



## Faith buildings and their urban environments

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The mosques that I went to as a child, were of two types. The first were ephemeral fleeting locations: hired halls, school rooms, community centres. They functioned as mosques only during the time that they were populated by Muslims, melting back into their ordinary functions as soon as the last worshipper had left.

The second kind were permanent structures, with the dedicated function of being a mosque; but somehow they were still lacking in confidence, constrained by lack of time, resources and vision. Purchased from owners who found the large buildings too costly to maintain as a result of disuse or disrepair, they were often old town halls, churches and even schools. They offered benefits such as being well located with large halls to accommodate worshippers. But the bathrooms were too small for the ritual ablutions, the floors too hard for prayers, the *qibla* that points the congregation to Mecca at a crooked angle to the building, and most likely in need of restoration.

What baffled me most – even as a child – was the crowning of these new buildings with a little green dome. I understand why it was done – a symbolic marking of the building's new life as a Muslim centre. Was it necessary though, I wondered? And what was the impact of these and similar architectural changes on the aesthetics of existing – often historic – buildings? And did it enhance the worshippers' faith?

These questions have been bubbling away in my mind for many years, so imagine my delight in finding a seminar hosted at a Muslim centre, and inspired by Muslims, focusing on the spatial relationships of faith buildings with their community and environment. Why had I never come across such a discussion before?

The seminar was prescient – coming only weeks before the Swiss referendum on whether to ban the building of minarets. 53.4% of the population turned out to a vote which carried the motion to ban minarets by 57.5%. The ban has provoked controversy, and has been called a violation of religious freedom and expression, but it highlights the significant meaning which people attach to faith buildings. Church spires are remarkably similar in size and shape to minarets, and Switzerland has plenty of them. Yet the population invests different interpretations to the two, even though the stone and mortar are very similar. It might be naive to wonder why this might be, but when approaching this question from an architectural rather than a political perspective, it gets to the very heart of this seminar's question about how faith buildings influence and interact with their surroundings.

In my experience, early Muslim architecture in Britain has understandably been constructed based on needs and available resources, rather than on a forward thinking and visionary utopian ideal. After all, these buildings serve as community centres, and as such their needs are real and immediate. If cash and time are tight, the buildings must be built within those constraints. However, the Muslim community is now more settled, more well-to-do and has already established over 1600 Islamic centres across the country. It is time now to ponder more deeply on the multiple aspects that go into a faith centre: location, architecture, art, people, services and urban relationships. And that is exactly what this seminar did. The speakers explored how have we arrived at where we are today, but more importantly, what is our philosophy and destination, and how do we get there?

The seminar was part of the This Is Not A Gateway (TINAG) Festival, a weekend of presentations, debates and forums on the city and urban citizenship. It was co-sponsored by Arts Council England's Arts and Islam initiative, and in his introduction the director of diversity Tony Panayiotou made a bold statement: "Arts can help young people from turning to extremism." I wondered whether, by extension, was the same true for faith architecture? I have always maintained that those who have been seduced by violence have not found it in mosques, but rather have been alienated from them. Was it therefore possible that a well-designed, well-built, well-implemented faith building could inspire souls and minds in positive ways?

Tony added: "Art has the ability to bring people together and when you bring art and faith together that makes the connection even stronger." Was that why a beautiful well-thought out faith building can inspire those of other faiths or even none?

Abbas from OpenVizor, the second sponsor of the evening, elaborated: the discussion couldn't just focus on the building itself. The social and spatial roles of faith buildings were determined by artists, architects and planners – the latter including the urban planners as well as those planning and implementing the community and pastoral services from within the buildings.

The importance of tying together the architecture with people and services was in no doubt when Shaynul Khan, set the stage for the evening's discussion by recounting the history and challenges of setting up two adjoining faith buildings in Aldgate for the Muslim community: the East London

Mosque (ELM) which will be celebrating its centenary next year, and the much newer London Muslim Centre (LMC).

