Proceedings of Symposium on Mosque Architecture, Vol. 3B, pp155-172, College of Architecture & Planning, King Saud University (1419H-1999)

Approaches to Mosque Design in North America

Omar Khalidi

School of Architecture and Planning, M.I.T.

Cambridge, MA, USA

Abstract: Although the mosque as a building typology has several centuries of history, in the United States and Canada, it is of recent origin. Since it is a building of recent origin, architects designing the mosques in North America have experimented with various design approaches. Some architects have simply reproduced mosque buildings inspired by Arabian, Turkish, and Indian prototypes. A number of architects have attempted a synthesis of building traditions combining Islamic and American origin. Examples of architects' reinterpretation of the traditional Islamic design within the North American context will be discussed. Still others have designed and built mosques in a totally unprecedented style. For a Muslim and an architect, what are the challenges posed by the new built environment within which he must operate? How can he meet the challenges that satisfy the demands of his faith as well as the requirements of a professional architect? Based on examples of mosques built for the religious purpose — as opposed to converted buildings — my paper will deal with and critique the various approaches adopted to design mosques in North America. The paper is illustrated with plans, and photographs of the architectural programs.

Introduction

The mosque is clearly the most significant place of public gathering in Islam. Every adult male Muslim is required to attend the mid-day Friday prayers every week in the company of other co-religionists as a religious obligation. In North America, unlike long established Muslim societies, a majority of the mosques are housed in buildings originally constructed for other purposes. Thus we have abandoned churches, fire stations, and warehouses converted into mosques. A survey I conducted in 1992-1995, showed that of the nearly 1000 mosques and Islamic centers in the United States, less than a hundred are designed as mosques. This essay is concerned only with structures specifically erected as mosques in North America and their relationship to issues of identity.

Although Muslim presence in North America has been documented for at least a century, liberalization of American immigration laws in 1965 led to a large-scale migration of Muslims from many different countries. Simultaneously, the conversion to Islam of Americans, especially of African-Americans, vastly increased the Muslim population in the United States. Initially, the lack of funds prevented Muslims from constructing mosques designed by architects. Barring exceptions, Muslims, like other immigrants, did not come to the United to propagate their faith or settle permanently. Their primary aspiration was economic prosperity, and religious and cultural affiliations were not instrumental to this pursuit. A number of crudely designed buildings emerged as mosques in Highland Park, Michigan (1919), Michigan City, Indiana (1924), Cedar Rapids, Iowa (1925), Ross, North Dakota (1926); Quincy, Massachusetts (1930), and Sacramento, California (1941). Many of this mosques/Islamic Centers were named "cultural centers" of the ethno-national population that built it, for example Albanian Cultural Center, Arab Banner Society,

Indian/Pakistani Muslim Association, and the like. Many of these buildings had a hall for prayer, but also served as ethnic clubs, complete with social hall for weddings and parties.

Although historically the mosque has experienced fourteen centuries of development, it is certainly an architectural novelty in North America and indeed the western world. The thematic and visual characteristics of mosque architecture in North America must confront an alien environment, one that has its own deeply embedded historical and visual vocabulary. The response, then, of the architectural characteristics of the North American mosques to its context is one of tension, resulting both from religious and cultural paradigms. While the building must respond to its own inner formal determinants (cultural and functional), it cannot ignore its regional setting.

The stylistic features of mosques built over the last few decades in America vary considerably. However, we can identify three basic themes, which prevail in the aesthetic content of the buildings. These range from traditional design transplanted from Islamic lands to a style resulting from reinterpretation of tradition, borrowing select elements from the traditional and American architecture, to entirely innovative. Functionally, there are also some distinct characteristics, for example, most of the buildings do not operate strictly as places of worship alone, but rather as places of public gathering; therefore, many are called Islamic Centers. Their programmatic organization logically contains such facilities that allow a variety of usage: Islamic school on Sunday, library, conference center, book shop, kitchen and social function hall, recreational and residential apartments, and sometime even a funeral home.

Islamic identity and Architectural Expression

In the design and construction of mosque architecture in the United States, two factors appear to be influential in the final outcome of the building: identification and expression. Unlike the indigenous converts to Islam in America, the immigrant Muslim community retains a vivid visual link with their country of origin. Examples of buildings resulting from this design approach can be seen in the cases of Islamic Cultural Center in Washington, D.C.; Dar al-Islam mosque in Abiquiu, New Mexico, Islamic Center of Toledo, Ohio; Islamic Center of Charleston, West Virginia, and indeed any number of mosques built on the principle of transplantation. An approach to mosque design that seeks to reinterpret and accommodate features of the traditional with that of the site in America can be found in the examples of the Islamic Cultural Center in Manhattan N.Y. and Jonesboro, Arkansas. Finally, there is the third approach, that of the innovative, unprecedented mosque. Good examples of this approach can be seen in cases of the Islamic Society of North America headquarters in Plain field, Indiana, Islamic Center of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Islamic Center of Edmond, Oklahoma, and the Islamic Center of Evansville, Indiana. A detailed consideration of each project will help illustrate the way in which each architect has approached the mosque design question in a predominantly non-Muslim environment.

The Islamic Cultural Center of Washington, D.C.

It is the earliest and architecturally the most significant building that immigrant Muslims built and one which clearly reflects the need for historical belonging is the Islamic Cultural Center of Washington, D.C. (Fig. 1).

