

Architecture in India

Delhi & Agra



Architecture in India: Delhi & Agra

Version 1.1

by David Raezer and Jennifer Raezer

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Introduction

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The architectural legacy of India's Mughal Empire (1526-1858) — with monuments concentrated in its great historical capitals of Delhi and Agra — is one of the richest in the world. This Approach Guide serves as an ideal companion for travelers seeking a deeper understanding of the art and architecture of this great Islamic Empire.

Mughal architecture in India

Mughal, in Arabic and Persian, means Mongol. The Empire acquired its name due to the fact that Babur, a Timurid prince who invaded India and unified control of the Delhi area, was descended from Genghis Khan, founder of the Mongol Empire. Although the Timurids were of Turkicized Mongol origin, they embraced Persian cultural traditions.

In India, the Timurids' Persian-inspired architectural heritage naturally served as the foundation for the Mughal style. However, it is far from being a Persian tradition replanted on Indian soil. The Mughals created a unique style of their own by perfecting earlier Persian forms and incorporating some building practices and aesthetic preferences of the indigenous Hindu population.

This Approach Guide begins by laying out the defining characteristics of the blended Mughal architectural style: first, its Timurid-influenced foundations; and second, its unique Hindu features. To make it easier to identify the defining characteristics for each style, this guide includes high-resolution images that highlight key architectural elements.

Detailed site profiles with high-resolution images

For each site in this guidebook, we focus on the most important aspects of its history, layout, and distinguishing features. Our goal is to provide you with a framework for understanding the site, how it fits into the overall landscape of Mughal architecture, and how it relates to similar sites.

This Approach Guide provides detailed profiles of **11 of Delhi's and Agra's most important architectural sites**:

- In **Delhi**, this guide takes you on a tour of Humayun's Tomb, the Jama Masjid, and Safdarjung's Tomb. There are also brief profiles of several non-Mughal sites: Qutb Minar, Quwwat-al-Islam Mosque, Alai Darwaza Gateway, Ghiyath ad-Din Tughluq's Tomb, and Moth-Ki Masjid.
- In **Agra**, this guide takes you on a tour of Akbar's Tomb, the Tomb of I'timad ad-Dawla, and the Taj Mahal.

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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into India's Islamic architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Have a great trip!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Raezer" followed by a flourish.

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides

Timeline for the Mughal Empire

The Mughal Empire — spanning over three hundred years from 1526-1858 — is responsible for India's greatest Islamic architecture. The greatest period of building was concentrated in the first half of the Empire's reign, under a small group of inspired leaders:

- **Babur.** Ruled 1526-1530. Founder of the Mughal Empire. See the next section for more details on Babur.
- **Humayun.** Ruled 1530-43 and 1555-56.
- **Akbar.** Ruled 1556-1605. A prodigious builder, Emperor Akbar played an instrumental role in shaping the Mughal architectural style.
- **Jahangir.** Ruled 1605-1627. Architecture under Emperor Jahangir served as an important bridge between Akbar and Shah Jahan.
- **Shah Jahan.** Ruled 1628-1658. Emperor Shah Jahan brought Mughal architecture to its highest levels of refinement and expression; his reign is seen as comprising the Classic period.
- **Aurangzeb.** Ruled 1658-1707.

The end of Aurangzeb's reign marks the beginning of the **Late Mughal Period**, during which the Empire went into a steep decline, ending in the deposition of the last emperor by the British in 1858.

The Mughal Style: Timurid Foundation

Persian-inspired Timurid architecture served as the foundation for the Mughal style's floorplans, facade arrangements, and decorative aesthetic.

This section explores — on a feature-by-feature basis — the defining characteristics of the Mughal architectural style that were shaped by that of the Timurids. For each architectural feature, this guide provides a detailed description (with explanatory images) and a perspective on how it changed over time; in specific cases, original Timurid structures are shown to draw parallels.

Floorplans & Layouts

Ninefold plan (a.k.a. hasht bihisht, meaning “eight paradises”)

The quintessential layout for Mughal **funerary structures** (and also residential structures under Akbar), the ninefold plan begins with an overall square- or rectangle-shaped structure; the corners are typically squared off to form an irregular octagon. This basic shape is sub-divided into nine discrete, but interconnected, rooms: a central, domed chamber, surrounded by eight rooms: four in the corners (two floors in height and vaulted; they are marked in green highlights [Fig. 1](#)) and four in the spaces between them (comprising the entranceways; they are marked in red highlights in [Fig. 1](#)). These tomb structures were typically aligned along a north-south axis; the body of the deceased was laid along this axis, with his head pointed west toward Mecca.

