

From Yellowknife to Charlottetown, Muslims across Canada have found new spaces for spiritual contemplation. Varying from traditionally styled mosques to storefronts, these spaces highlight the spatial transitions of contemporary Muslim life. *Muqarnas: Intersections of Contemporary Islamic Architecture* looks at the changing spaces in which Muslims converge and practice their faith. The symbolism of a Muqarnas, an architectural feature of projecting niches that evokes a sense of the infinite as well as spaces of transition reflects these new dimensions of sacred spaces.

Converging Sites: Muslim Sacred Spaces and the Practice of Architecture

BY NADIA KURD

*I went to the mosque
when no one was there.
No One was sweeping up.
She said: This place is just a place.
Light is everywhere. Go, live in it.
The Mosque is under your feet,
wherever you walk each day.*

- "My Little Mosque" by Mohja Kahf.¹

The mosque has many uses; it is a place for prayer, a community centre, and for learning. For the Muslim diaspora, the mosque plays a pivotal role in anchoring the community in new locations. For it is in these spaces that Muslims can practice and define the characteristics of Islam. Issues related to civic engagement, the role of women, and educating the youth are all based on the decisions made within the mosque. In light of these multiple and contrasting uses, what are the aesthetic considerations made when these spaces are constructed? How does the Muslim diaspora envision the spaces in which Islam is practiced? This exhibition intends to examine the prevalent and most engaging aspects of Muslim life in North America, namely the various interpretations of how characteristics of Islamic Architecture are constructed in the diaspora. The work done by Muslim artists and architects living in the diaspora can influence the concepts of Islamic architecture while also providing a working base from which new understandings can surface.

With a career spanning over thirty years, artist **Lubna Agha** explores the traditional features of Islamic architecture through the medium of painting. Her large scale work utilizes features such as geometric patterning, and a repetition of arches- both quintessentially Islamic in aesthetic, however these images are much more materially grounded in the tradition of painting. Paintings such as *Star 1* (2005), and *Fountain* (2005) were influenced by a trip that Agha made to Morocco and Turkey, and as a result, the architectural symmetry found in Moroccan and Turkish mosques feature strongly. In these works, not only do

these images integrate elements of architecture but also incorporate a brushwork style consisting of many points. This method of painting gives her subject matter a distinct brilliance in colour and shape. The abstract images in her work challenge some of the immovable qualities of architecture to provide an ephemeral sense of two contradictory senses: infinity and oneness.

Agha's work does not rest on a conventional square canvas, but rather, the physical form of her work takes on architectural features such as scale and shape. The effect is considerably more dynamic and breathes life into constructed Muslim spaces. For example, *Four Windows* (2005) replicates actual windows of traditional mosques, yet her approach provides a portable means to experience such spaces in different environments.

Trained as an architect, **Sharif Senbel** has been designing mosques in British Columbia since the early 1990s. Though Senbel does not exclusively build mosques, his overall practice is strongly dedicated to social, cultural and environmental responsibility.² As for his mosque designs, Senbel seeks to synthesize an assortment of localized architectural needs with a larger Islamic aesthetic. This process of creating spaces for the Muslim community directly coincides with the tradition of Islamic architecture which actively integrated elements of the local vernacular architecture. In other words, accounting for the local climate and materials is an essential part of designing mosques. In British Columbia, this approach bridges both the cultural and religious aspects of Muslim life to produce uniquely situated spaces that speak of the changing Canadian landscape.

For Senbel, the practice of building a mosque is a participatory creative process that draws on the client's specific needs and wishes.³ In mosques such as the Al Hidayah (2003) in Port Coquitlam, and the Surrey mosque and school (2005) feature an all purpose gymnasium, library, and a commercial kitchen. Both mosques' exteriors include a minaret and identifiable Islamic elements such as etched windows with geometric patterning and inlay calligraphic texts, both of which are connected to a pan-Islamic design. While the inclusion of these elements also signifies a growing need to symbolize Muslim identity, these architectural features are also easy targets for vandalism and anti-Muslim sentiments. Mosques such as these have been under the public scrutiny and often bare the consequences of global upheavals around the Muslim world.

Accompanying Senbel's schematic drawings and Agha's jewel tone paintings is a photo installation of mosques across Canada. Taken by the locals where the buildings exist, these images show how storefronts, office buildings, and converted churches are used to accommodate the new communities which

congregate there. These mosques are equally striking as the conventionally aesthetic mosques; however, they articulate the transformative and adaptive nature of Muslim life in Canada. They challenge the scripted notions of grandeur in Islamic architecture, and complicate ideas of any singular definition. Beginning to discuss and document the histories of Muslim spaces in the diaspora can better inform us of this process.

Indeed, the manifestations of Islamic Architecture are so varied that to define it as a singular creative and spiritual expression cannot fully describe the myriad of spaces that Muslims use. As architect Gulzar Haider points out:

Muslim minorities in the non-Muslim world will ultimately realize that their history has put them in a position somehow reminiscent of the Prophet's Meccan period. Their isolation will purify and strengthen their belief, it will refine their thought and make their tools precise, and at an appropriate time, they will start to send 'expressive' postcards home. Then there will begin another migration, not in space and time, but from blindness of a certain kind to a clearer vision, from spiritless materiality toward expressive spirituality.⁴

The place and character of the diasporic mosque continue to illuminate how identity is inscribed in new settings and how identity itself can change. *Muqarnas: Intersections of Islamic Architecture* shows how this is a dynamic time for Muslims in Canada and throughout North America, as the possibilities for new sacred spaces are contested and negotiated from both within and outside the community.

NOTES

¹ Kahf, Mohja. "Little Mosque Poems," in *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*. ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan. (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2005.) 123.

² *Studio Senbel: Architecture + Design*. <<http://www.studiosenbel.com/studiosenbel.html>> (1 June 2006).

³ *Studio Senbel: Architecture + Design*. <<http://www.studiosenbel.com/studiosenbel.html>> (1 June 2006).

⁴ Haider, Gulzar. "Muslim Space and the Practice of Architecture," in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. ed. Barbara Daly Metcalfe. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 43.

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