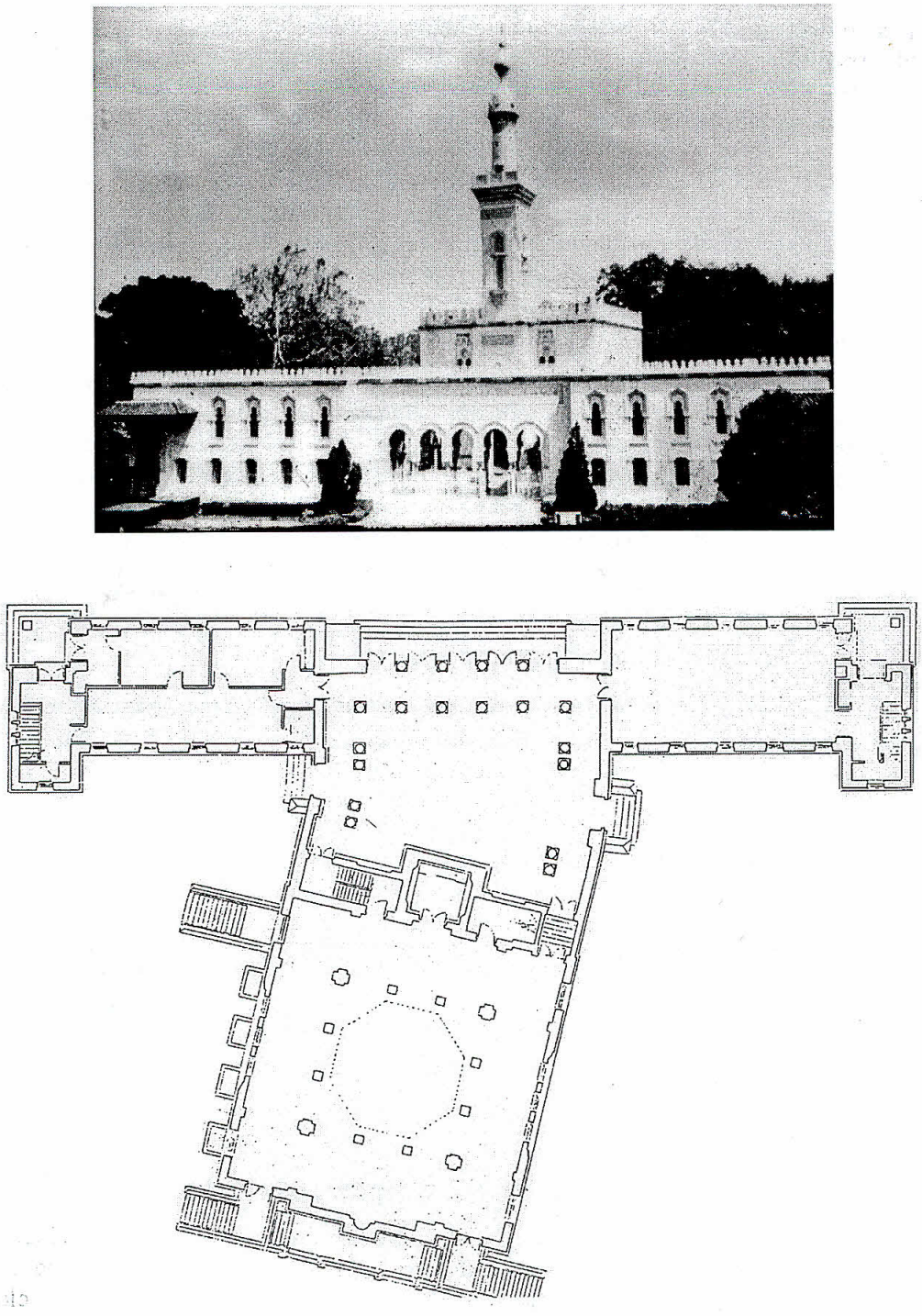


Fig. 1: Islamic Center Washington D.C., View of the Islamic Centre & Plan.

It is listed, and therefore protected as a Historical American Building (HAB). This stone finished building was conceptually designed by Mario Rossi (d. 1961), an Italian architect practicing in Cairo, Egypt, with the help of engineers from the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf. The conceptual design was modified and built for the actual site by the firm of Irvin S. Porter, a Washington, D.C. company now out of business.

The buildings reflect a Mamluk character commonly found in Cairo, but it also includes Turkish and Andalusian decorative motifs. The Islamic Cultural Center was completed in 1957, but its planning goes as far back as 1944 when a wealthy Palestinian real estate firm owner and the Egyptian ambassador to the United States conceived a mosque project to serve the immediate need to conduct an Islamic funeral service for the Turkish ambassador who had died that year. The mosque construction was financed by the diplomatic missions of the Islamic countries and such wealthy Muslim potentates as the Nizam of Hyderabad who donated $50,000 in 1954, a grand sum in those days. With its completion, "the Islamic Center was an unprecedented venture that marked an increased level of religious cooperation among Muslim countries in support of a U.S. mission. The Center became a symbol of Muslim unity and identity in the United States."[1]

Despite its general eclectic expression, the Islamic Cultural Center of Washington, D.C. retains in its neo-Mamluk character through the elegance of proportions and details of the Islamic architectural legacy of Cairo. This is one of the first cases in which an Islamic community center in America represented itself proudly, presenting what they considered their best image to both the American public and to their own fellow Muslims. Yet in its historic references, and in the international and diplomatic context in which it is located, this building is reminiscent of the "exotic" pavilions of Islamic countries which were erected in the great international expositions of the nineteenth century. Conceptually and spatially, the building is closer to the images of the "exotic orient" found represented throughout America in the concrete and cement Moorish styled buildings.

Since Muslims are part of the American population at the close of the twentieth century, the views and images they evoke for the rest of the American society will be critical for cross-cultural communication. As Syed Gulzar Haidar, an architect and professor of Islamic architecture, said, "Muslims in the United States and Canada should recognize the basic fact that the images of Islamic architecture and culture they carry with them from their original countries or from their history are well recognized in North America but in very different contexts and visually with grossly different meaning."[2]

Varying only in size and scale, there are a number of examples of mosques built based on the same principle as the style of the Harperwood, Michigan, and Washington, D.C. Islamic centers in 1980s. That principle is one of straight, literal transplantation of traditional mosque architecture in the Islamic world onto an American site. Three obvious examples are the Dar al-Islam mosque in Abiquiu, New Mexico, Islamic Center of Toledo in Perrysburg, Ohio, and Charleston, West Virginia.

The Albanian Islamic Center, Harperwood, Michigan

Given available information, the Albanian Islamic Center in Harperwood, Michigan is the earliest example of transplanted Islamic architecture in America (Fig. 2). Designed and built in 1962 by an American architect, Frank Beymer, the mosque makes a clear and unambiguous statement of its national character through its exterior Ottoman design represented by sleek, pointed arches, dome, and color scheme. As with mosques everywhere, Muslims of every ethno-national origin are welcomed at the Albanian mosque, though its facade proclaims the identity of its original founders, the Albanian Muslim immigrants in Michigan.



Fig. 2: The Albanian Islamic Center, Harperwood, Michigan

Dar al-Islam Mosque, Abiquiu, New Mexico

Similar to the Washington, D.C. mosque in conceptual framework, but differing in scale and location is the Dar al-Islam mosque and school in Abiquiu, New Mexico, designed by a leading Egyptian architect, the late Hasan Fathy. It was built in 1981 and used predominantly by indigenous Muslims. The 2260-square-foot mosque sits on a reinforced concrete foundation, upon which a concrete block stem wall has been built to create a uniform edge at ground level. The mosque's dramatic form, as sculptural as anything in the surrounding landscape derives from the combination of Byzantine and Sassanid domes, barred vaults, and large pointed arches. Dar al-Islam mosque embraces the romantic and regional New Gourna tradition of Egypt (Fig. 3).

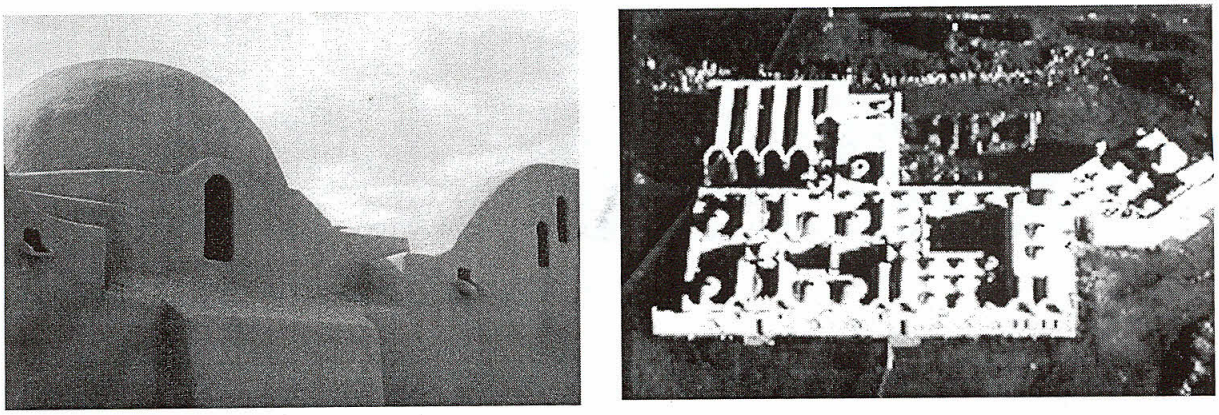


Fig. 3: Photo and Aerial View of the Dar al-Islam mosque in Abiquiu, New Mexico.

The use of earth construction further reinforces the expressive values of the designer. In view of the cultural and architectural links of New Mexico to Spain and the existence of past local building traditions similar to those of New Gourna, Egypt, Fathy's Dar al-Islam may seem appropriate, but they are so only superficially. The major difference is the climate, being totally different from Egypt or Spain. The one positive feature of this project is that given time, Fathy's ideas of self-help construction and emphasis on appropriate technology may eventually work, particularly if the client community is not resourceful. Three sets of criticism may be made of the Dar al-Islam project. The first is its disregard to the local climate resulting in water seepage from the roof and the dome. The other is its physical isolation from population centers. By founding a community in a remote corner of the country, the project shies away from addressing the conflicts and diversities of modern life. In refusing to engage in a dialogue with the dominant culture, the mosque and its community is in danger of reinforcing the Western views about the "otherness" of Islam.