Although the ninefold plan has clear Timurid precedent, it was clearly given its greatest, most perfect expression under the Mughals. Perhaps this is because tomb structures were assigned particularly high importance in the Mughal architectural hierarchy. Since succession to the Mughal throne was not regulated by primogeniture, emperors had strong incentive to build elaborate tombs, as there was no better way to preserve their legacies.

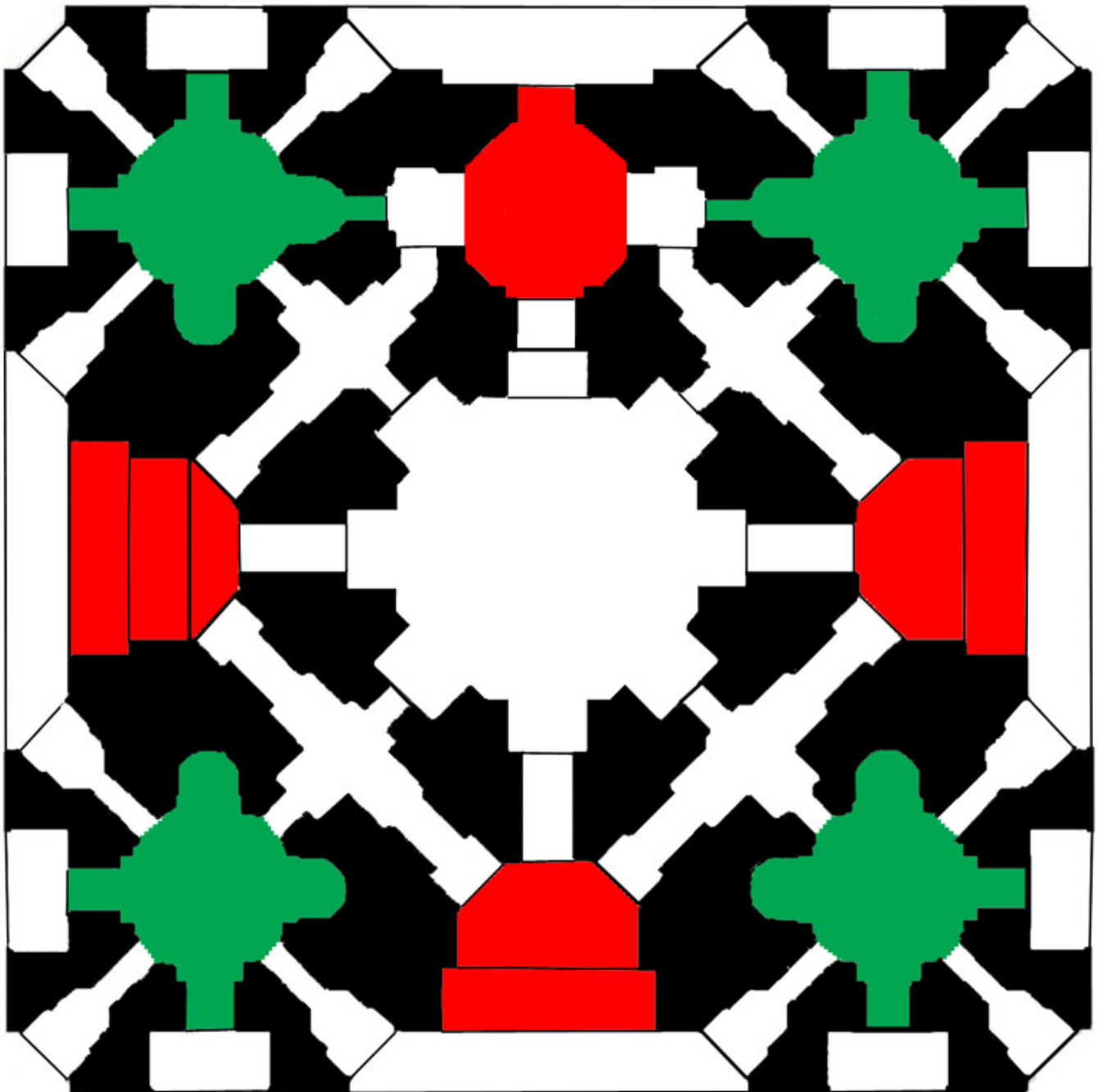


Fig. 1. Ninefold plan (Humayun's Tomb, Delhi). Highlights added.