Khan, who is the assistant executive director at the LMC, which was the host venue for the evening, explained the humble origins of the East London Mosque, which aimed in its early days simply to “erect and maintain a place of worship”. Like many other mosques around the UK it wasn’t located in a permanent place at the time, more of a concept brought to life by the hiring of different local venues.

Its physical transience perhaps reflected the image that the congregation had of itself – that it would have only a fleeting residency in the UK. Yet after a while, people who thought that they were only visitors began to settle.

In the 1960’s, the physical proximity of a dense Muslim immigrant population meant that community problems began to emerge, and the mosque started to address those issues. These were the first steps from being a location for spiritual devotion, towards the realm of community service provision. It is a path that many other faith centres, Muslim and otherwise have also followed.

The form of the building, and the function the building serves in the community are two different things, explained Khan. His perspective as a member of the mosque management committee, responsible for the running and function of the centre made his point clear: “It’s not just about the physical space, but the softer things – people, processes, access, approach, support.”

The Reverend Rosie Fairhurst, representing St Martin in the Fields, one of the UK’s most famous churches, echoed his sentiments about weaving both the form and the function of a faith building into the lives of the people whom it serves, and whom it co-habits the area with.

Located in Trafalgar Square, St Martin-in-the-Fields first came to prominence in 1542 when Henry VIII built a new church there so that plague victims would not be carried past his own palace at St. James. It is believed that people have been worshipping in this place for up to 2000 years, not all of them necessarily Christian. In 1720, a plan for a major re-building of the church was put forward, its goal being to construct “the best that London could offer God”. Most recently it has just completed a full refurbishment of the building, adding a glass atrium and a full underground floor in order to amplify its resources to the local community.

The eponymous Martin entered the Christian Church after a career in the Roman army, and became Bishop of Tours. He is particularly remembered for an instinctive act of generosity: sharing his cloak with a beggar. The example of St Martin was followed by Dick Sheppard, Vicar of St Martin's during World War I, who gave refuge to soldiers on their way to France. He saw St Martin's as 'the church of the ever open door'. The fight against homelessness was formalised with the foundation of the Social Service Unit in 1948 which cares for around 7,500 individuals each year.

Like many other faith buildings, this potted history of the church made me reflect on the many intentions that often lie behind the construction of religious buildings: pomp, ceremony, aloofness, community service, community togetherness and worship amongst others.

In order to keep funding the building and its activities, the church started a market in its grounds, as well as the famous Cafe in the Crypt. Reverend Fairhurst described how this had challenged the church to develop its own philosophy of commerce: it is good to do business well and honestly. I was reminded of the similarity to many mosques around the world which share a similar communal and commercial philosophy. The grand mosque in Casablanca has tea rooms and a hammam, the mosque in Paris built in 1927 has a souk, a salon de the and a garden.

Of course the East London Mosque and Muslim Centre where we were currently seated on a large carpet, cross-legged, sipping tea whilst listening to these insights on faith buildings, has a similar vision: it already has a variety of shops on its street front, a recently opened gym and soon a multi-storey resource centre for women. In 1985, this multi-functional mosque opened, and now its mission extended to “what can we do for the community, how can we make a change to the lives of the people who visit us.” Of the multitude of services that run at the mosque, Khan was careful to emphasise that these were not decided only by those involved in the running of the mosque, but by the community itself.

“It is the community itself that has ownership of the building. The mosque feeds into the fabric of their lives.” This is literally as well as metaphorically true – the community contributed £7.5m of the overall £10m building cost.

The mosque has indeed come a long way – in 1975 it consisted only of two terraced houses, which the GLA exchanged for the land where it is currently located, a piece of land which was previously a bomb site.

Ali Mangera, of Mangera Yvars Architects, had a similar vision of regeneration for the Abbey Mills mosque, which was so maligned in the press as the “mega mosque” that the whole project had to be abandoned. What the press didn’t bother to report, he said, was that the land was contaminated and unusable for anything else. “It was going to be turned into a garden, a garden for London.” His implication was that the vision of reclaiming and rejuvenating disused land is symbolic of the life which faith buildings nourish in their vicinity.

