easy to identify for the viewer.

Pattern Repeat
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 viewers eye and crystallizes the pattern for them.