Gardens (a.k.a. charbagh)

The Persian-inspired Timurid garden was the standard layout for tomb complexes; with its lush vegetation and running water, it was meant to symbolize the deceased's everlasting post-mortem paradise.

The charbagh consists of a square or rectangular courtyard divided into four equal parts by two

The Mughal Style: Hindu Features

The Mughal style is one that could have only happened on Indian soil. While it remains at its core a Timurid tradition, it has many distinctive features that were shaped by the indigenous Hindu building tradition. Accordingly, this section picks up where we left off in exploring the defining characteristics of the Mughal architectural style, only here we identify those derived from Hindu influences.

While some Timurid-Hindu blending would have naturally occurred, the degree of blending is probably greater than it would have otherwise been since it served a valuable **political agenda**. As a small Islamic minority seeking to control a vastly larger Hindu population, the Mughals sought to project reconciliation and inclusion by incorporating indigenous design features.

Stone Construction Replaces Brick

The Hindus had a longstanding tradition of building in stone and the Mughals elected to adopt this medium. Accordingly, the prevailing local stones of the area around Delhi — red sandstone and marble — replaced the baked bricks of Persian-derived Timurid construction.

Key Structures Elevated on Platforms

Following in the tradition of Hindu and Buddhist architecture, Mughal builders often utilized a podium or platform (a broad stone-built slab) to elevate the key structures (usually the tomb or a mosque) above the rest of a complex, thereby giving it greater visibility to the community and assigning it heightened importance. Timurid structures were not placed on platforms.

Stone Carved Decoration Replaces Tiles

Perhaps more than in any other religious architecture, decoration is critical to achieving the goals of Islamic architecture. Accordingly, architects cover surfaces with intricate, three-dimensional textured decorations that exhibit seemingly **unlimited possibilities of extension, thereby creating the feeling of structural weightlessness, continuous space, and the infinite**; this has the effect of alluding to the divine or eternity.

In the Timurid tradition, this was achieved with brightly colored, glazed tiles that created complex, all-over geometric and vegetative patterning; tile-based inscriptions were also employed for narrative and decorative effect. For a good example of this all-over tilework, see [Fig. 5](#) from the prior section.

In Mughal architecture, while this all-over patterning and inscription aesthetic was maintained, the medium changed. **The Mughals replicated the look of glazed tiles used in Timurid architecture with stone carved decoration.** Stone carved decoration is a trademark of Indian architecture and is derived from Hindu and Buddhist temple precedent.



Fig. 10. Decorative changes (clockwise from top left). chini khana bas-relief in red sandstone; stone intarsia inlay in red sandstone; pietre dure inlay in white marble.

Rectangular framing grid

- This is an early (albeit not the first) Mughal use of the pishtaq, a large, rectangle-shaped portal that frames a monumental arched entranceway (iwan).
- The pishtaq is a part of a rectangular framing grid that runs throughout the facade. The same rectangular form (with an inscribed arch) appears in a range of form factors: the central pishtaq (the largest), the flanking arched iwans, the arched vestibules in the podium, and the arched decorative frames (the smallest). See red highlights on Fig. 26.
- The facade adheres to the standard five-part plan. See yellow highlights in Fig. 26.

