

# TOWARDS AN ANGLO-ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

THE SOCIO-SPATIAL ROLE OF MOSQUES IN SHAPING  
A COHESIVE BRITISH MUSLIM IDENTITY



ABDULLAH GEELAH  
2018 CHURCHILL FELLOW



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abdullah Geelah is a solicitor based in London. His interest in Islamic spaces and identity stemmed from his previous involvement in arts and community collectives in the United Kingdom where there was a need by young British Muslims for cultural spaces and facilities within established Islamic centres. He is also a regular non-fiction writer for *Critical Muslim*. Abdullah holds an undergraduate degree in English Language and Linguistics and a postgraduate degree in Law, both from the University of Sheffield, England.





# ABOUT THE CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP

The Churchill Fellowship (the operating name of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust) was set up when Sir Winston Churchill died in 1965 as his national memorial. The Churchill Fellowship carries forward his legacy by funding up to 100 British citizens each year from all backgrounds to travel overseas to gain knowledge, experience and best practice to inspire positive change in their professions and communities in the United Kingdom. Successful applicants are known as Churchill Fellows for life. Since 1965, 5,800 Churchill Fellows have been appointed to travel the world in his name and provide his living memorial. Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the erstwhile patron of the Churchill Fellowship, granted permission in 2019 for Churchill Fellows to use the post-nominal honorific “CF”.

# FOREWORD

This report would not have been possible without the support of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (WCMT) and the Linbury Trust. I was incredibly honoured to be awarded the Churchill Fellowship in 2018 which enabled me to visit Canada, South Africa and the United States for my research. I am equally honoured to be amongst the many Fellows—past and present—whose contributions have had, and will continue to have, an enduring impact in the United Kingdom. I am also greatly indebted to all the staff at the WCMT for their invaluable advice and assistance over the years. They are the unsung heroes of the Churchill Fellowship. The Churchill Fellowship was a fitting honour given the relationship between Sir Winston Churchill and Islam. A hitherto unknown aspect of this relationship was a letter discovered in 2014 by a history research fellow at the University of Cambridge, England. It was written by Lady Gwendoline Bertie, Churchill’s sister-in-law, who begged him not to convert to Islam (‘Please don’t become converted to Islam; I have

noticed in your disposition a tendency to orientalise, Pasha-like tendencies, I really have’). It was a curious and delightful discovery and one which further interrogates our understanding of Churchill’s conflicting views on Islam and Muslims. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to all those I had the pleasure of interviewing for my research. I have developed lasting friendships with many of them. Their hospitality and generosity of spirit were truly moving. Their insights made this report happen. I am also thankful to members of the Muslim Institute, the Muslim Council of Britain and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims for their interest in my research and valuable contributions. They, like many others in the United Kingdom, are working tirelessly to make our faith spaces inclusive and enriching for the next generation of British Muslims. Lastly, to my family, friends and wider Muslim community in the United Kingdom, I would like to thank you for your unwavering love, warmth and encouragement.

THE  
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## AUTHOR’S NOTE

This report is based on qualitative research methods which consist of *(a)* a three-month research trip to Canada, South Africa and the United States visiting mosques, Islamic cultural centres and spaces and *(b)* in-depth interviews and discussions with young people, engaged citizens and other stakeholders in the abovementioned countries. I have conducted over 30 individual meetings and large focus groups in the abovementioned countries and the United Kingdom. I have anonymised participants of focus groups whose responses I have used directly in this report. The research is enhanced by my own fieldwork in the United Kingdom and other countries, over the course of half a decade, visiting many mosques and community centres (including churches and the West London Synagogue) to explore best practice. Whereas contributions from this very wide range of stakeholders helped to shape this report, it is worth adding that the recommendations herein do not necessarily reflect the views or policy positions of individuals or their organisations.

The research has resulted in a wealth of material (some 400 pages of notes and over 30 hours of recordings). Sadly, it would have been unfeasible to include all of the valuable data into something which is both meaningful and practical. Accordingly, I have synthesised the material into broad themes which have been woven into the main argument of this report. To that end, this report is structured as a long essay, incorporating relevant case studies to enable a detailed exploration of the themes. Given the objectives of the Churchill Fellowship, this report is not designed to be an academic paper. For academic discussions in the focus areas of this report, readers are advised to consult existing scholarship.

This report assumes a working knowledge of Islam as it is primarily aimed at members of the British Muslim community. However, in the hope that it may gain a wider readership, I have provided appropriate explanations of certain concepts, applicable historical overviews and a glossary for lay readers. It is in the spirit of inclusivity and broad engagement, therefore, that this report has been prepared.

