The American Mosque: What, How, and Where to Build

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Writer's Comment: As a first-generation Afghan-American Muslim artist and designer, it has been difficult navigating the spaces of art and architecture in the 20th and 21st century that have been dominated by the western European white male. At the peak of the Islamic Golden Age, the 8th through the 14th century, Muslim artists, architects, philosophers, and scientists provided the world with such nuanced pieces of scholarly, theoretical, pragmatic, and artistic works yet its history was silenced where and when credit was due. I believe that in order for Islam to thrive as it once did, its identity in the Western world, especially in America, must be in tune with the cultural and regional settings of the place within which it exists; the best and easiest way to achieve this is through mosque architecture. This paper explores the identity of the mosque in America, its struggle to develop cultural and regional roots, and the societal and political issues that stand in its way.

Thank you to my instructor, Bradley Sekedat, for pushing me throughout this project, for allowing me to pursue personal interests within an academic environment, and for letting a design student take a class intended for anthropology majors.

Instructor's Comment: UWP 102N is an interesting course because the umbrella of anthropology is inherently large. Students convey a wide array of interests, ranging from the technical and the scientific to the social and emotional. As a result, the research papers produced by students in this class are rich and varied. In this context, Omar brought forth his interests in architecture, design, and society, which

he marshaled into a research essay that explores why the American mosque does not adhere to specific design principles. As the essay unfolds, Omar connects the mosque to social, political, historical, and architectural trends that have affected the identity of the mosque in an American context. The interplay between these parts is what makes the essay so strong. As readers, we are left with a complex picture of the mosque in a country that is cosmopolitan: competing notions of what the mosque is, by the very users of such structures, confront broader social unease about the role of the mosque in American cities, yielding agendas that frustrate the formation of coherent identities in architectural spaces. The result is a rich essay driven by a clear research question.

—Bradley Sekedat, University Writing Program

The arts have helped to define what it means to be of a certain people, place, or era since the first human artifacts were discovered. Ancient tools and semiotics have helped to dictate how a certain people lived and communicated. Ruins of ancient architecture provide information on its inhabitants' ways of life and religious beliefs. The values, strengths, hardships, and commonalities of everyday life can be told through the art and architecture of a place. Art and architecture both carry the will to create culture, but it is through architecture that humankind is able to create social schemas for the cultures that manifest within. Architecture is therefore the most social of the arts, possessing the ability to create, preserve, and spread identity (Serageldin 255).

In Islam, the architecture of a mosque is able to create personal geographical and regional cultural identities pertaining to the place and boundaries of space within which it is located. The mosque acts not only as a spiritual place of prayer, but as a vital space for the community to grow together, as a beacon of the existence of Islam in reference to the culture of a particular region, and as a space for Muslims to share, to create, and to cultivate identity. The architectural identity of mosques around the world, however, differs based on its regional, societal, and cultural factors. A mosque in Morocco looks vastly different than a mosque in Saudi Arabia based upon factors of environmental landscape, climate, and both esoteric and exoteric culture. The architecture of a

mosque "plays a role in defining, articulating and improving society's perception of itself" (Serageldin 255). Muslims in these countries culturally identify with their holy places of worship, which in turn gives them a sense of belonging, trust, and inheritance of the space and society they occupy. Islam in Morocco and Saudi Arabia dates its origin to over 1,400 years ago. These countries, as with other eastern Islamic countries such as Turkey, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, have been able to develop a culture over time based dominantly—and in some cases, solely—on the principles of Islam. Thus, they were able to mirror their culture into the architecture of their mosques. Conversely, as Islam began to make its way West, and as the West began to make its way to Islam, Islamic cultural identity slowly began to lose its grasp on the mosque.[1]

The Islamic identity of America is an eclectic one, constantly overpowered by which race or ethnic group holds ownership of the most important cultural space for a Muslim to share, create, and develop identity: the mosque. The architectural form of mosques in America today takes the form of old churches, business parks, or even homes. Built anew, the more grandiose "real" mosques are reflections of the culture and identity of Islamic regions in the East. Mosques in America hold no true American identity. Through research of different Islamic cultures, regions, and architecture—and with comparison to the eclecticism of the early beginnings of religious American architecture to the search for a new *modern* American architectural identity—I will attempt to convey why the mosque in America has yet to build architectural roots appropriate to its American identity, and how this lack of identity affects the identity of the Muslim American community as a whole.

