

CALL FOR PAPERS

International Journal of Islamic Architecture (IJIA)

Special Issue: The Urgency of the Digital

Thematic volume planned for July 1, 2025

Proposal submission deadline: June 15, 2023

This special issue focuses on the critical and urgent use of digital tools, interfaces, media, and methods for the study and design of Islamic architecture, cities, and the built environment. Over recent decades, architectural historians, architects, and other specialists of the built environment have drawn increasingly on digitized databases, digital data, and processing software to reimagine the history, documentation, design, and construction of buildings, gardens, and cities wholesale. Representations of historical, contemporary, razed and never-built structures are now fully realizable, and massive corpora of information that once took many months or years to sort can now be analyzed in seconds. Yet, digital tools, infrastructures, and databases bring their own set of concerns. Databases, like all archives, do not merely *contain* information, they *are* information. And as such, they bear the marks of the epistemologies that shape them. Digital files are always remediating, meaning that they are the products of multiple human interventions, just as analogue media are. Some of the platforms that facilitate virtual reality simulations of architecture, cities, and transcontinental migrations enjoy an uncomfortable kinship with the pervasive governmental and private surveillance technologies in use today. Artificial intelligence (AI) has enormous potential to transform the way that architects, city planners, and historical preservationists work, and yet racial, gendered, ethnic, and religious biases in the datasets that machine-learning algorithms employ raise questions about the ramifications of these undertakings. Digital frameworks enable more expansive, multi-layered, and speculative investigations of buildings, cities, and spaces, but they also demand rigorous scrutiny.

With computational tools, the many lengthy geographies in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and other languages that scholars have long mined for textual evidence of architectural, urban design, construction, and migration practices can be analyzed at scale. This approach—what’s known in digital humanities parlance as “distant reading”—permits the identification of historical patterns, common literary forms, and intellectual networks that might have eluded analogue methods. It therefore allows texts to be understood as part of broader, interrelated phenomena rather than as isolated works. The capacity for large-scale textual processing may seem especially well-suited to works, like geographies, that are themselves large-scale and densely packed with information. However, many distant reading technologies have historically privileged left-to-right and Roman scripts, and thus betray disciplinary biases that require their own rumination and interpretation.

Endeavors underway to remedy these technological and hermeneutical morasses can bring their own insights. For example, the aim of the University of Maryland-based Open Islamicate Texts Initiative’s Arabic-script Optical Character Recognition Project (OpenITI AOCP) is to create technical infrastructure to process texts that use Arabic scripts. Comprising a team of literary

specialists, historians, and computer scientists, this initiative models an interdisciplinary, collaborative working approach that bears on how humanities scholars form research hypotheses and conduct investigations. In such contexts, digital work can be urgent, generative, and transformative.

Along similar lines, proposed articles might investigate how software that was created for the analysis of French Gothic churches or the drafting of architecture using English-language commands transfers (or does not transfer) to the study and design of buildings in the Islamic world. Authors might probe how the study of, for instance, *madrasas* or gardens through the schemes of big data differs from finer-grained investigations that focus on a single monument, or what it means to use Cartesian coordinate systems to map realms that were perceived and traversed historically through non-Cartesian lenses. The urgent use of digital files and technologies to reconstruct the physical spaces where crimes against humanity have occurred, like the Forensic Architecture research group does, might also be taken up.

Digital databases and archives offer another avenue ripe for investigation. Troves of image, sound, video, and text files are seemingly but a click away. Yet, for many, digitized collections remain out of reach due to paywalls, government censorship, copyright restrictions, inadequate internet speeds, frequent brownouts, and a reliance on monolingual (often English-language) interfaces. Migrants, minorities, people with disabilities, and certain genders also face obstacles accessing digital content online. We must then ask what it means to study and reproduce digitized representations of buildings, cities, and built environments of the Islamic world that are not accessible to those who are, or once were, local to those places. According to what paradigms are these data organized, and how are they and their metadata made digitally findable? Digitization of archival materials, for that matter, incurs enormous costs in terms of the use of labor, skill, materials, and computer servers. Who is shouldering those financial and ecological burdens, and why? And how are decisions made regarding which files are prioritized for digitization?