The title of this report references *Toward an Architecture (Vers une architecture)* (1923), a pivotal work by the French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965). This book argues for a new architectural aesthetic grounded in the principles of functionalism and rationalism, drawing a parallel between the precision and efficiency of engineering and the potential for architecture to achieve similar clarity and purpose. This report has a similar objective in calling for a radical transformation in Anglo-Islamic architecture. Readers (especially architects) will be relieved to know that, unlike *Toward an Architecture*, this report does not promote a form of architectural determinism which leaves little room for individual expression or diversity in British mosque architecture.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

I am cautious about offering recommendations that could be seen as prescriptive. The reasons for my reticence are threefold. First, there is a lack of religious stricture in mosque design, which enables the flexibility for Muslim communities to realise their places of worship in ways that align with their wishes and needs. It would be imprudent, therefore, to delineate what is acceptable as this would ultimately be informed by subjective tastes vis-à-vis the requirements of local communities. Furthermore, such flexibility in mosque design is an asset, and one that should be promoted more vociferously. It allows us to think creatively on how we conceive places of worship that are harmonious and inclusive in a British context and to move beyond the stagnant mentality around mosque design. Second, I am aware of grassroots initiatives, led and facilitated by Muslim organisations in the United Kingdom, in changing the current paradigm in mosque design and functionality. By way of example, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the largest and most diverse representative body for the British Muslim community in the United Kingdom, offers training around good governance in this area. (And I am sure there are others, some of which non-affiliated with the MCB, who are spearheading similar efforts more locally, though exploring them in more detail was beyond the scope of my research.) Consequently, it seems sensible to let such initiatives run their course. Third, it would be impossible to recreate the

current mosque landscape in the United Kingdom so it expresses a more culturally relevant architectural style. Despite their architectural shortcomings, existing mosques in the United Kingdom have been developed to reflect a certain historical context. They are a testament to a former era and an impetus to build new ones differently in the future—if the need arises. The recently built Cambridge Central Mosque in Cambridge, England is a salient example of this drive. With that in mind, my research provides three practical recommendations that could significantly contribute to fostering a cohesive faith and national identity amongst young British Muslims, especially in relation to the mosque’s role. First, the representation of young British Muslims from diverse backgrounds to mosque committees, boards or other governing structures in place. Second, to the extent that mosques are unable for practical reasons to support them within their existing structures, the development of supplementary “third spaces” designed for young and diverse British Muslims to fulfil their social, cultural and spiritual needs. Third, the importance of training and guidance to existing mosque boards and committees around best practice on mosque design, particularly in respect of *(a)* creating spaces for women and other marginalised groups and *(b)* focusing funding efforts (to the extent feasible) for the achievement of the said objectives.





BACKGROUND





Mosque architecture in the United Kingdom presents a complex challenge, encompassing both aesthetic and socio-cultural dimensions. Historically, many mosques have been established in repurposed residential or commercial structures, resulting in a lack of architectural coherence, design ingenuity and optimal facilities. This issue is further compounded by the necessity to harmonise traditional Islamic architectural elements with the local British architectural vernacular. Moreover, there exists a tension between creating spaces that fulfil the religious requirements of the Muslim community and those that promote broader community engagement and integration. Public debate and scholarship on British mosque architecture and functionality have been both intense and interesting.

Young British Muslims have been active in efforts to interrogate the existing orthodoxy within the traditional mosque landscape. Young British Muslims in my focus groups overwhelmingly considered “mosque politics” as having led to complexity in their own construction of identity and community. Two prominent themes emerged around “mosque politics”: design and diversity. The latter was particularly pertinent and timely. Plans for the opening of a women-led mosque in Bradford in 2015, for example, reinforced the exclusionary nature of mainstream mosques. The location for this women-led initiative was noteworthy: Bradford mosques have never been known to be paragons of architectural ingenuity, integration and inclusivity. My discussions with young British Muslims underlined the argument in Vincent Biondo’s 2006 article *The Architecture of Mosques in the US and Britain* that traditional mosque architecture in western contexts creates confused identities for Muslims. Coupled with the ethnocentricity of British mosques, this has often complicated the desire for young British Muslims to integrate their faith and national identities. The question is posed: could a cohesive British Muslim identity be formed if the mosque fulfils its original and historic role as an open communal space?