Islamic Center of Toledo, Ohio

The Turkish architect Talat Itil designed and built the strikingly Ottoman styled mosque in the cornfields of Ohio in 1983 (Fig. 4). Its 135 feet high sleek minarets and large spherical dome (60 feet in diameter) are visible from the highway 1-75. On top of one of the two minarets is a *ma'dhana*, a platform for calling the faithful to prayer. However, that platform has never been used given the fact that most Muslims live quite far from the mosque. The architecture of the mosque was not received well by the local community, as the "farmers initially thought the Muslims were trying to build a Middle East conglomerate and spoil the landscape.[3]

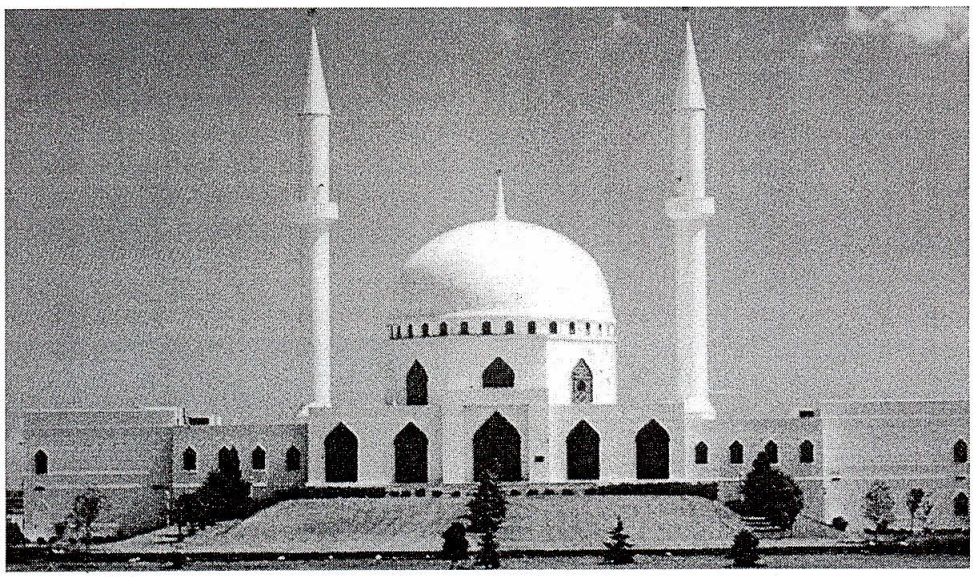


Fig. 4: Mosque of the Islamic Center of Toledo, Ohio.

The architect in this case insensitively violated the basic principal of good design: it should be site-bound. Instead, Itil seems to follow the motto of the unimaginative architect: design is sight-bound. The tall Ottoman minarets stand out as exotic and strange towers of the Middle Eastern culture in the Midwestern environment. In addition to the obvious disregard to the existing built environment in Toledo, Ohio, the architect can also be cited as

disregarding the spirit, if not the letter, of Islam. As a matter of faith and beliefs, norms, values, and laws governing personal and public conduct, Islam is viewed as universal and timeless. But the material culture (including architecture) of Muslims is bound by space and time. Thus the architecture of Muslims everywhere is quite legitimately varied and diverse.

The Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan, New York.

The Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan (ICC) was designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) and completed in 1991 (Figs. 5&6). It is located at the intersection of Third Avenue and 96th Street in Manhattan. This project illustrates the search for an image with which most Muslims and the larger society can be happy.

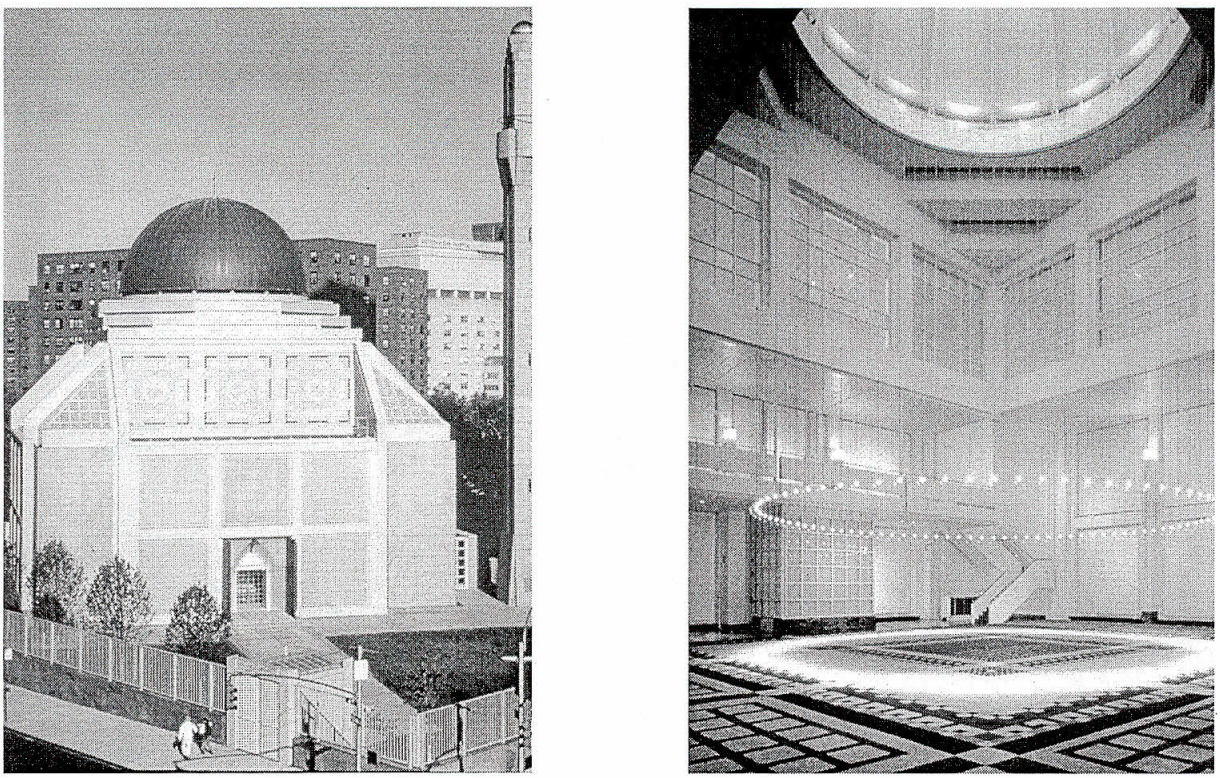


Fig. 5: External and Internal View of the Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan, New York.

It also highlights the relationship between architectural production and the cultural politics of identity. The mosque was designed for the use of Muslims in New York City metropolitan area, which also has a high profile and influential group of Muslim diplomats accredited to the United Nations as well as the national consulates and trade offices. The idea of the mosque project goes as far back as 1966 when the governments of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Libya bought the site of the present building. Since 1981, the prime financier of the project has been the State of Kuwait, whose UN ambassador Muhammad Abulhasan assumed chairmanship of the Board of the Trustees of ICC. Initially the project was given to the Iranian American architect Ali Dadras, who drew up a traditional mosque plan with a courtyard and gardens. By the mid-1980s, however, the Board of Trustees came out in favor of a more contemporary style, and Dadras was replaced by SOM. The minaret's design was awarded to Swank Hayden Connell of New York. SOM's long architectural involvement in

the Islamic world included the Haj Terminal of the Jeddah airport, King Abdulaziz University and National Commercial Bank (both in Jeddah) as well as other large building projects in Kuwait and Bahrain. The appointment of SOM for the ICC project was quite logical and based on previous experience and the general reputation of the company.