Mangera’s passionate adversity to transplanting eastern design to western places was evident throughout his philosophy of mosque design. He shared several cutting edge projects that his firm has worked on. “People cling onto an archetype of a mosque with a dome and a minaret, but this is not the typology of a mosque.” He was even less in favour of entirely new buildings constructed to look like buildings from elsewhere. “It’s folly to create in 2009 something from India, for example” he commented.

He described a new mosque in Cambridge whose challenge was to fit in with a city that has dignity and history. He described it as drawing inspiration from a dune: “soft, jewel-like, inviting people in from the outside.”

In South London he worked on a project where the mosque was to be built next door to a church. “How to combine these two neighbours?” he asked. In the end, his firm designed a garden between the two faith buildings, as a place where worshippers could come together and enjoy beauty.

He also mentioned a new mosque-cum-community centre that is currently going through the planning process in North Harrow in London. The design has a curvaceous almost futuristic quality that in my view was not just leading edge for mosques, but for architecture in general. Mangera’s description was “three volumes, linked by a series of arches. The centre will accommodate a sports hall, residential home, nursing home, library, seminar rooms and cafe and restaurant. A place where different ages and communities can come together.”

The design is quite remarkably different to Harrow Central Mosque which is currently under construction. The latter adheres to Mangera’s definition of the ‘traditional’ mosque – stunning arched windows, a dome and a minaret. The North Harrow Community Centre draws seems to draw its ethos from the same philosophy as St Martin in the Fields, the East London Mosque and the others I mentioned earlier: to replicate the historic functions of a mosque from the Prophet Muhammad’s time. This encompassed a place where everyone could come, and not just for the ritual prayers, but for other spiritual, emotional and even worldly needs. It was a place of discussion, of intergenerational mingling, even of finding employment or commerce.

This view echoed in particular through the voices of those who spoke from within the running of the faith buildings. The artists and architects who spoke throughout the evening were keen to lay emphasis on a spiritual artistic and holistic notion of ‘mosque’. Mangera said “a mosque is just a line on the floor facing Mecca.”

Abdul Lateef Whiteman, a calligrapher and graphic designer, went one step further saying: “when I am asked what are the rules and regulations of building a mosque, I say that in the Qur’an, there are none! Just the direction of prayer!”

“Muslims seem much more comfortable with tradition, though. I’m not a traditionalist, but in religion, religion is tradition!” Having himself been trained in modern architecture and design, Whiteman explored the relationship between tradition and modernity, eastern and western, and how it might be possible to combine two elements together rather than be forced to choose one of the other.

He used his experience as a calligrapher and graphic designer in laying out books that contained Arabic and English text as an example. “How do you blend these two together beautifully?” he asked. For him, even the typesetting of a page which had different traditions in it was a work of art.

Despite his rigorous modernist training, he found that it was in North Africa that he first experienced the notion of building as sanctuary, that offered a refuge and a stillness. He seemed particularly drawn to natural materials such as adobe. In his mind this material conferred another benefit on a communal building – it had to be regularly maintained, and this construction and maintenance were done by the community itself. The community quite literally invested themselves into the building. Like East London Mosque, it seems the magic of the sacred came from the people themselves, whether building it, funding it or laying claim to its services and worship within it.

Mangera was clearly moved by this point and interjected: “for Muslims all spaces are sacred. The intention is important. The buildings are not about power, but about inclusivity and in London in 2009 they are especially important in bringing people together.”

The artist Zarah Hussain offered a different perspective on inclusivity and sharing – through the art of the mosque itself. “Mosques are not art for art’s sake, but art for the community,” she explained. “In the Muslim world, the best art was reserved for the mosque, where the community could share it. The art belongs to the community, not with individual states, but for everyone, regardless of whether they are Muslim or not.”

Art is essential to a faith building, she elaborated: “Having beauty inside the mosque and outside the mosque is part of the purpose of the mosque, and reminds us why we are here.” Her perspective was that the form is what bestows spirituality on the building. Form binds the individual worshipper to the sacred place, and it also binds the sacred place into its spatial environment.