This special issue encourages contributions that address the urgent promises and risks that digital infrastructures, tools, and approaches hold. We invite paper proposals that employ a wide spectrum of approaches, including but not limited to spatial mapping, social network analysis, distant reading, photogrammetry, 3D printing, virtual reality and augmented reality simulators, humanities gaming, and electronic publishing, among other topics addressing contexts in or involving the Islamic world. Paper proposals may also examine how digital collections, interfaces, and software bear on the study and design of Islamic architecture, cities, and the built environment. Contributors are asked to reflect on what the translation of sources and evidence into electronic data entails, how these acts upend questions and procedures that are fundamental to our fields, and what pressing limitations and potentials the digital brings.

Proposals should work from the framework outlined above. We encourage contributors to consider the themes of this special issue as they pertain to less frequently represented geographies such as sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Submissions

addressing considerations of race, gender, migration, disability, and minority communities are particularly welcome.

Questions that might be addressed by contributors to this special issue might include:

1. What does it mean to investigate and design the built environment through a data-centric lens? What do digital approaches offer disciplines that are materially and pragmatically oriented? And how do we maintain any critical distance from the digital when we are also irretrievably and fully immersed within it?
2. How does the computer see architectural forms and styles? How do large image datasets provide a corpus for reimagining architecture, landscape, city planning, and historic preservation in the Islamic world? What does AI—machine learning and its algorithms, especially—bring to the design process?
3. What roles do digital databases and archives play in the design and study of architecture in the Islamic world today? Who has ready access to these materials, and why? How have earlier histories of classification, information design, and computers come to bear on contemporary naming authorities, information retrieval, and metadata management?
4. How can (and should) computers and digital processes be used to reconstitute buildings, cities, landscapes, and built environments that have been destroyed, replaced, looted, or never excavated? Towards what ends might these same technologies be employed to speculatively imagine architecture that was never built, or to investigate state violence and violations of human rights? What are the ethical and practical implications of these enterprises?
5. How do digital technologies remediate architectural photographs, plans, drawings, and other media, and what are the broader ramifications of these processes? What connections, if any, do these phenomena have with the histories of earlier media?
6. What are the promises and pitfalls of big data approaches to the study of architecture and architectural history? How might current and historical acts of state-sponsored surveillance, documentation, and data science inflect and inform these endeavors?
7. In what ways are current digital tools and approaches like digital mapping with GIS, distant reading, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence suited—or ill-suited—to the study of architecture and space in the Islamic world? How should the digital be leveraged towards more emic ends, if at all?

8. How have digital technologies made previously “hidden” architectural histories of marginalized communities more visible? What are the costs and benefits of making information belonging (or that once belonged) to vulnerable and underrepresented groups publicly accessible?
9. How might digital tools and processes bridge the study of the Islamic built environment with that of other artifacts bearing pictorial representations of architecture and space, such as manuscripts, printed books, photographs, and ceramic tiles? How might the digital challenge long-standing disciplinary boundaries that have removed architecture from the study of portable media?

Articles offering historical and theoretical analysis (Design in Theory; DiT) should be between 6000 and 8000 words. Those on design and practice (Design in Practice; DiP) should be between 3000 and 4000 words. Practitioners, urbanists, art historians, specialists in literary and religious studies, archivists, librarians, data scientists, software developers, anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, and historians whose work resonates with the topic of this special issue are welcome to contribute discussions that address the critical themes of the journal. Collaboratively authored articles are also welcome. Please send a title and a 400-word abstract to the guest editor, Yael Rice, Amherst College (IJIA25Digital@gmail.com), by June 15, 2023. Authors of proposals will be contacted by July 1, 2023, and may be requested to submit full article drafts for consideration by January 30, 2024. All submissions will undergo blind peer review, editing, and revision. For detailed author instructions, please consult: www.intellectbooks.com/ijia.