During the design stage of the project, the ICC Board appointed two advisory committees, one composed of "prominent members" of the Muslim community in New York, mostly immigrants. The other committee included practitioners of Islamic Architecture, mostly non-Muslims, led by Michael McCarthy of SOM, and established scholars such as Professors Oleg Grabar (then of the Aga Khan Program at Harvard University), Renata Holod (University of Pennsylvania), Marilyn Jenkins, Curator of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum and Mildred Schmertz of Architectural Review, a prestigious journal.

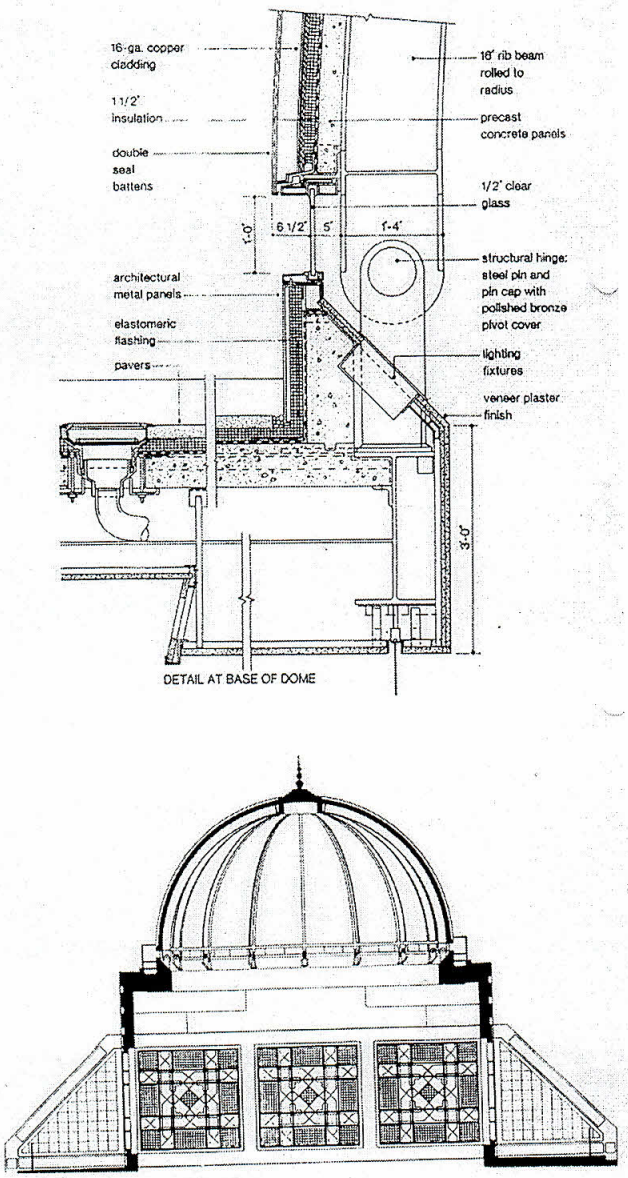


Fig. 6: Cross section and detail of the dome of the Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan, New York.

The debate between the two committees centered on the image of the mosque. The practitioners and scholars desired "a mosque that belonged to the 21st century."[4] The nostalgic immigrants on the other committee wanted the architects to reproduce to the furthermost extent possible the style of a traditional mosque, and sought literal versions of historic motifs. Their conception was not different from the original plan designed by Ali Dadras. On the other hand the scholars and practitioners wanted a contemporary mosque. The scholars urged the architects to exercise complete freedom in forms and motifs while respecting the Islamic beliefs. Michael McCarthy, the SOM architect chose to follow the second path. He justified his decisions by pointing out that "Islam in its vast conquests absorbed the best of local building techniques and materials under an overall umbrella of careful geometric ordering of mass, enclosures, and finishes. Why not meld this tradition with the best that the twentieth century technology has to offer?"[4] After a long and thoughtful debate the decision arrived at by both sides was in favor of a "modernist" character, yet the Muslim committee succeeded in forcing the inclusion of both a minaret and a dome, something disfavored by the architects and scholars. The conflicting perceptions of what a mosque ought to look like brings into high relief the salience of "old and familiar" for immigrant Muslims which Western scholars and Westernized, non-practicing Muslims tend to disregard. At completion in 1991, the ICC mosque consists of a 90 foot clear span structure roofed by a system of four trusses supporting a steel and concrete dome above, from which is suspended the women's gallery beneath. The plan is composed of a domed cubical area in the center, with foursquare comers roofed by skylights in the form of quarter pyramids. Light pours in from these skylights and through the decorative square openings of the trusses beneath the dome.

Islamic decorative features include a modern adaptation of *Kufic* used here as ornament over the main entry portal, the *mihrab* and the apex of the dome, and a modern circle of steel wire supported lamps, somewhat reminiscent of the circle of lamps in Ottoman mosques. Interior decoration adapts the square module of the screens located within the large square openings of the trusses to the entrance screen, the carpet pattern, and the ceiling tiles. The walls, which are a pale pastel green, have almost no decoration. The green color reflects the clients' preference. Green has traditionally symbolized fertility and hope everywhere, but has been associated with Islamic culture, and used extensively in the Muslim world, though not in the pastel tone which is applied in ICC mosque. The square module has been consistently used throughout the building at various scales and in a variety of materials and expressions. The external walls are divided into large square modules of light granite panels, each outlined by a strip of glass and supported by a concealed grid of tubular steel. The abstract nature of this geometric form has lent the design of the mosque a simple rational appeal and given the project a contemporary character, while allowing continuity of association with traditional Islamic architecture through the use of abstract geometry.

The Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan's link with traditional mosque architecture, however, goes deeper than subtle references through geometry, or the obvious use of architectural icons and calligraphy. As Oleg Grabar pointed out, the drawings for the final design of the mosque prepared by the SOM team were "quite reasonable" in the conventional Ottoman tradition. Although the SOM architects were referencing the typology of the Ottoman mosque in the design of the ICC mosque, they were nevertheless uninspired by the interior ambiance of such mosques. They rejected the dimness of the old mosques and introduced skylights in roof corners and patterned glass in walls, bathing the prayer area with light.

The interior of the mosque is broadly divided into three vertical zones: the part between the floor of the main prayer hall and the soffits of the peripheral areas, the large screen trusses

to define the middle part of the interior, and the dome to mark the upper part. The stepping, pendentive-like beams at the comers of the middle part, in addition to their structural role in supporting the dome help to visually connect the trusses to the dome, thus allowing a smooth transition between the square and the dome. This inspiration from traditional structural and aesthetic systems seems to unify the middle and upper parts of the interior of the mosque. Moreover, the steel ribbed structure of the dome expresses its modernity, and the tectonic expression of the supports of these ribs, with their minimum proportions reinforced by the light penetration creates a distinctively modem floating effect. It can be said, therefore, that although the dome is used as a traditional form, it is effectively and successfully expressed in a contemporary language.

The structural system of the screen trusses that support the dome appears to be cantilevered from the external walls, creating a truly modem expression. This cantilevering of the middle part of the interior is illusionary and is created by the ambiguity of the expression of the relationship between the trusses and their vertical supports in the outer walls, and by the fact that the soffits of the trusses are merged with the ceiling of the peripheral areas. All this seems to create discontinuity between the lower and middle parts of the interior of the mosque, and to give a visual heaviness of the trusses. The intersection of the main trusses is emphasized by the creation of the corner skylights, which allow this intersection to be seen as a point on which all the upper part of the building is supported. This dematerialization of the corner seems in contradiction with the tectonic emphasis on the support system of the dome above. By contrast, in an Ottoman mosque such as the Sulaymaniya, the effect of the enormous columns leading up to the large central dome creates a graceful, uninterrupted upward thrust, while increasing the lightness of the ceiling and the slenderness of the support system. The reversal of this arrangement in the Manhattan mosque is a clear statement of the modem technology employed, but it sacrifices the organic lightness and 'spirituality' of the Ottoman prototype for the sake of creating a column-free space, and displays the clients desires for a progressive image. The ICC mosque projects the assimilation of traditional Islamic design elements in at least three other ways. One is the women's prayer gallery, the second is the minaret and the third is external relationship to the built environment around it.