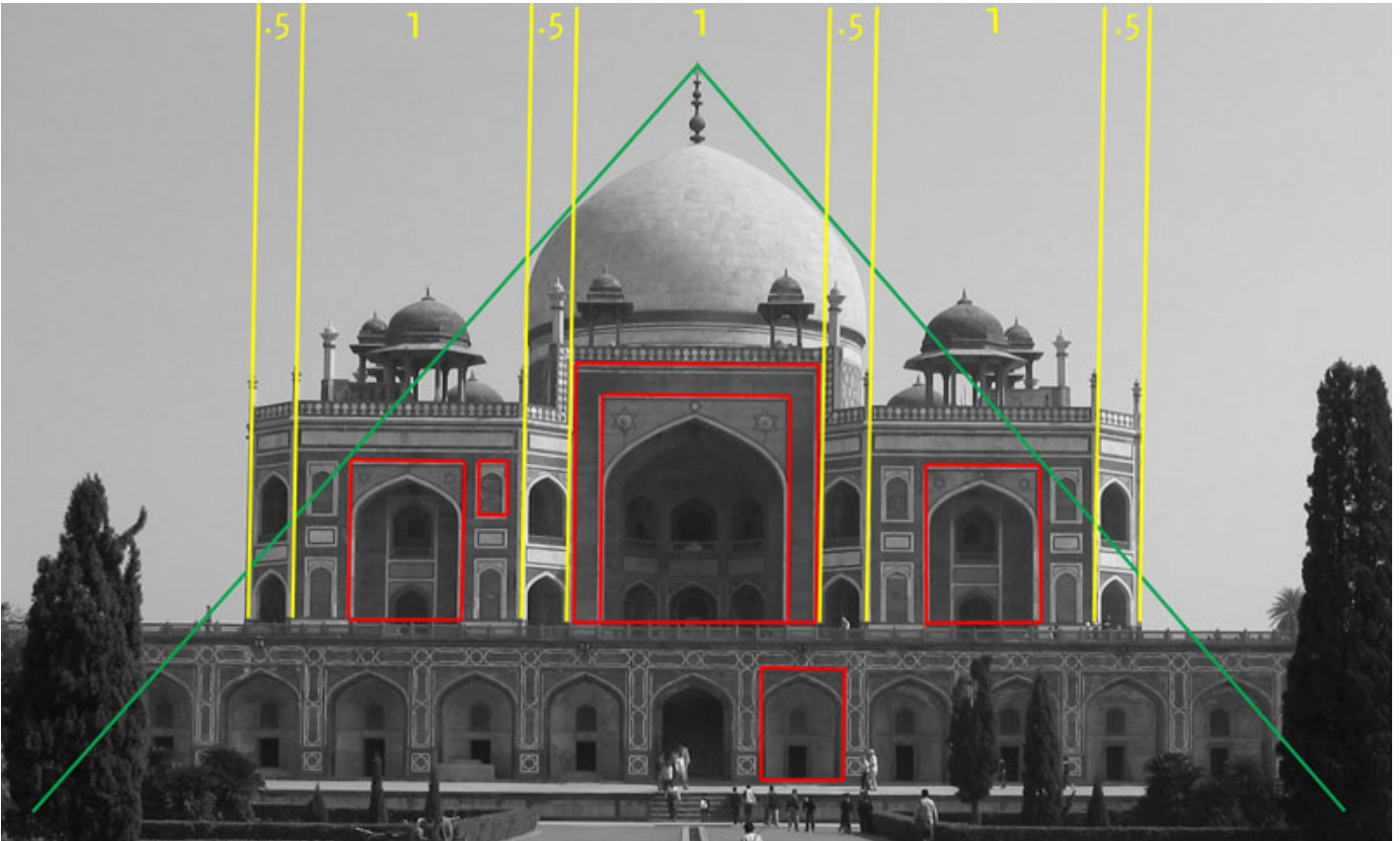


Fig. 26. Humayun's Tomb, Delhi.

Hierarchical color accents of basic stone intarsia

- Other than the prominent white marble-clad dome, marble highlights are confined largely to decorative elements. This is consistent with the earliest stage of hierarchical color accents. (The three stages are laid out in the section entitled “The Mughal Style - Timurid Foundations”.)
- There is basic stone intarsia inlay decoration — white marble inlay on a red sandstone background — in various part of the façade: surrounding the arches of the podium, on the pishtaq, and on the upper fringe of the facade.
- Inlay decoration will increase in detail, range of color, and complexity in future tombs, particularly under Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

Taj Mahal

- Mughal Period. Built 1632-52 by Shah Jahan (ruled 1628-1658).
- The Taj Mahal was built as a tomb complex for Shah Jahan's favorite wife (Mumtaz Mahal, which was later corrupted to "Taj Mahal") soon after she had given birth to their fourteenth child (no typo).
- Chronologically, it is the fourth built of the five Mughal tombs that are profiled in this Approach Guide. It represents the **apex of the Mughal style**.