Today there are roughly 3.45 million Muslims living in America (Besheer). This statistic consists of an amalgamation of different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups, ranging primarily from South Eastern, Middle

1 Language itself reflects this process. Throughout this paper, the Western word "mosque" is used in place of the correct Islamic term *masjid*, which in Arabic is defined literally as "a place of prostration." The word "mosque" is derived from the French (*mosquée*), the Italian (*moschea*), and the Spanish (*mezquita*). I use "mosque" as an empathetic gesture to this audience, who has most likely been informed of Islam through a Western lens where "mosque," not *masjid*, is a familiar term.

Eastern, and North African nations. The Islamic identity of America is extremely eclectic, yet this eclecticism cannot be found in the design and architecture of American mosques, let alone in the identity of individual American Muslims. In his paper "Islam and the Cultural Imperative," American convert Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah addresses this very issue that Muslims in America face. By remaining attached to the lands and cultures they left behind, Muslim immigrants are developing subcultures that revolve and only thrive within the Islamic schools, college campuses, homes, and especially the mosque (Abd-Allah 9). These subcultures reflect a countercultural approach to what it means to be American, causing American Muslims to live dual lives: one at the mosque, one at work.

Mosques in America are administered by the ethnic or racial group that holds ownership of the property. The culture of these groups is then used as the foundation regarding who should be in charge, what should be taught, and what languages to speak. As Dr. Abd-Allah states, "Managing the mosque subculture is the biggest challenge, since it has already become 'second nature' for a vocal minority and difficult to reorient, despite the fact that it alienates a substantial part of the community." Abd-Allah's solution to this issue can be prescribed through the means of the architecture of the mosque: "A successful Muslim American culture would produce mosques which—like those of the traditional Islamic world—express fully the universal idea of the mosque in consonance with Islamic transcendental norms while creating American sacred space in harmony with an indigenous ethos and normative aesthetic sense." Abd-Allah wants mosques in America to look and feel American, just as the mosques in Morocco and Saudi Arabia look and feel Moroccan and Arabic.

One of the first problems pertaining to the lack of a clearly conceived American mosque can be traced to the origins of Islamic art and architecture and the theories formed by Western "orientalists" regarding it. According to Professor Nasser Rabbat, the study of the architecture of the Islamic world was a post-Enlightenment European project. The term "Islamic architecture" was not coined by Muslims themselves. After toying with terms like "Mohammaden," "Saracenic," and "Oriental," "Islamic architecture" was deemed fit and, with it, all Islamic art from varying cultures, regions, people, and countries (about fifty) was homogenized into a single term and study (Rabbat 3). By the 18th and 19th century, amidst the process of globalization, colonial/

Western powers deemed Islamic architecture to be a tradition of the past, a novelty that would not be taught in the schools but whose nuances would be deemed fit for practical architectural applications. With this lack of an in-depth education about the design and architecture of the Eastern world within the architectural schools of the early 19th century, how can one blame the West for being unable to devise its own architectural form for a mosque? The problem is that the only types of knowledge available relating to mosques are within those mosques in the East designed by Eastern architects of those regions. There was no blueprint for avant-garde studies of Islamic architecture, unlike those from the early 20th-century German Bauhaus, or the constructivist Russians which both had a say in the development of the modern architecture of America. This pedagogy of pushing the traditional into the modern never existed for Islamic architecture in America.

This search for an Islamic American architectural identity is extremely difficult to navigate within a landscape that has already been defined with an American architectural history of almost 300 years. However, the search for a Muslim American identity resonates deeply with the original American identity that those escaping religious prosecution from England not so long ago hoped to forge. The pilgrims consisted of members of the Puritan and the Anglican church, each defined by their own personal beliefs, values, and ways of life. The easiest and most critical way to distinguish these two churches from one another was through their architecture. The Puritans believed in a purer way of religion, where the hierarchy to God was unnecessary: everyone could speak to and possess a relationship with God. They did not believe in the ornamentation of their places of worship, and disliked the need for music and celebration to praise their Lord. The Puritan church was simple, lacked ornamentation, and was most often painted in white (Handlin 19). The Anglican church was highly decorative with intricate facades and stained glass windows, while creating a building that functioned as more than a church, but still facilitated the hierarchy of leaders and space to God (Handlin 18). These people were able to create a new identity when arriving in America through the design of their places of worship.

This search for a bespoke architectural identity did not end with the church, however. As the population of the early United States began to increase, along with the booming economy of slavery, the need for an identity independent of the English became especially acute. The structure

of the Greek democratic government was used as a guiding force towards developing the government and the constitution of the United States of America. Given the adoption of classical methods towards the creation of a nation, neo-classicist architecture was deemed the most appropriate fit for the newly developed country. Apses, domes, and columns were present not only in the buildings of D.C., but also in those of plantations in the South. As time continued to pass, an eclectic approach to architecture was applied to the U.S., until the first skyscraper was born and a true American architecture was defined through modernism.

