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Introduction

In Islam, Hajj and prayer are the only pillars that have a connection to an architectural and spatial dimension.[1] Where the singular architectural symbol of the Ka'aba is commonly associated with the former, the latter occurs on multiple scales, ranging from the individual to the city, each linked to its own spatial features. While worshippers commonly need a prayer mat and should face the qibla, wherever they might be, prayer at the scale of the city is reflected in the mosque, which takes on a variety of scales.[2] Serving the needs of diverse communities around the globe, mosque design has evolved over time. The range and variety of architectural styles are often dependent on each mosque's location, scale and any additional services it might offer.[3] New York and Sharjah are no exception to this evolution. Today, mosques serve as architectural emblems of Islam, with a myriad forms, mainly acting as a shared space for prayer.

This research project highlights and responds to the lack of architectural documentation of these structures in both New York and Sharjah. While its inception was funded by a grant from Zayed University, the project continued beyond the initial award, where the displayed drawings and images are original and constructed for this research project funded by Art Jameel. Depending on site surveys, oral history and in depth visual analysis of the selected buildings, this project highlights the architectural importance of these spaces and the impact they had on their communities over time. Not only do the mosques presented here act as an agent in the construction of Islamic identity and its relation to architectural form, but they reflect the growth of the urban fabric that engulfs them as well as the continuously evolving nature of devotion.

Brief relevance of architectural form in Islam

A masjid (the Arabic term for mosque) is defined as an architectural space that physically manifests the worship of a God whose visual depiction is prohibited. The use of the term masjid, especially in the Quran, does not provide specific guidelines when it comes to architectural elements. When referred to the term, a masjid is often referred to as a place where worship is performed and should be exalted in building, with an

emphasis on physical cleanliness.[4] This resulted in a lack of adherence to everchanging design rules, evidenced by its fluctuating design methodology.[5] This effect is clearly demonstrated in the changing architectural expression of these spaces that takes on a multitude of styles and scales, expressing themselves differently depending on their location and time of construction.

Why Sharjah and New York were selected

New York City houses three hundred mosques, roughly, making it one of the most diverse Muslim cities in the world. In comparison, the emirate of Sharjah is home to the largest number of mosques in the UAE, with approximately 2,000 mosques dating from historic and contemporary periods. At a first glance, mosques in both locations can seem widely different, similarities can be drawn between structures in New York City and Sharjah, especially in relation to their architectural form. New York's storefront mosques commonly express themselves with green awnings and mesh with the urban fabric of the city as they fit within existing structures. Similarly, historic mosques in Sharjah insert themselves into their urban context, in both their form and material. Specifically, the coral and mangrove trees used to construct these structures recall the emirate's natural landscape at the time the mosques were built.

Although the mosques appear integrated with their surroundings, at the time of their inception, their spatial makeup conflicts with the growing and shifting urban fabric that surrounds them today. With regard to the remaining historic Sharjah mosques, materials were heavily altered in order to maintain their upkeep and structural integrity. Air conditioning, ablution structures and imam housing quarters have been added, while others are awkwardly located in the city, such as in the middle of a roundabout in Kalba. In tandem, New York mosques continue to expand their interior spaces vertically and horizontally. Despite seemingly fitting within the urban grid, inhabiting existing apartments or townhouses, interior spaces must adapt to face the qibla during prayer, creating formal tension and odd corners. Walls, doors and other elements within the space are cut and molded in order to fit the diagonally oriented direction of prayer.

Mosques in Sharjah (Obaid Bin Eesa in Sharjah, Saif Bin Ghanim in Kalba, Ahmed Bin Hassan in Khorfakkan)

Mosques built in Sharjah before 1970, and the unification of the UAE, portray a sense of local expression. This is formally evident in the mosques of Obaid Bin Eesa Al Naboodah in Sharjah, Saif Bin Ghanim in Kalba, and Ahmed Bin Hassan in Khorfakkan. In one sense, using the term 'local' to describe this architectural typology is precarious, given the transnational nature of many historical forms of mosque

architecture, especially in a historic trade hub like the UAE. However, these pre-1970 mosques all employ the same architectural vocabulary, typical of historic religious spaces in the Emirates at the time. Evidenced in small-scale one-storey structures, these mosques were built with thick white walls, roofs made from mangrove tree bark and palm fronds, and high windows covered in plaster screens with geometric motifs inspired by nature.[6] The walls are typically composed from the most readily available materials found in a marine desert environment: coral and laminar shell stone.[7] Predominantly, openings were positioned on the north- and south-facing walls to funnel the breeze coming in from the shore.