The Design Process

In the design process it has hardly made a difference whether the architect happened to be a Muslim or not. The transplanted mosque approach has been used both by Muslim and non-Muslim architects: Washington, D.C., Abiquiu, New Mexico, and Toledo, Ohio (Muslim) and Harperwood, Michigan (non-Muslim). It is the guiding principles that produced the design, not the religious background of the architect. In the case of Charleston, West Virginia, (built 1989) we have a non-Muslim architect uncritically reproducing a Mogul model. William Preston, the designer of the West Virginia mosque proudly points out: "The South Charleston center is modeled after a famous Islamic house of worship, the Badshahi Mosque, in Lahore, Pakistan. The Badshahi Mosque is considered to be one of the largest mosque in the world." [5]

As a final outcome, the Charleston, West Virginia, mosque is far from its source of inspiration (Fig. 7). From conversations with the architect, his clients, and many of the worshipers at the mosque, the final architectural product does not seem to disappoint them. To them imitation is not the intention, rather it is the "capturing the flavor" of the old, the familiar, or at the most the "blending" of the old and new. In this manner, the contemporaniety of the building is expressed in a form of parody, which is not only desired

by a nostalgic community, but also by a generation of architects and Americans in general, a generation that in the words of Preston" has lost faith in the future, and seeks for the present the stability and humanness embodied in vernacular and pre-modern architectures."[5]

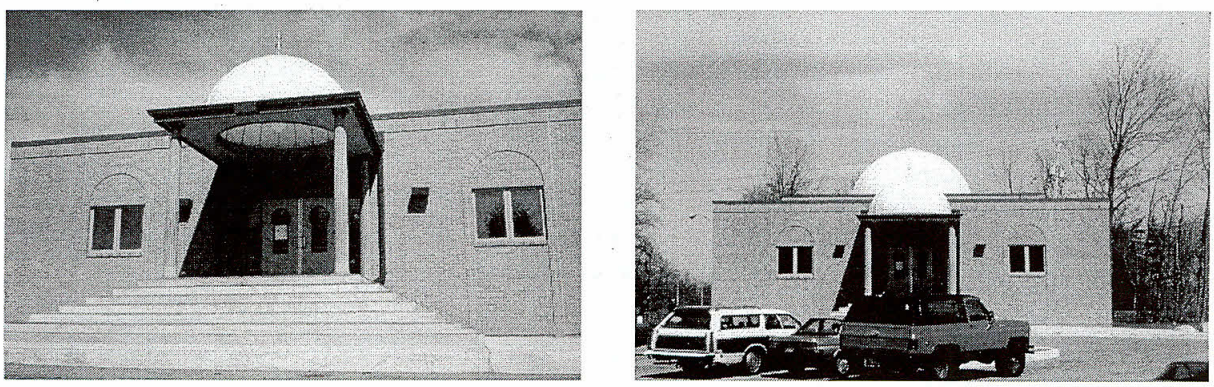


Fig. 7: The Islamic Centre Charleston, West Virginia.

In this context the role of the architect is to bring back the past, the familiar, to make the users of the building feel at home, and to reinterpret its vocabulary in the every day language which can be easily fathomed. In post-modern America this is the language of the commercial strip, with the result that the clients and their architects consider with pride the "capturing the essential symbols of Islamic architecture." But these symbols (minarets, arches) can and have been perceived as exotic oriental restaurants. A typical conversation between two truckers ensued upon sighting the Toledo mosque as follows: "Isn't that the new Middle Eastern restaurant!" Mosques and Islamic centers built in America with literal readings of original mosques in the Islamic world generally lack the qualities of refined aesthetics and use of materials of the traditional architecture. The distorted expressions of many of these buildings, their garish colors, and use of prefabricated industrial materials all deny the authenticity of the old monuments they inspire to imitate, and the romanticism with which Islamic architecture is imbued in America. The generally crude aesthetics of the Islamic centers is also related to the low esteem in which a professional architect is held among American Muslims. Since the cost of recreation of monumental mosques is beyond the financial means of the community--sometimes not even desirable--the clients settle for a rough replica. This replica, in which only the image of the monument sought is important, can, according to the clients, be provided by any architect regardless of his background by reference to available visual sources. As Syed Gulzar Haidar explains: "When Muslim groups set out to build an Islamic center or a mosque, they consider professional architectural services quite redundant. An architect is 'not needed' because 'who does not know what a mosque looks like,' and 'we need only a few drawings for fund raising' and 'later' any draftsman under an engineer's advice can draw them up for a building permit."[6] The results are not hard to seek. Clone after clones of imitative and unimaginative buildings passing for "authentic" Islamic architecture have cropped up in the United States from coast to coast.

In the cases of transplanted mosques, the resulting design allows the architect to recall an Islamic affinity through the expression of some anachronistic feature of the building such as the dome or minaret. In contrast some mosques have attempted a reinterpretation of the traditional mosque architecture with mixed results in American landscape. A number of

examples come to mind, the prominent ones being the Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan, New York.

Few mosques in America have been able to solve the question of women's' prayer area in a sophisticated and architecturally sound manner. In Muslim societies, women infrequently used Mosques, though they were never prevented from praying there. In Manhattan mosque, the architects have arrived at a sound solution. The mosque is divided into two levels: the main prayer hall on the ground level, and the women's gallery suspended by rods from trusses above. This is undoubtedly an innovative way of integrating women and men under one roof. Access to the upper gallery is made from two stairs that act as freestanding sculptural elements directly accessible from the main floor. The complete visual transparency of women's' area, its direct link to the men's area, and the fact that it is located above the men's prayer hall, all represent a bold statement.

While the planning committee composed of architects and scholars had rejected the inclusion of the minaret, it is interesting to note that some outsiders urged the inclusion of a minaret in the scheme of the building. Among such people was the philanthropist David Rockefeller, who came up with a substantial donation to include a minaret upon learning that it was being excluded for reasons of economy as well as design preference. Once it was decided to include a minaret and funds were found, the design of the minaret was commissioned to Swanke, Hayden, Connel (SHC) of New York. The minaret was designed by Alton Gursel, a Turkish-American architect with SHC. According to Gursel he was faced with the unenviable task of having to satisfy the visual perceptions of the minaret to the representatives of nearly 50 Muslim countries in New York! Gursel designed nine models of minarets ranging in appearance from sharp pencils to ball-point pens, before eventually choosing one sufficiently abstract and de-historicized, more of the ball pen mold, as the other type maintained a strong Turkish look. In contrast to the massiveness of the mosque proper, the minaret's slenderness, shear height (one and a half of the top of the dome) and simple articulation makes it an elegant part of the project. However, in view of its astounding cost ($1.5 million!) and its redundancy in functional terms, it demonstrates to what lengths some people are willing to go in order to express their identity. The fact that significant parts of the mosque project, such as the school and the library had to be delayed while the minaret's construction went ahead is another indication of the clients' priorities. Image making in this case took precedence over providing services to the community. The architects and the chief financial patrons of the project however have different views on the question. Because of the mosque location in a high profile area in the heart of the world's financial and cultural center, the architects intended a "welcoming image which includes, rather than excludes the public." Since its completion in 1991, the mosque has become a landmark in the area. A New Yorker remarked to the present writer: "It is nice to have something of every denomination represented in the City." For some Muslims (particularly the immigrant types), it provides a welcome relief in an area of high rise development along the Third Avenue. This building like its counterpart in scale, the London Central Mosque, is an unusual feature in the New York landscape, but it is generally seen as an improvement rather than detraction.