Hierarchical color accents: from building to complex

- The primary tomb structure is constructed entirely of white marble brought from Makrana (near Jodhpur), Rajasthan. Secondary structures are constructed in red sandstone.
- **Hierarchical color accents taken to their logical conclusion.** While hierarchical color accents — white marble against a red sandstone base — began under Jahangir at Akbar's Tomb, this concept has now been extended from the building level to the entire complex: **Whereas under Jahangir, highlight features were clad in white limestone (domes, doors, and even entire floors), Shah Jahan clads the entire tomb building and platform in marble, highlighting it from the rest of the surrounding red sandstone complex.** The concept has reached its ultimate expression.

Ninefold plan par excellence

- This funerary building's floorplan corresponds to the ninefold plan par excellence, following in the tradition of the tombs of Humayun and I'timad ad-Dawla.
- Notably, **the chamfered corners** first introduced with the plan of Humayun's Tomb have returned; the floorplan assumes the overall shape of an irregular octagon. And as at Humayun's Tomb, **this overall shape is replicated in its constituent parts:** each of the four corner chambers is itself an irregular octagon. Accordingly, the façade's reuse of the octagonal shape affords it a particularly high degree of balance and symmetry. As discussed earlier, **uniform, repetitive shapes** were used by the Mughals to express the feeling of continuous space and divine infinity.
- **What makes the Taj Mahal the greatest expression of the ninefold plan is that the nine-chambered floorplan is of the same dimensions as the facade elevation.** Accordingly, the Taj Mahal's dimensions are those of a **perfect cube**; there is absolute symmetry.

***Author Tip:** To illustrate this last, critical point, we have overlaid a transparency of the tomb's floorplan on its facade elevation in Fig. 45; the overlay shows that dome rises to the exact height of the floorplan's width. Further, comparison of the floorplan-elevation overlay with that of Humayun's Tomb (Fig. 46) is instructive. In the case of the "less balanced" Humayun's Tomb, the floorplan is double the height of the facade elevation; the horizontal elements predominate.*