With a few exceptions, Sharjah's historic mosques are located within walking distance of the Gulf's shoreline and are usually accessible from the waterfront where the residential neighborhoods were mostly concentrated.[8] The size of the mosques depended on location and foot traffic as well as their beneficiaries. Those on the water were typically larger, such as Obaid Bin Eesa Al Naboodah's mosque that is two stories high and can accommodate up to 200 people as well as caters to a variety of worshippers due to their close proximity to the port. Those located inland typically had a smaller capacity of up to 10 worshippers, such as Kalba's Saif Bin Ghanim mosque.[9]

The majority of mosques constructed between 1800 and 1969 were built and funded by local patrons who either sold personal property or used their inheritances to construct and maintain these privately funded structures, such as the case with the Al Naboodah mosque.[10] Even though mosques built at the time often did not feature minarets, historic images show that the Al Naboodah's mosque minaret has fallen into the nearby shore due to prevailing tides one year. The only salient architectural feature visible from the outside of the building are the protrusions that can invariably be found on their external qibla wall, forming the exterior of the mihrab alcove.

The interiors of historic mosques are usually devoid of lavish ornament. Due to the use of wooden roofs, the size of the space was restricted to the span of dowels and palm tree fronds. As a result, wide columns were sometimes introduced to expand the space, distributing the weight of the roof while allowing for a larger number of worshippers to gather.[11] The columns in the Al Naboodah Mosque were imported from India where the beneficiary once resided, while the columns in Ahmed Bin Hassan's Mosque were constructed from rocks and coral-bound plaster. [12] The capitals and bases of such columns display humble motifs: abstract floral designs are common in the emirate's capital while crescents and stars were typically found in the eastern region.[13] As worshippers enter, their movement is centered upon a direct axis facing the qibla wall and culminating in the arched alcove of the mihrab.[14] Worshippers can also move bi-axially, fanning out to the sides if prayer is in progress. Windows take up a large part

of the interior walls and carved niches act as Quran-holders. Most of these historic mosques were refurbished in the past decade. Today, Ahmed Bin Hassan Mosque boasts a colorful carpeted flooring, but when it was built, the floor was made from rammed earth.[15] The use of praying carpets was uncommon and woven palm fronds would have been used instead.[16]

Mosques in New York (Islamic Cultural Center in New York in Manhattan, Masjid Al-Firdaus in Harlem, Islamic Society of Mid Manhattan in Manhattan)

Mosques in New York have witnessed a meteoric growth in the past few decades. Even though Islam has been present in the city since the 18th century, brought by muslim slaves from Africa, its official recognition was delayed by at least a century, where it finally gained sufficient advocacy.[17] The year 1907 marks the first 'mosque' built in the city in Brooklyn.[18] Due to the fact that mosques are often put together by immigrant Muslim communities, these institutions reflect a new cosmopolitan and plural character to these sacred spaces, defying a singular and reductive image. Here, the architectural image of a mosque is more often than not a reused interior space, some of which are storefronts, garages, or homes as seen in the selected mosques: The Islamic Society of Mid Manhattan and The Islamic Cultural Center of New York, both in Manhattan, and Masjid Al Firdaus in Harlem. The architectural language timidly extends to the exterior of the mosque, with painted doors or green awnings, marking the building's new identity. Arabic text sometimes makes its way to the exterior signage, as well.

Unlike Sharjah, New York's mosques, selected for the scope of this research, are sacred spaces inserting themselves into storefront buildings, lofts and brownstones. The buildings range in cost, from the multi-million dollar project of the Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan to prayer halls with kitchens and lounge areas, carved out of existing structures, such as Masjid Al Firdaus.[19] With a few exceptions, mosques in the city are funded by local councils and small congregations that work together with local contractors and are donation based. Architects are rarely hired for the task and professionally designed mosques are the exception to the rule.