Innovative Mosques

A decisive departure from both the approaches of the transplanted traditional architecture and its modem reinterpretation is the approach of two architects: Syed Gulzar Haidar and Bart Prince, one a Pakistani-Canadian and the other an American Christian. Their projects represent the innovative, the creative, and the unprecedented mosque. Haidar advocates a

tripartite operational principle of modern, namely a design approach that is "environmental," "morphological" and "semiotic." His notable example is the mosque in the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) headquarters.

According to Haidar, "Islamic architecture should be expressive and understandable to all. It should employ a form language, which invokes in immigrant Muslims a sense of belonging in their present and hope in their future. To the indigenous Muslims it should represent a linkage with Muslims from other parts of the world and should underscore the universality and unity of Islam. To the new Muslim this architecture should invoke confidence in their new belief. To non-Muslims it should take the form of clearly identifiable buildings which are inviting and open, or at least not secretive, closed or forbidding." [6, p. 166]

In 1979, the Muslim Students Association of the U.S. and Canada (MSA), the parent organization of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) decided to centralize its numerous activities by a establishing a headquarters in Plainfield, Indiana. Syed Gulzar Haidar designed the project, while the detailed construction documents were prepared by the associated architect Muhammad Mukhtar Khalil, an Indian Muslim. The entire headquarters were never completed and in early 1996 moves were afoot to move the ISNA offices to Washington, D.C. The buildings that were constructed included a mosque, library, and some office space, all collectively known as the ISNA headquarters. The headquarters is set amidst an elaborate landscaping with formal front plaza (Fig. 8&9).

The three units of this building, the mosque, the library, and the office block form a unified scheme in which the mosque and the office block are placed on an axis and the library is located on an axis perpendicular to the first axis. The architect describes the symbolism of this design thus: "A mosque is a space celebrating man's servitude to God. The office building is an arena of work for Islam and its society in North America. The library is a research facility upholding the Quranic ideal that only through knowledge, intellect and contemplative thought, does Man ascend to higher levels of belief and action."

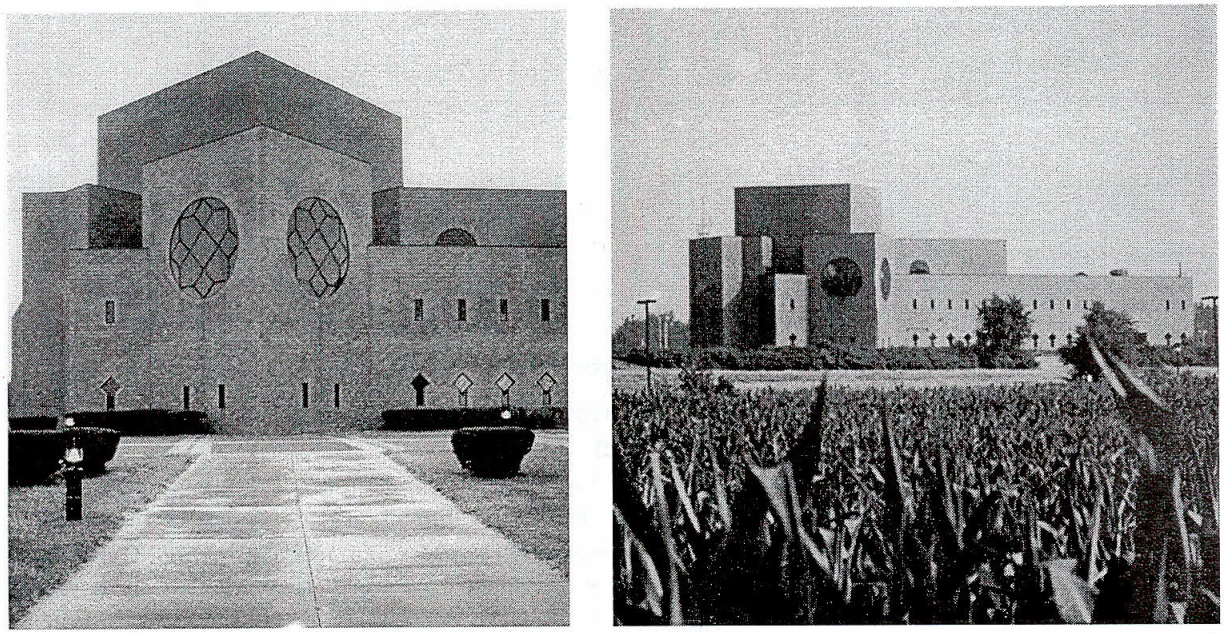


Fig. 8: Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) Headquarters

ISNA's mosque is characterized by its austere contemporary character and the absence of iconic references to traditional Islamic architecture. The solid walls of the exterior give little clues as to what is inside the building and narrow, vertically slit, widely spaced, windows add to the building's sense of impenetrability. This is in contrast to the use of a large dome in the mosque hidden behind the high walls and parapets, which comes as a pleasant surprise as one ventures from outside to the inside of the building. Haidar justifies this contrast between outside and inside as embodying the attributes of Allah, namely two of the 99 beautiful names of God: al-Batin (the hidden) and al-Zahir (the manifest). Haidar sees these attributes of God as "of special interest to architects in pursuit of the silent eloquence of space and the quintessential presence of form." [6, p. 16] He states that through his experience of Islamic architecture he became very intrigued by these divine attributes: "And in all the beautiful names of God, I searched for a special wisdom to guide the designer who must create but not confront, offer but not attack, and express profoundness in a language understandable and pleasing to the listener... I chose to distinguish the exterior from the interior. I chose to veil the mosque."[6, p. 164]

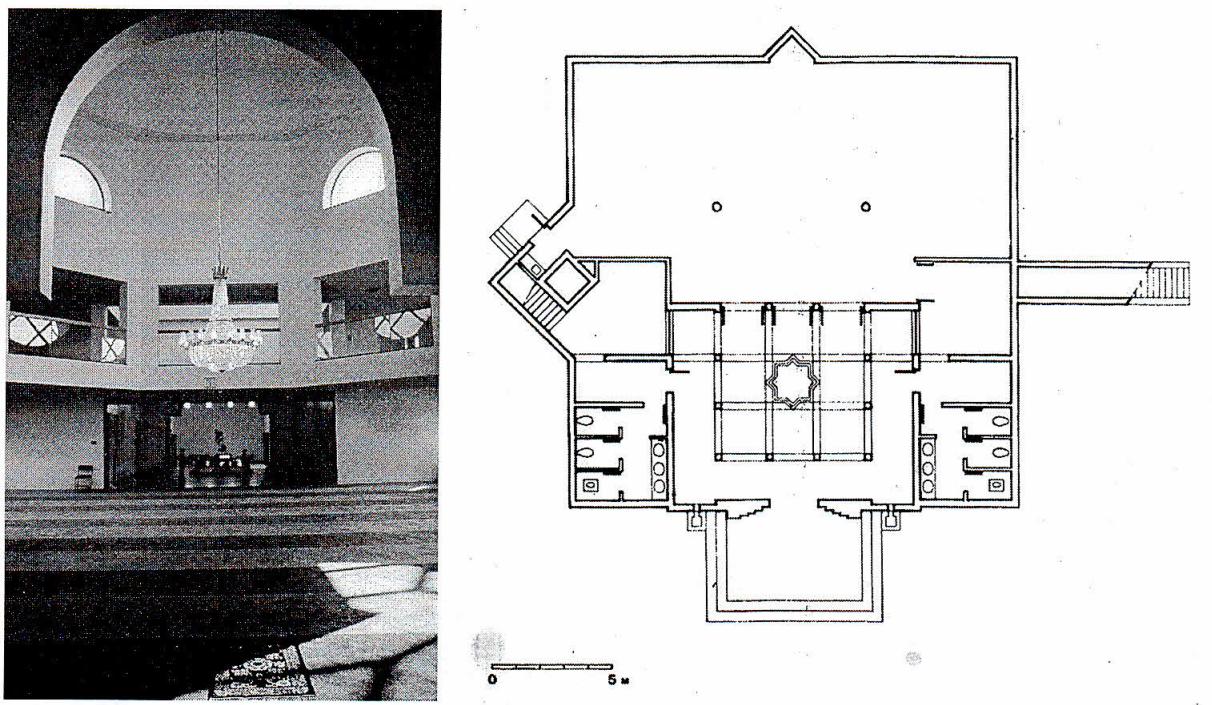


Fig. 9: Internal View and Plan of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) Headquarters