So as Islam in America continued to grow, without the major architectural schools taking Islamic culture or architecture into account, mosques began to take the form and shape of any place that would let them: old churches, business parks, or even personal homes. This eclecticism of not only form but function of space leaves the everyday American with no clear image of what Islam truly is in America. With the lack of a strong aesthetic sense of the single most important place of worship, how could an Islamic identity thrive in America? Just as America defined its identity through time with its skyscraper cities, so too through time might it define an Islamic identity of its own.

It is important now to present multiple cases that demonstrate this lack of a defined identity of mosque architecture in America. Focusing on the East Bay area of California alone, within the close borders of Contra Costa County district there exist five mosques within a twenty-five-mile radius of one another:

1. Islamic Center of Contra Costa (ICC), Concord
2. Noor Islamic Center of Concord (NICC), Concord
3. Walnut Creek Islamic Center (WCIC), Walnut Creek
4. San Ramon Valley Islamic Center (SRVIC), San Ramon (see Figure 1)
5. Muslim Community Center (MCC), Pleasanton (outside of Contra Costa County but neighboring San Ramon)

Of these five mosques, only ICC was built from the ground up as a stand-alone mosque, yet it appears solely as a commercial rectangular box with green (the color of Islam) trimmings and Arabic above its sign. NICC has

been newly housed within an old church; previously it belonged to a small room located above a cowboy boot shop in a neighborhood dominated by a Hispanic community. WCIC was previously housed in a room located in a 7-Eleven and Starbucks parking lot. It is now housed within an old church located on a street where three other churches exist—one directly across the street, and one a block over. SRVIC and MCC are housed within business parks where neighboring buildings are occupied by a Kung Fu school, a real estate company, and offsets of Hewlett Packard and the Boeing Company. All of these mosques utilize the fluorescent lighting one may find in a hospital or corporate office. Parking is awful at all of these institutions, so bad that security and parking personnel are required so that adherents of the mosque don't get parking tickets.

Figure 1. San Ramon Valley Islamic Center, San Ramon, California (Courtesy Jennifer Wadsworth, Patch Staff, https://patch.com/california/sanramon/an--khatam-al-quran-friday-at-the-islamic-center).

None of these places were easy to obtain, cheap to maintain, or even affordable for the community. The Islamic community itself funds these spaces. During the month of Ramadan, charity is given in grand amounts to pay for the costs that it takes to run these spaces, such as rent, mortgage, electricity and water bills, cleaning fees, and a salary for the resident imam, or pastor. It is not only during Ramadan that money is donated; the community is urged to pitch in after most Friday prayers, and multiple fundraisers are organized and held throughout the year. NICC, WCIC, and SRVIC have currently stated on the homepage of their websites that they are in need of funding. SRVIC is in need of $100,000 by the end of 2018. One might suggest that if all of these mosques were to come together and agree to work together, they would indefinitely be able to finally afford and build the kind of mosques that they would find in their Islamic countries. A site could be chosen at the midpoint of their current locations. Would not a grand mosque that reflects the cultural values and ideals of Islam in America make it worth the extra ten-minute drive?

In *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, Kahera addressed issues regarding the spatial location of mosques. In order to satisfy the requirements of having congregational spaces to pray particularly close to certain communities, the Dyula Muslims of West Africa devised three types of mosques: (1) the *Seritongo*, used by individuals or small groups for daily prayers; (2) the *Misijidi*, used by families from local communities for daily prayers and Friday prayers if there is no access to a Friday mosque; and (3) the *Jamiu*, used for Friday prayers and serving the requirements for the entire Muslim community as a whole. The Seritongo was stated to be as a place literally demarcated by stones and sand in the ground, whereas the Jamiu is the grand mosque of the community and designed to look like a West African mosque.

Figure 2. The Grand Mosque of Bobo-Dioulasso, Bobo-Dioulasso, Bukina Faso (Courtesy qiv, https://www.flickr.com/photos/14196341@N08/1560736452).

About this notion of "levels" in mosque design, I spoke to my grandmother, 78-year-old Sharifa Simab, about her time growing up and living in Kabul, Afghanistan before fleeing the Soviet Invasion in 1985. During our interview, I asked her about the location of mosques in relation to her home, and how *distance* from and to these mosques played its role. What she told me was an indirect reference to the Dyula mosques. There were small mosques throughout the neighborhood that one could walk to for daily prayers or as a small communal meeting place, but it was rare for the community to engage in Friday prayers or to celebrate religious holidays at these spaces. For that, one would make the longer hour walk or short bus ride and visit the beautiful and majestic grand mosques in Kabul.

