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## Baha'i temples

The Baha'i temple—known as a Mashriqul-Adhkar, literally the "Dawning Place of the Praise [of God]"—is one of the institutions conceived by Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith. Mashriqul-Adhkar is a term with several meanings, depending on context, and can variously refer to: (1) a gathering of Baha'is engaged in devotion to God, especially at dawn; (2) any building dedicated to such worship (as in Iran and the Transcaspian Territory in Russia, where many Baha'i communities designated ordinary houses in their local communities as Mashriqul-Adhkar); (3) the complex of institutions surrounding a central house of worship that Baha'u'llah ordained to be at the very heart of every Baha'i community; or (4) the central house of worship itself. The only Baha'i temples that exist at present are continental temples. National and local Baha'i houses of worship will, in successive stages, be built in the future, as circumstances and resources allow.



In the Baha'i book of laws, *The Most Holy Book (Kitab-i Aqdas)*, Baha'u'llah ordained that a temple be raised up in every city, town, and village throughout the world. While it was Baha'u'llah who instituted the Baha'i temple, it was Abdul-Baha who further elaborated on its essential architectural character and social purposes. Abdul-Baha encouraged Baha'is to establish Mashriqul-Adhkar in every "hamlet and city." If not possible due to persecution, then a Mashriqul-Adhkar could even be "underground."

Linking worship to service to humanity, the Baha'i house of worship takes on greater social significance in that it is not just spiritual in character, but is dedicated to medical, charitable, educational, and scientific pursuits as well. Thus the Baha'i temple is part of a grand vision of community building and urban planning, universally conceived and locally planned. In the words of Shoghi Effendi, Baha'u'llah's grandson and "Guardian" of the Baha'i Faith from 1921 to 1957, each house of worship and its dependencies "shall afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant."

Also associated with each Baha'i house of worship—although not part of the temple complex, strictly speaking—is a center for Baha'i administration, known as a Haziratul-Quds ("Sacred Fold"), although it is not to be connected to the Baha'i temple as such. An institution complementary to the Mashriqul-Adhkar, the Haziratul-Quds may consist of a council chamber, secretariat, treasury, publishing trust, archives, library, and assembly hall, and may be situated near the Mashriqul-Adhkar, although this is not a requirement, as is already the case in Wilmette, Illinois, where the Mashriqul-Adhkar—as the headquarters of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States—is located in Wilmette and in nearby Evanston.

The basic design for a Baha'i house of worship is distinctive in that each temple requires three essential elements: (1) a nine-sided, (2) circular shape, (3) surrounded by nine gardens with walkways. In Baha'i thought, the number nine symbolizes completion, perfection, and the unity of religions in their pure form. Nine likewise represents the numerical value of the Arabic word, "Baha'," from which the words "Baha'u'llah" and "Baha'i" (follower of Baha'u'llah) are derived. While a dome is not an essential requirement, it has so far been a structural

feature of all Baha'i temples, as Shoghi Effendi advised in 1955 that "at this time all Baha'i temples should have a dome." Beyond these essentials, a Baha'i temple is typically designed to be culturally distinctive, often incorporating indigenous architectural influences in the design. Each design is selected for its intrinsic merit, irrespective of whether the architect is Baha'i or not. Two houses of worship—in Frankfurt and Panama—were designed by architects not affiliated with the Baha'i Faith, while other nonaffiliated architects have collaborated in perfecting the designs in Ishqabad and Sydney.

The doors of all Baha'i houses of worship are open to people of all religions, races, and nations. No sermons may be preached nor rituals performed. Sermons and rituals, as commonly understood, are not part of Baha'i practice anywhere, and the Baha'i Faith has no clergy. Use of pulpits is expressly forbidden in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, not just in the temples. No fixed speaker's platforms or altars are allowed, although readers may read sacred scriptures from behind an unadorned, portable lectern. During devotional programs, invited readers—of any faith—recite or chant, in any language, the sacred scriptures of the Baha'i Faith and of other religions. Baha'u'llah exhorts parents to teach their children to memorize passages from the Baha'i writings, so that they may chant or recite them in the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkar*. In the Baha'i house of worship in Wilmette, devotional services are currently held at 12:30 p.m. daily.

At present, there is a Baha'i house of worship on each continent of the world, with the construction of national and local houses of worship reserved for the future, as resources permit. The resources, or funds, necessary to erect and maintain these institutions comes from the regular or earmarked contributions of Baha'is only. Accepting donations from outside sources is strictly forbidden, as only Baha'is have the privilege of contributing to the Baha'i funds. While each Baha'i temple is administered and maintained by the national Baha'i council (known as a National Spiritual Assembly) of the country in which the temple is located, the ultimate oversight of the continental Baha'i houses of worship is by the international governing Baha'i council, called the Universal House of Justice, established in 1963. There are now seven Baha'i temples, with a eighth under construction, although the first Baha'i temple, which no longer exists, would bring the number to nine.

The first Baha'i temple was built in Ashgabat (Ashkhabad) in Russia's Transcaspian Territory (now Turkmenistan). It was first planned during the ministry of Baha'u'llah. This temple was designed by Ustad Alí-Akbar Banna of Yazd, under the direct supervision of Abdu'l-Baha, during the former's visit to Akka in 1893. Construction began in October 1902. Because Banna was killed during an anti-Baha'i pogrom during his visit to Yazd in 1903, a Russian engineer named Volkov was then hired to oversee the construction, which was completed in 1919. In 1928, the temple was expropriated by the Soviet regime, and was then rented back to the Baha'is for two five-year periods. It was finally converted into an art gallery in 1938. In 1948, the temple was damaged by violent earthquakes and further weakened by the heavy rains in the following years. In 1963, Soviet authorities demolished the remaining edifice and converted the site into a public park.