According to Haidar, the ISNA mosque addresses itself to Muslims through the concept of the al-Zahir and al-Batin through the mystical geometry, and particularly through the cubic form of the mosque as subliminal reminder of the Kaaba, the symbol of unity. Moreover, he relates his decision of contrasting the inside from the outside to the context of Muslims being in a minority living in a predominantly non-Islamic America. He sees this contrast as symbolic of the fact that Islam in this country is restricted to private matter of faith rather than a state religion as is the case in much of the Islamic world. "If the dome is symbolic of the esoteric and the divine, and the cube that of the esoteric and of the Earth, then we consider it a befitting gesture to make the dome internally manifest and externally veiled."[2] Moreover, the exterior of the building, its choice of materials, details and fenestration is

intended by Haidar to be "sympathetic to North American indigenous architecture rather than any historic or modernized Islamic style."[2]

The architectural character of ISNA mosque reflects the architect's fascination with the mystical interpretation of Islamic architecture. The adoption of abstract geometry in the building can be seen as Haidar's search for universal architectural solutions, but with which he can identify as a Muslim, because of the roots of these solutions in Islamic architectural tradition. This architectural character may also be viewed as an attempt at addressing complex cross cultural issue, and the difficult question of expressing identity through form without having to resort to traditional imagery which do not appeal to his modem design sensibilities. Many would regard Haidar as working within the prevalent architectural thinking to which he was exposed in North America, particularly that of Louis Kahn. ISNA headquarters is one of the significant examples of Islamic centers in America, it is regrettable that it was unable to flourish in the Midwest due no doubt to a lack of significant population group that it could serve as a focal point. Conceptually related to the ISNA headquarters in terms of innovative mosque design are a number of other Islamic centers, three of which will be highlighted below.

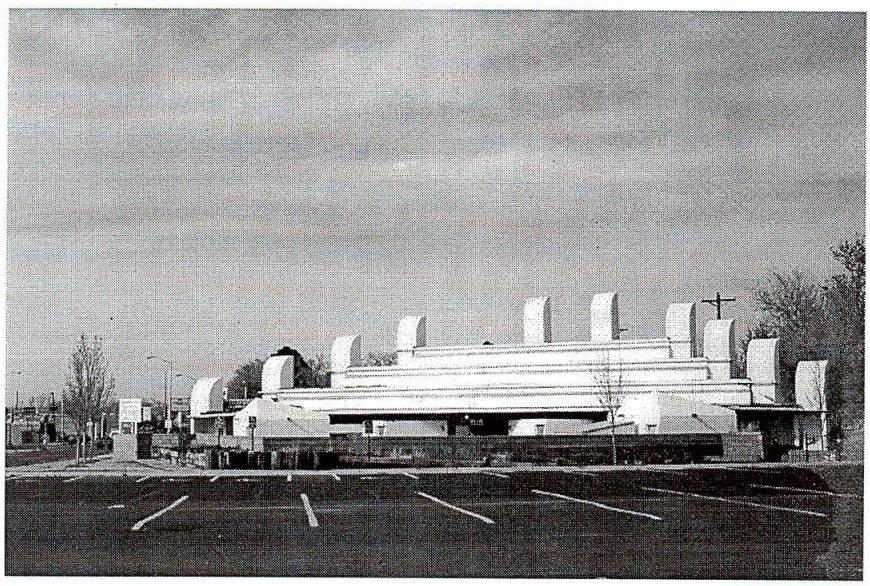
Unprecedented Designs

The Islamic Center of Albuquerque, New Mexico, designed by Bart Prince, a leading exponent of organic architecture, was completed in 1991, although the project began five years earlier (Fig. 10). From a distance, the building resembles a giant set of bleachers reaching skyward in tiers topped by towers that contain tall, narrow windows. Inside, the mosque is essentially one large hall divided at prayer times by temporary partition to separate the genders. The ceiling steps up with the tiers, supported by thick wooden beams and rafters made of bronze-colored pipe. Daylight pours through the narrow windows. It is simple, elegant building, functional, and completely at home in its environment. The work of the New Mexican architect resists easy translation into words. Dramatic and often unusual forms characterize this project along with his other buildings in New Mexico. His style is rooted in the peculiarly American tradition of Organism. Defined by the Midwestern architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), and the Oklahoman architect Bruce Goff (1904-82), the organic tradition argues for the necessary individuality of each architect and each architectural design. The tradition's individualism makes it difficult to classify its work with a coherent set of stylistic similarities. Coherence comes instead from a shared attempt to create an organically integral architecture that rethinks the possibilities of geometry, space, structure and material.

The project began in 1986 during a time of extremely negative press about Islam due to the events in the Middle East, the architect has designed a climatically thoroughly sound building without encumbered with historical precedents. There is no dome, no minaret, nor other readily identifiable signs of 'Islamic architecture.' There is however a projection in the Qiblah wall marking the mihrab and pointing the believers toward Makkah. Akin to the Albuqurque mosque is the Islamic Center of Evansville, Indiana (Fig. 11).

Built in 1992, this is a bungalow-like building with no reference whatsoever to traditional Islamic architecture. Inside is a large rectangular room with a barn-like roof. Minimum effort is made in this building to relate the interior of the prayer hall to the conventional image of a mosque, and no architectural elements are added to the barn type as direct visual iconic references of a mosque. The only exception in this otherwise domestic, suburban character is the projection in the Qiblah wall, like the one in Albuquerque project. Practically the same design is found in the case of Masjid al-Salam in Edmond, Oklahoma,

which was completed in 1992 (Fig 12). According to Siddiq A. Karim, the architect of this mosque, the local authorities required the mosque to fit in with the prevailing built environment, i.e. the structure should be in harmony with the context of single family homes amidst which it is located.