This report explores the socio-spatial role of mosques in shaping a cohesive British Muslim identity, with a particular focus on design and diversity. In essence, the term “socio-spatial” refers to how social relations shape and are shaped by spatial environments. Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work, *The Production of Space* (1991), posits that space is actively produced by social relations, rather than being a mere backdrop for social activities. In the context of architecture, the socio-spatial perspective examines how built environments influence social interactions. It highlights the importance of architectural design in shaping social dynamics, such as community cohesion, accessibility and the distribution of resources. In *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics* (2002), Professor Akel Ismail Kahera builds on these foundations where he seeks to provide a theoretical basis to American Muslim architecture and explores whether a local model can be realised given that American Muslims’ needs are ‘a complex configuration of transcultural modalities of place (including both rural and urban sites) and architectural space’. To achieve an American Islamic architectural idiom, Professor Kahera looks to Muhammad’s mosque in Medina, alongside his *sunna* (practices and daily life), as precedent to ascertain the core of Muslim sacred space. He notes that ‘the seminal mosque is a spatial paradigm; it is an archetype, which offers a distinct type of spatial order. Architectural convention and subjective meaning have evolved in response to this type of spatial order’. He introduces the term ‘spatial *sunna*’ to describe the key aesthetic principles that guide the design and organisation of mosque spaces: structure of belief, order, space, materials and symbols. (While I have departed from applying these guiding principles collectively in examining the spatial *sunna* of British mosques, the broader concept and some of its constituent parts have been particularly useful to this report’s main argument.) Hence, the socio-spatial perspective (or spatial *sunna*) is particularly appropriate to mosque architecture because it illustrates the purpose of the mosque as both a religious and social space. In other words, the mosque is designed to facilitate communal worship and social interaction, reflecting the physical environment in which Muslims manifest their beliefs and deeds. This perspective facilitates our understanding of how mosque spaces can cultivate community cohesion, accommodate diverse social practices and adjust to contemporary social changes.

Accordingly, this report outlines the constraints inherent in the current architectural paradigm of British mosques and posits that reform in this domain could develop a distinctive and deeply rooted architectural style that embodies a unified British Muslim identity. “Between a Rock and a Hard Place” sets out the genesis of the mosque as an Islamic place of worship. “First Time Dome Buyers” evaluates the architectural development of British mosques. “Out of Many, None?” analyses the functionality of mosque spaces, with a particular focus on diversity. “The Inbetweeners” concludes this report and provides some recommendations.

The benefits of this report are thus. First, it will contribute positively to the ongoing and dynamic discourse on mosque reform in the United Kingdom. Second, it will serve as an inspiration for young British Muslims, demonstrating that creative spaces within or supplementary to places of worship can support an Islamic identity congruent with British values. Third, it will elucidate that the younger generation is capable of establishing a shared, universal and authentically Islamic environment that is open, egalitarian and primarily led by British Muslims for British Muslims, without necessitating a top-down approach or external interventions. It is my sincere hope that mosque leaders and wider stakeholders will be encouraged to empower the younger generation in creating mosques that reflect and reinforce a 21st-century western context.

A version of this report featured in the autumn 2020 edition of *Critical Muslim* with the title ‘Do Visit (Some) of Our Mosques’. *Critical Muslim* is a project of the Muslim Institute. Published by Hurst and Co., it is a quarterly magazine of ideas and issues showcasing ground-breaking thinking on Islam and what it means to be a Muslim in a rapidly changing, interconnected world.





Exterior view of the Cambridge Central Mosque in Cambridge, England.  
Photo by Amelia Hallsworth from Pexels.





# BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE



‘The world is a mosque,’ declared the Prophet Muhammad (c.570 – 632) as recorded in the *hadith*—the collection of the words and deeds of Islam’s preeminent agent of divine inspiration. It communicates a universal and expansive approach to our understanding of a place of prayer. Indeed, the term’s original Arabic antecedent (*masjid* meaning “the place of prostration”) evokes multiple locations and landscapes for prayer. For Muhammad, the young shepherd and later merchant, this could be amongst his flock as an itinerant Bedu, atop the Precambrian rocks of the Hejaz Mountains, along the caravan routes to Syria, in front of Mecca’s stone temple, inside the solitary quietude of a cave wherein the Archangel Gabriel visited him to convey the divine message. The battlefield and the courtyard, the desert and the orchards, were also sanctified. Over time, concerns around purity and practicality delineated the exceptions to what could constitute a place of prostration: bathrooms and graveyards, camel pens and slaughterhouses, the middle of a road and on top of the Kaaba.