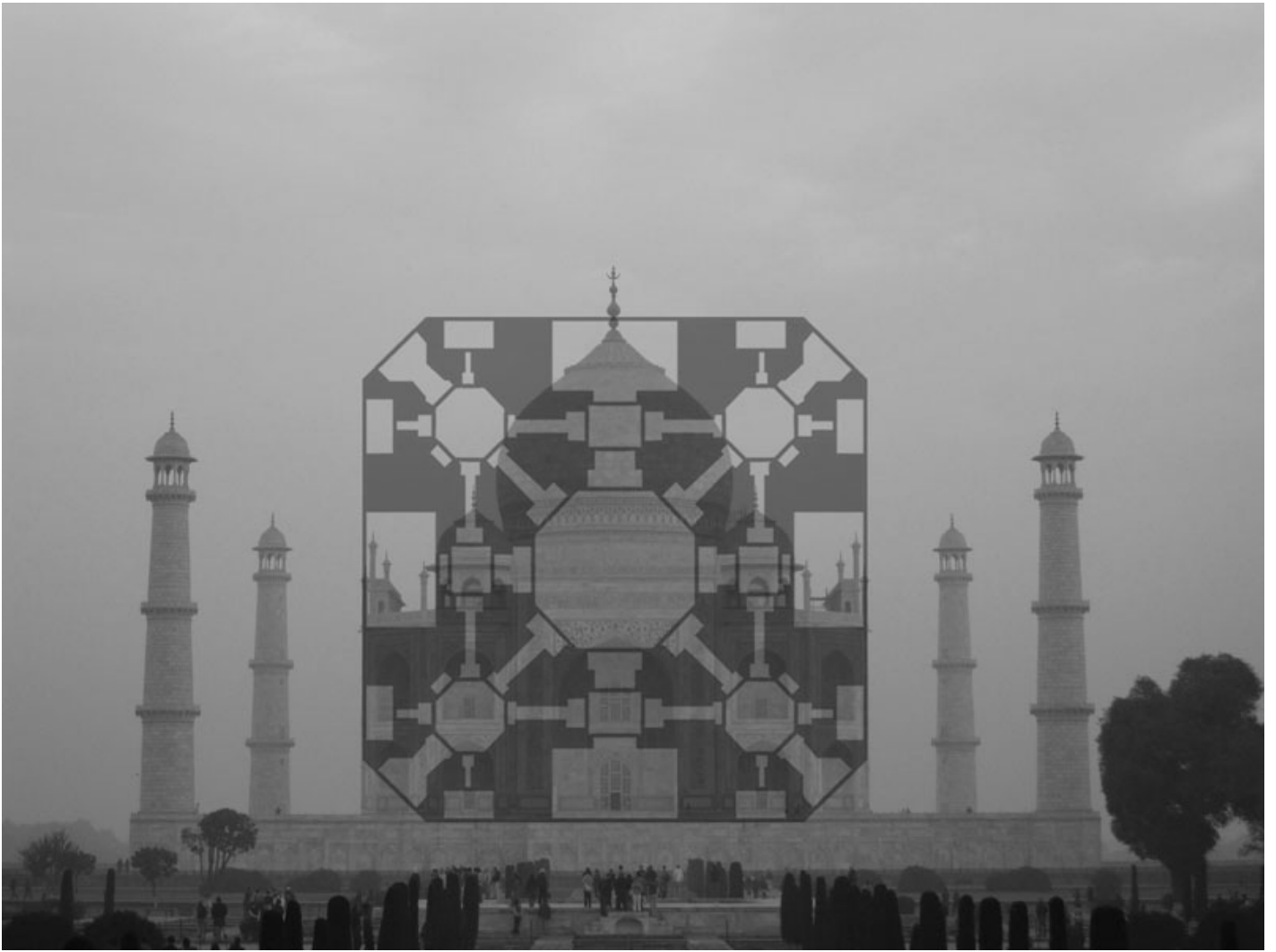


Fig. 45. Floorplan overlaid on elevation, Taj Mahal.