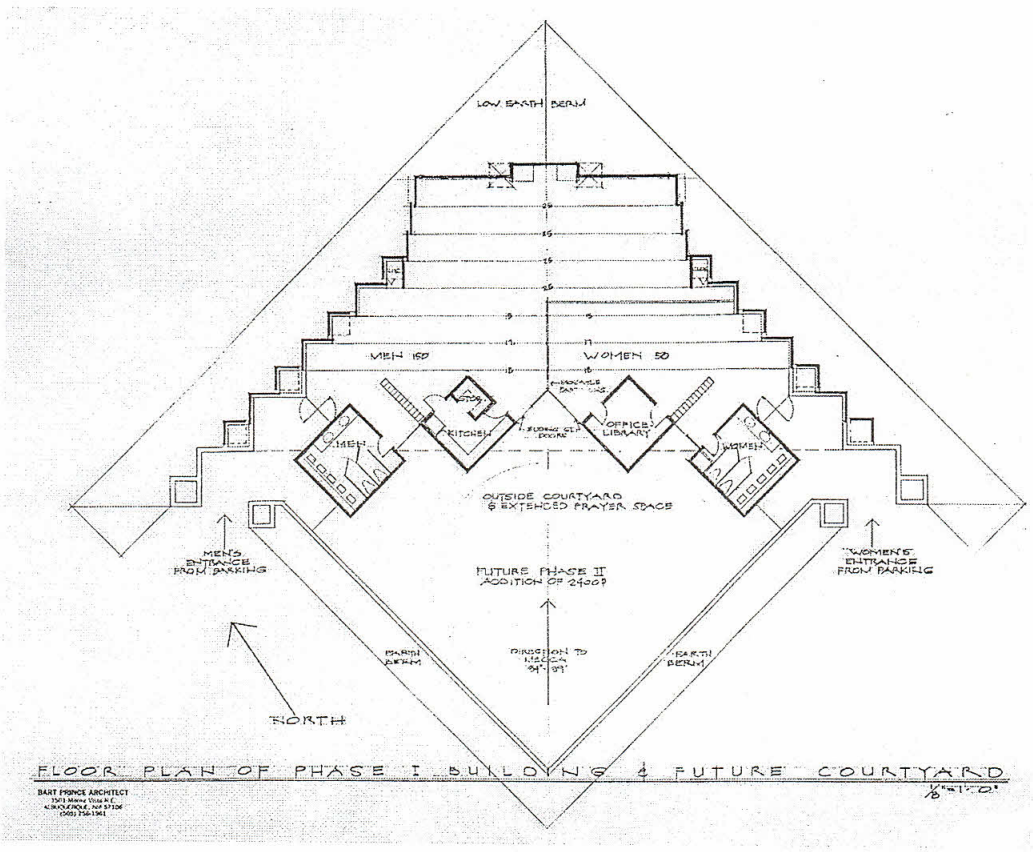


Fig. 10: The Islamic Center of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

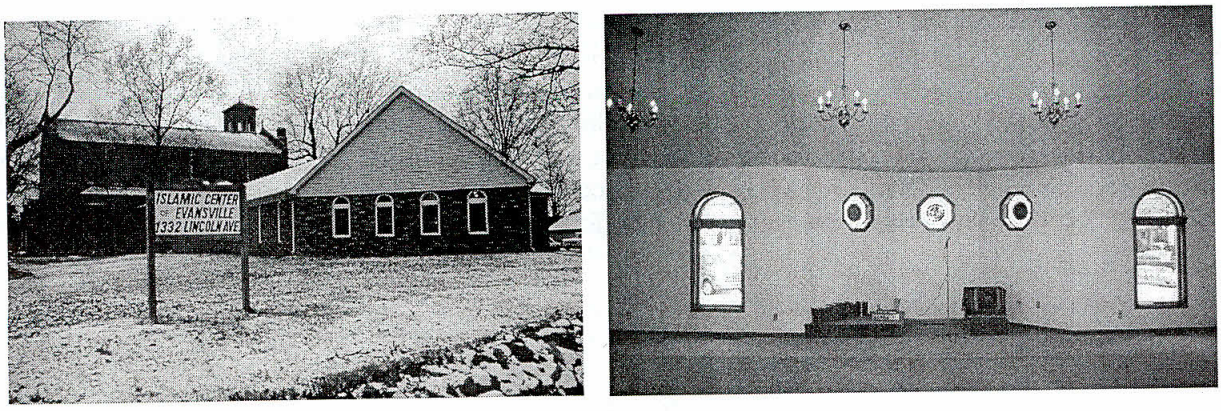


Fig. 11: External and Internal View of the Islamic Center of Evansville, Indiana.

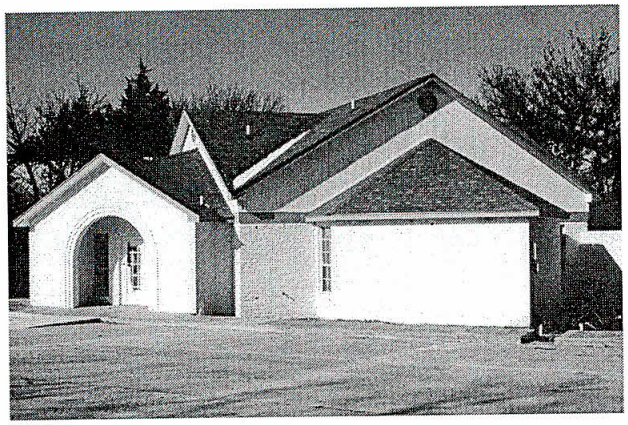


Fig. 12: External View of the Masjid al-Salam in Edmond, Oklahoma.

Conclusions

What does the experience of various mosque projects tell us about nature and direction of design preference and its consequences? New and insecure Muslim communities in America at first often constructed mosques, which were architecturally nondescript. Examples of this kind may be seen in the cases of early mosques in Michigan, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and California. Since then a large number of mosques have been built in purely traditional style found in the Muslim countries with little regard to the site in North America, and still less regard to the resulting negative consequences. Some architects have experimented with reinterpretation of the traditional design with mixed products of uneven quality. The innovative mosques of Haidar, Prince, and Karim have not always been well received due to the emotional attachment of the immigrants to particular images of mosques. Given the extreme diversity of Muslims in America, the logical choice would seem to be to go in favor of an unprecedented mosque with maximum regard to the strictly Islamic requirements and minimum to ethno-national taste, whether it be Ottoman, Mamluk or Mogul. We have already seen such a compromise reached in the case of the minaret of the Manhattan mosque. The attachment of traditional design principles is restricted to the first generation of immigrant Muslims. Their descendants and indigenous converted Muslims will eventually constitute the majority of the Muslim population, and consequently the scales will probably

be tipped in favor of the innovative architecture. Many Muslims of all backgrounds may even see it as a prime Islamic imperative: living in harmony with the total natural and historical environment of the place. Revivalist, historicism, or any design based solely on traditional principles will retard creativity. The unwillingness of some Muslims either as clients or architects to innovate, to experiment, to rethink design in a new context reflects a lack of confidence, and reaffirms the perceptions that Muslims are either resisting or yielding to the Western influences and therefore incapable of changing from within their own tradition.

References

[1] Richardson, Eallen. *East Comes West.* New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985, pp.154.

[2] "Interview with Syed Gulzar Haidar." Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993.

[3] Wilson, Steve. "Mosque Goes All Out in Tradition." In: *USA Today,* February 17-19, 1984.

[4] Kliment, Stephen. "Manhattan Mosque." In: *Architectural Record*, August 1992, p. 93.

[5] "Telephone conversation with William Preston." June 12, 1993.

[6] Haidar, Syed Gulzar, and Khalil, Muhammad Mukhtar, "Islamic Architecture in Non-Muslim Environment." In: *Places of Public Gathering in Islam,* Fifth Aga Khan Award for Architecture Seminar, Geneva: Aga Khan Award, 1980.

توجهات تصميم المسجد في شمال أمريكا

عمر خالدي

كلية العمارة والتخطيط, معهد ماساتشوستز للتقنية

كامبردج، ماساتوشتس, الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية

ملخص البحث: بينما يعود تاريخ عمارة المساجد إلى الوراء قرون عديدة، تعتبر بداية عمارة المساجد في الولايات المتحدة وكندا ظاهرة معاصرة. ونظرا لحداثة بناء المساجد في شمال القارة الأمريكية، فقد جرب المعماريون عددا من الاتجاهات في تصميمها. وأقدم بعضهم وببساطة على تقليد الطرز المتوارثة من النماذج العربية والتركية والهندية، بينما حاول آخرون ابتكار أنماط تجمع بين طرز إسلامية وأخرى محلية يتضح ذلك في عدد من الأمثلة. كما يمكن العثور على أمثلة لتصاميم مستقلة لا تمت بصلة في طرزها لأي تقليد. وبالنسبة للمعماري المسلم, ما هي التحديات التي تفرضها البيئة المبنية الجديدة التي يجب أن يتعامل معها ذلك المعماري؟ وكيف يستطيع مواجهة التحديات التي تضعه في وضع يجمع بين متطلبات الدين والتخصص؟ واعتمادا على أمثلة لمنشآت بنيت كمساجد – وليست تلك المباني التي تم تحويلها إلى مساجد – يناقش البحث بمنهجية ناقدة عددا من اتجاهات تصميم المساجد في شمال أمريكا. ويشتمل البحث على مساقط أفقية وأشكال لتلك التصاميم.