The multicultural communities in America are spending too many resources on smaller, lackluster spaces of worship as opposed to coming together as a community and devising mosque plans such as the Dyula or Afghan people were able to design. This issue can be understood in connection to the lack of cultural diversity within mosques to which

Dr. Abd-Allah makes reference. Because each mosque is governed by a certain culture, the perceived need for five main East Bay area mosques within a twenty-five-mile radius (see above) is likely fueled by national and cultural pride that hinders the creation of one beautiful multicultural and cosmopolitan mosque within the twenty-five miles that separate the smaller five; the Arabs go to the mosque in Walnut Creek, the Afghans go to the mosques in Concord, and the Pakistanis go to the mosques in San Ramon and Pleasanton. These subcultures are able to thrive in these settings, while disregarding their American identities and the American ideal of diversity.

The speculative design of the Park51 mosque in New York, proposed in 2010 and soon dubbed the "Ground Zero Mosque" by anti-Islamic organizations, is a prime example of the not-so-progressive path that American mosques might have to take in order to be realized. Located a couple blocks from the Ground Zero memorial, the project was originally titled "Cordoba House." Known for its religious and cultural diversity, Cordoba was the third capital of the Ummayyad Caliphate in Spain of 756-1031. In an interview conducted by The Architecture Foundation during a symposium titled "Faith in the City," the architect of the Park51 project, Michel Abboud, a Lebanese-Christian himself, constantly defines the space as a multilevel, mixed-use community center and *not* a mosque. The actual mosque, or the "prayer space" aspect of the project, has been placed out of sight in the basement. During this interview, a Muslim audience member questioned this motive and called it a "failure" that represents Islam in an apologetic form. Given its definition as a community center and the mosque being placed in the basement, all signs

Figures 3 & 4. (Top) Grande Mosquée Hassan II, Casablanca, Morocco (Courtesy Creative Commons CC0 1.0); (Bottom) Sultan Ahmet Mosque / Blue Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey (Courtesy Nserrano [CC BY-SA 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0)], from Wikimedia Commons.

point to an America that wants nothing to do with a mosque as grand, elegant, and beautiful as the Hassan II Mosque in Morocco, or the Blue Mosque in Turkey.

Park51 points signs to a post-9/11 America where Islamic architecture must be covert or apologetic in order to thrive. It is important to notice the *names* of this mosque and the previous five East Bay mosques I discussed. There is no "mosque" or *masjid* in any of their titles. Across the United States, many mosques have been built under the guise of the "Islamic Center" since the first mosque to be built in the capital of America was named the Islamic Center of Washington. Dearborn, Michigan—the home to the largest Arab population in America—has called its *masjid* the Islamic Center of America. Although not fitting to the discussion and form of an American architectural identity with regards to this essay, both of these mosques are beautiful, yet they are apologetically beautiful because they have not been able to exist by their true name in America.

Before 9/11, however, two mosques in metropolitan regions in America were built and designed in a manner that is true to both Islamic and American identity: the Islamic Center of Washington DC (1954) and the Islamic Cultural Center of New York (1991). Both of these mosques are representative of the landscape they are situated in. ICWDC looks like the White House and buildings on Capitol Hill had a love child with Mamluk style mosques of Egypt: it is truly successful in holding on to traditional elements while coupling them with those of America. The ICCNY, designed by renowned modernist architectural firm SOM, takes hints from a postmodern Frank Lloyd Wright design-language and merges this with a traditional dome and minaret pairing. These two mosques, along with the red-bricked geometric form of the Islamic Society of

Figure 5. Islamic Center of Washington DC, Washington DC (Courtesy Carol M. Highsmith [public domain], via Wikimedia Commons).

North America (1982) in Plainfield, Indiana are three mosques that look like they belong in America and *nowhere else*. One could not pick up one of these mosques and place them in Afghanistan, Egypt, or Indonesia; besides the *neo-mamluk* style of the ICWDC, these three mosques do not possess a known style, and that is *exactly* what makes them American.

Figure 6. Islamic Society of North America, Plainfield, Indiana (Courtesy Omar Khalidi, https://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/30249).

The scope of this paper does not permit me to proceed further in my analysis of the mosque in America. I am unable to further investigate the points made in relationship to one another, and I am more than unable to propose an architectural solution to these points at all. What I am hoping to have succeeded in is to give you, the reader, a glimpse into the issues of identity that American Muslims face with regards to the lack of a strong visual and spiritual relationship with an architectural identity appropriate to an American mosque. A misconception of Islamic architecture that dates to the 18th century, a lack of unity in diversity among different Islamic cultures in America, a burgeoning dependence on efficient and affordable eclectic spaces, and an apologetic post-9/11 landscape are only some of the causes for the lack of a sound architectural identity pertaining to the American mosque.

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