Architectural elements for a mosque in New York City are mainly functional and speak to the use of the space. Symbolic forms that we tend to associate with the formal expression of a mosque are rare: Minarets and domes are not commonly found. Among the common components are ablution spaces, which can range from a side sink to elaborate tiled fountains, such as the one found in the The Islamic Cultural Center of New York. Other commonalities are the separation of the sexes, whether it be on

different floors or using a temporary curtain, the establishment of the qibla and the restriction of the use of images that depict God.

The interiors of New York mosques are characterized by their make-shift nature, evident in the defiance of the city's urban grid by the carpeted floors that face Mecca. No matter how intentional the community was when it came to the renovation project, the spaces are predominantly geared towards the act of prayer and worship, along with other improvised activities, such as the occasional nap or coffee break, seen in Masjid Al Firdaus in Harlem. This attitude extends to the furnishing of the interior space with a clear detachment from aesthetic considerations. While some walls are painted green, red carpets fill space with a stark contrast, suggesting that formal and design considerations come second to the space's utilitarian nature. As worshippers enter, their movement is constantly fluctuating from the city's overpowering grid to the new interior direction that faces the qibla wall. Mihrabs here vary from built in wooden elements to moveable structures that provide a seat for the imam. Windows are often covered by drapes and natural light is rare on the ground floor of the mosque.

Conclusion

Sharjah's historic mosques as well as New York's storefront mosques are a physical manifestation of public, private and spiritual worlds coming together in their respective locations. These spaces were, indeed, deeply intertwined with daily life cycles. Such communal spaces meant that the mosque acted as another public gathering space, beside the predominant majlis in Sharjah and a break room for Grubhub drivers in New York City. Moreover, in Sharjah, the patrons who built historic mosques were not distant benefactors but rather local people who also acted as caretakers of the premises, further strengthening the ties between sacred space and neighborhood life. A relationship of care and responsibility was thus established over generations, linking the community to its space of worship in an intimate way. Similarly, the pooled donations in New York City to build the storefront mosques evidence a sense of community using architecture as a formal expression. Both locations prove that the mosque's architectural expression is often ubiquitous, conforming to regional forms and mainly acts as a shared space for prayer, equally belonging to all members of the society.

1. The core of Islamic law is based on five pillars: Shahada (profession of faith), salat (prayer), zakat (charity to the poor), siyam (fasting in Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)

2. Qibla: the direction of Mecca

3. See Azra Aksamija, Mosque Manifesto: Propositions for Spaces of Coexistence(Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2015)

4. القرآن الكريم ١٩ التوبة ٣١ الأعراف

5. Rudolf Stegers, Sacred Buildings: A Design Manual (Basel, Berlin and Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2008), p46

6. د. حامد بن صراي، 'أخشاب الجندل .. مزيج حكايات ومغامرات وأسفار'، البيان، 25 مايو، 2017

7. Anne Coles and Peter Jackson, Windtower (London: Stacey International, 2006), p 26

8. (عبدالستار العزاوي، مسجد عبيد بن عيسى (حلب : دار القلم العربي، 2009، p 10

9. (عبدالستار العزاوي، مسجد الدليل: تحليل أساليب الترميم والصيانة (الشارقة : عبد الستار العزاوي، 1998، p12

10. Ibid

11. العزاوي، مسجد الدليل: تحليل أساليب الترميم والصيانة، p 45

12. Mosques that were closer to the shore received a larger amount of imported building materials such as hand carved doors and columns from India. See pp 50–51, عبدالستار العزاوي، مسجد عبيد بن عيسى

13. Mosques in the capital are often simpler in terms of design, lacking ornament, while those in the Eastern region of the emirate display a wider array of trims, more elaborate column capitals as well as a wall and window embellishment. See pp 11–124, 2011 ،(عبدالستار العزاوي، المباني الأثرية في كلباء (الشارقة : دائرة الثقافة والإعلام

14. Site visit by the author, 21 November 2023.

15. حقبة

16. Ibid

17. New York Masjid, p24

18. Ibid

19. Ibid, 29