The second Baha'i house of worship was built near the shore of Lake Michigan in Wilmette, north of Chicago. On May 1, 1912, Abdul-Baha laid the cornerstone, which remains in a special room beneath the main floor of the temple itself. The principal architect, Louis J. Bourgeois (French-Canadian), who originated the exterior design in 1919, likened the Wilmette house of worship to a "Great Bell, calling to America." The temple was dedicated on May 1, 1953. In 1978, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places and has received prestigious design awards.

The third Baha'i temple is located in Africa, on Kikaya Hill on the outskirts of Kampala, Uganda. It was designed

by Charles Mason Remey, who worked closely with Shoghi Effendi in refining the design. Building commenced in May 1957, and the temple was dedicated on January 15, 1961. Standing at nearly 124.7 feet in height, the temple was the highest structure in East Africa at the time of its construction.

A landmark on the scenic northern coast of Sydney, Australia, the fourth Baha'i temple is located in Ingleside on the Mona Vale Hilltop, in the hills and bushland overlooking the beaches below. Also designed by Remey, excavations began in December 1957, and the completed temple was dedicated on September 16, 1961. Like the Wilmette temple, the Sydney house of worship is distinguished by its innovative use of crushed quartz concrete.

The fifth Baha'i temple was designed and built by Frankfurt architect Teuto Rocholl at Langenhain, in the Taunus Hills near Frankfurt-am-Main, West Germany. Its foundation stone was laid in November 1960 and the temple was dedicated on July 4, 1964, by Ruhiyih Rabbani—distinguished Hand of the Cause of God (an appointed dignitary whose mission is to promulgate and protect the Baha'i Faith) and wife of the late Shoghi Effendi—representing the Universal House of Justice. All existing Baha'i temples were dedicated by Ruhiyih Rabbani, in fact.

The sixth Baha'i temple was built on Cerro Sonsonate, a mountain seven miles north of Panama City, Panama. The cornerstone was laid on October 8, 1967. Designed by English architect Peter Tillotson, construction commenced on December 1, 1969, and the temple was dedicated on April 29, 1972. The temple's parabolic dome is built on the principle of a shell. Adorning the dome's supporting walls are abstract designs, in red marble chips, that evoke the decor of temples of the ancient Americas. Mahogany seats, set on a terrazzo floor, complete the interior space, which seats 550 people.

The seventh Baha'i temple was built in Western Samoa, in the Pacific Ocean, at Tiapapata, in the hills behind Apia. Designed by Hossein Amanat, the foundation stone was laid on January 27, 1979, by His Highness Susuga Malietoa Tanumafili II, Head of State of Samoa—the first ruling head of state in the world to become a Baha'i—and by Hand of the Cause, Ruhiyih Rabbani, representing the Universal House of Justice. Both dignitaries also were prominent in the dedication of the house of worship on September 1, 1984.

The eighth Baha'i temple, known as the Lotus Temple because of its shape, was built near Nehru Place, at Bahapur, in New Delhi, India. Designed by Fariburz Sahba, a Canadian of Iranian birth, the Lotus Temple was conceived as a lotus that appears to float in a series of nine reflecting pools. There are three rows of nine petals each on the outside of the temple—that is, 27 exterior petals on the outside of the temple—and 2 interior rows of 9 petals, which comprise the interior dome of the Lotus. So there are five rows of nine petals each, representing the sacred names, the "Bab" and "Baha"—commemorating the two prophet-founders of the Baha'i Faith. Described by one commentator as having the "the grandeur of a palace and the peace of a monastery," the design of Lotus Temple was originally inspired after Sahba had visited several holy places in India, when he realized that the symbol of the lotus blossom was revered by all the religions of the Indian subcontinent. Construction began on April 21, 1980, and the Lotus Temple was dedicated on December 24, 1986.

The Lotus Temple has enjoyed international renown and critical acclaim, having received prestigious awards from architectural and engineering societies. In 1987, the Lotus Temple received a "Structural Award" from the Institution of Structural Engineers of the United Kingdom (the world's leading professional body for structural engineering) for excellence in structural engineering (excellence, creativity and innovation, sustainability, value,

and buildability). In that same year, Sahba was honored with the "First Honor Award—Excellence in Architecture" from the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture Affiliate of the American Institute of Architects. In 1988, Sahba was given the "Paul Waterbury Special Citation for Outdoor Lighting" by the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America for what was described as "the Taj Mahal of the Twentieth Century." In 1990, the American Concrete Institute recognized Sahba with its "Finest Concrete Structure in the World" award.

The ninth Baha'i temple, near Santiago in Chile, is the last of the continental Baha'i temples. Designed by Siamak Hariri of Toronto, Canada, this temple is conceived of as a translucent "temple of light." It will, in the words of the architect, be "both monumental and intimate, subtly structured and ordered yet capable of dissolving in light." This temple is constructed of a dome of glowing, translucent stone, and is notable for its absence of straight lines. The structure is created by nine alabaster (translucent stone) and cast-glass "wings," allowing sunlight to filter through during the day, and emitting a warm glow from the interior lighting at night. Gracefully torqued, these wings wrap around the interior of the dome, creating a nest-like structure. Each wing is made of two delicate skins of semitransparent, subtly gridded alabaster, with a steel structure enclosed in curving glass in between, with its primary structural members intertwining with secondary support members, like the structural veining within a leaf. The primary purpose of the nine surrounding ponds is to reflect the temple.

In its April 2001 message, the Universal House of Justice announced that the completion of the continental houses of worship would pave the way for the next stage of Mashriqu'l-Adhkar development: the construction of national houses of worship, as circumstances permit.

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### Further Reading

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