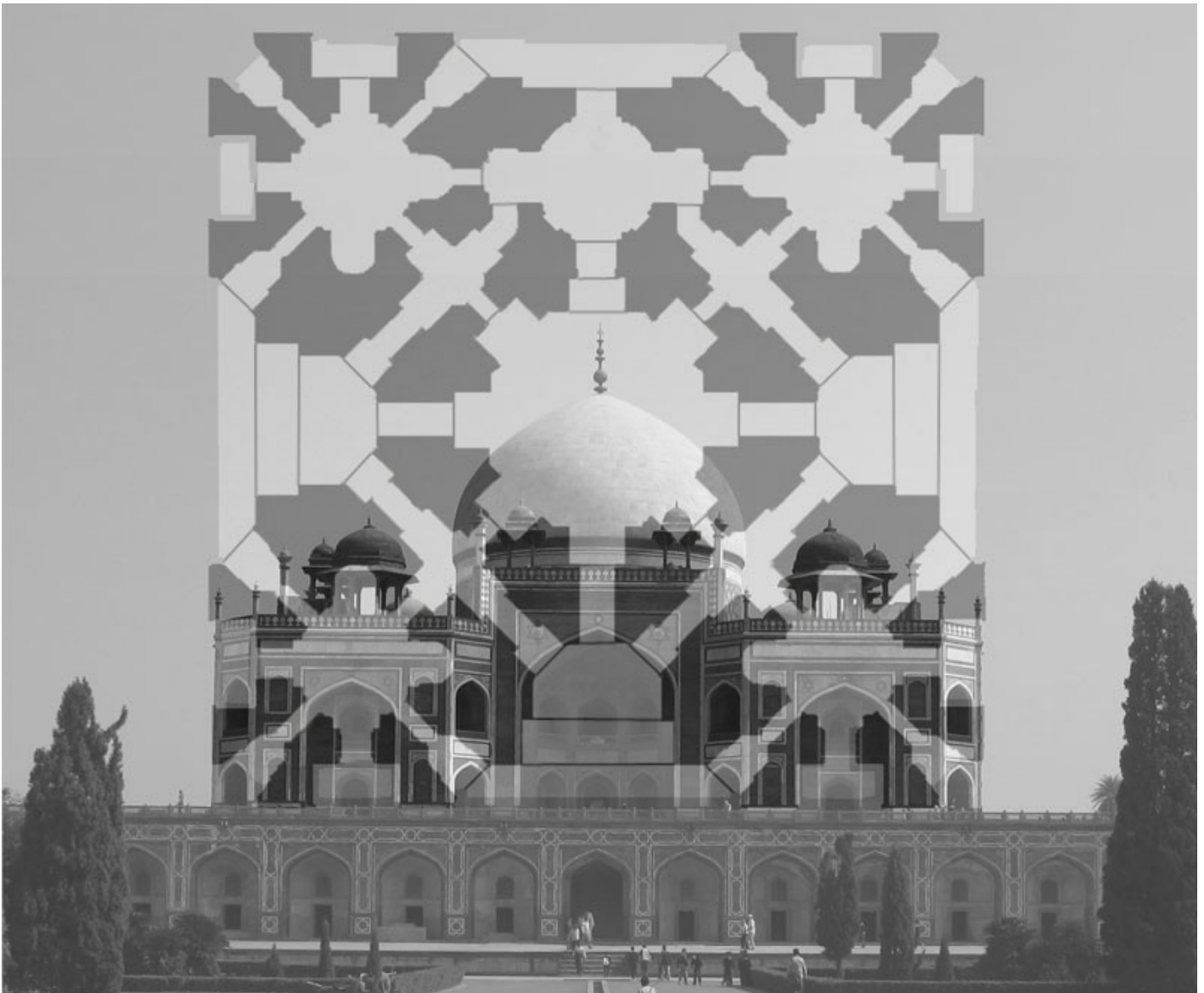


Fig. 46. Floorplan overlaid on elevation, Humayun's Tomb.

Rectangles and lines create a semblance of balance.

- Architects employed the standard five-part facade layout and a hidden staircase rising to the platform. See yellow and blue highlights on [Fig. 47](#), respectively.
- The eye is directed — via clear directional indicators in the form of the detached minaret-shaped towers (the first such detached towers in any tomb complex in India) and spires on the roof — to the entrance portal. See green highlights on [Fig. 47](#).
- **The basic ordering element to the design of the Taj is the rectangle.** This core element manifests itself throughout the facade: the main portal (four rectangles), the smaller openings flanking the main portal (one rectangle), the chamfered corner openings (one-half rectangle), the space between the top of the portal and the base of the dome (two rectangles), and the giant dome (four rectangles). As demonstrated in prior structures, this rectangular framing grid was a trademark of Mughal designs. See red highlights on [Fig. 47](#).

Extra: India's Islamic Dynasty Timeline

Islam's Entrance into India

The earliest Islamic invasions into Indian territories commenced in the 8th century; they were led by the Arab governors of the Umayyad Caliphs. The vestiges of these early raids were largely erased by subsequent invaders, including the Turks and the Afghans.

However, in the 11th-12th centuries, a prolonged Islamic onslaught began under the leadership of the Ghurids. The Ghurids, the first of the Slave Dynasties (see below), established their capital in Delhi, a strategically positioned trading city that controlled the pass through the Himalayas and had access to rest of the Indian mainland via the Ganges and Jumna rivers. The first centralized Islamic kingdom in India was formed.

The greatest challenge for the new Islamic dynasty was establishing itself in a Hindu land. However, this proved easier than might be first thought for the following key reason: the relatively progressive Islamic faith was appealing because it offered freedom for the masses of Hindu believers who suffered under the prevailing, repressive Hindu caste system.

Delhi Sultanates

- The Slave Dynasty (1206-1290).
- The Khalji Dynasty (1290-1320).
- The Tughluq Dynasty (1320-1414).

It is important to point out that the powerful Tughluq dynasty was decimated and brought to an end by the 1398 sack of Delhi by Timur (the founder of the Timurid Empire), the grandson of Genghis Khan. He resolved to destroy Delhi, so as to make his capital in Samarkand the greatest in the world. The powers of the Delhi Sultanates that followed in the wake of Timur's invasion were greatly diminished; as a result, a number of independent, provincial sultanates arose during this period. This power vacuum persisted until the rise of the great, unifying Mughal Dynasty in 1526.

- The Sayyid Dynasty (1414-1451).
- The Lodi Dynasty (1451-1540).
- The Suri Dynasty (1540-1526).
- The Mughal Dynasty (1526-1858).

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Los Angeles Times

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