Unsurprisingly, with this as her philosophy, she was mortified when the budget for a new centre prioritised a car park over a peace garden. Her horror was that beauty – and by extension beauty as a form of worship – was relegated in favour of functionality.

Hers is a critical point about creating and sharing beauty, and its importance is not to be underestimated. The challenge is how to resolve the prioritisation of functional needs in the very construction of the mosque with the mosque’s inherent purpose to inspire and transcend the mundane.

The most surprising contribution of the evening for me, was the incredible work of Liz Hingley, who spent two years documenting diverse religious communities on the Soho Road in Birmingham. Using her skills as a photographer, her aim was to show people other lifestyles that they don’t readily have access to, with the hope that it could speak to wider, more complex social problems.

She chose Soho Road because of the thirty faith buildings that are found along its length. “Maybe the different buildings are the way that different faith communities show their face in Britain. And the biggest ones showed the most obvious face of their religion.”

Whereas the focus of previous speakers had been on the competing tensions of form versus function, Hingley pointed to a more subtle tension – between that of the building and the individual. Faith, after all, is a human matter and this is what she was searching for: “I wanted to see

the faith that lived in people. But the buildings were not where I found the personal faith that I was looking for.” Her concern was that organisations can overpower the individual.

With faith buildings becoming bigger and ever bolder, how is the intimacy of the individual to be retained in worship, I wondered. And how to nurture amongst the faithful the sense of being a unique individual, who is at the same time part of a wider community? How can the building itself facilitate this rather than hinder it?

Her views were a stark contrast to Dr Richard Gale whose professional expertise was also centred around Birmingham. He conducted his doctoral research on urban planning as a way of governing space for faith communities, to see if it discriminates against any of them, by studying the area from the 1950s to today. He found four phases when it came to Birmingham Corporation’s planning policies regarding the need for community spaces: denial, conflict, abrasive accommodation and celebration.

Faith communities, particularly immigrant faith communities, have a sense of urgency in establishing faith buildings, as they form the religious as well as the cultural heart of their society. Within them are located not just spiritual services like prayer halls – but other community needs like religious schooling, weddings, births and deaths. For me it was the first time listening to the planning authorities from the “other side”, about their philosophy when it comes to planning for faith buildings.

Gale posed the urban planners’ dilemma to the audience: “New buildings have to engage with existing environments and accommodate them. But what is the meaning of these faith buildings?”

He dug deeper into his own thinking when it comes to planning strategy, quoting: “French philosopher Henri Lefebvre sees it as a tension between the way spaces are represented by powers such as government against how they are practically used by communities.”

Gale further asked: “How are spaces conceived by the people who use them, and how are they governed by the powers that plan and control them?” It was a philosophical echo of Hingley’s observation of the tension between the individual and the organisation. More than that, it harked back to the core of the discussion that resonated through every one of the speakers: what is the relationship between the form and implementation of the building, and the people who bring it to life and invest into it the sacred.

As Hingley asked: “What makes the brick of the butcher’s shop across the road, less sacred than the brick in the religious building?” The only answer I could come up with was: the people who bring it to life.

As the evening closed, I still had plenty of questions, but I suspect the subject will need to be explored in many ways yet, till a multidisciplinary body of thinking can be developed. The challenges for Muslim buildings of worship are at the same time similar and different to those of other faiths.

For Christianity, its buildings are historically interwoven into the landscape and culture of Britain, and it seems that it does not need to overcome any sense of 'otherness' or adaptation. On the other hand, all buildings of faith are constantly being challenged to justify their contribution to the landscape, and need to think carefully not only about the values and services they impart – and whether these are still relevant or not - but also about the values that underpin their construction and vision.

The seminar posed some huge questions, and to its credit, it attempted to explore the subject from a wide range of angles. As a first attempt to tackle the subject it was incredible as well as overwhelming. The ideas will need time to percolate, digest and make sense of. We need more discussion please, and soon.

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