The Kaaba was a logical exclusion. If the temple reputed to have been built by angels and rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael during their sojourn to Arabia was the focus for Muslim worship, where would one turn to face one’s Lord on top of that ancient structure? The Koran identified the Kaaba as the original house of worship. ‘Purify My house for those who go around and those who meditate therein and those who bow down and prostrate themselves,’ God commanded Abraham and Ishmael. It slowly turned from a monotheistic shrine to a pagan pantheon where Arabia’s revered deities were housed. Save for lanterns and crucible censers, it lies empty once again to glorify the One Unseen God. Draped in resplendent black silk intricately woven with gold threads of liturgical calligraphy, the basic rituals associated with its age-old sanctity, however, remain unchanged. Pilgrims to this day continue to circumambulate and prostrate before it and Muslims around the world turn to it for their prayers (*qibla*).

‘If Mecca provided the first Muslim shrine,’ notes Yasser Tabbaa in his contribution to the 2007 edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* ‘the city of Medina...may have provided the germ of the idea for the Muslim place of prayer, the masjid, in the form of the house of the Prophet himself’. In 622, Muhammad migrated to Yathrib, a viridescent oasis some 200 miles north of Mecca, ostensibly to avoid the enmity of his pagan clansmen. The sanctuary which the leaders of Yathrib promised Muhammad and his followers had a strategic element. Muhammad, known for his honesty even amongst his enemies, was invited by the city’s leading tribes to serve as a mediator between their perennial feuds.

There was an added prestige in his selection. An Arabian prophet with a religious mission was novel and the prospect of his being Yathrib’s leader became ever more attractive. Muhammad’s flight (*hijra*) represented the beginning of a new calendar—*anno Hegirae*—and the date of a new Islamic era. With a growing Muslim community and away from the persecution of Mecca’s pagans, the city-state became the locus of Muhammad’s new polity. It was renamed *Madinat An-Nabi* (“the Prophet’s City”) after Muhammad’s death and thereafter shortened to Medina (“the City”) which, without further qualification, underscores its profound significance in Islam. A social contract (misleadingly referred to by modern historians as the “Constitution of Medina”) was diplomatically drawn by Muhammad between the feuding factions and formed the basis (albeit temporarily) of a cosmopolitan city-state of Jews, pagans and Muslims. This event marked an important point in the development of the Muslim community in Medina as an identifiable socio-political entity. The *ummah* was begotten.

Built on the site of his home, Muhammad inaugurated the first central mosque within his seat of power, serving as a crucial cornerstone for the Medinese city-state. (Quba Mosque was the first mosque built by Muhammad after his *hijra* from Mecca in 622.) He pioneered and participated in its construction. A mudbrick building: its walls of beaten clay and its pillars and roof made from the stumps and leaves of the ubiquitous date trees of Medina. In *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture* (1996), Andrew Peterson describes it as ‘a simple rectangular (53 by 56 m) enclosure containing rooms for the Prophet and his wives and a shaded area on the south side of the courtyard which could be used for prayer in the direction of Mecca’. Marcus Vitruvius, a Roman architect once wrote that buildings should be *firmitas*, *utilitas*, *venustas*—solid, useful and pretty. Muhammad’s mosque upended these ideals: an unstable structure with no aesthetic aspirations. Nonetheless, it was disruptive to the perceived architectural order at the time, be it Christian-Byzantine, Jewish, Sassanid-Zoroastrian or pagan. The late Öleg Grabar, the first Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at Harvard, highlights in *The Architecture of the Middle Eastern City from Past to Present: The Case of the Mosque* (1969) that ‘[t]he main characteristic, then, of this first stage was the creation of a space which served exclusively Muslim purposes...The word masjid is always associated with these spaces, but it does not yet possess any formal structure nor does it have any precise function other than that of excluding non-Muslims.’ Muhammad’s mosque was neither elaborate in its architecture nor derivative of known temples. There were no statues, instruments, objects or images.



Pilgrims ascend Jabal Al-Nour in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The mountain is renowned as the site of the cave where Muhammad is believed to have received his first revelation of the Koran from the Archangel Gabriel. Photo by Muneb Muhammed on Unsplash.



Further still, its functionality (or lack thereof) allowed it to do so many things, yet simultaneously, removed any impediment or distraction when it came to its central purpose as a place of worship. There was no confession, confirmation, sacrament or song. Liturgy was the Koran and, like the call to prayer five times a day (*athan*), recited in the unassuming and unaccompanied human voice. The faithful would bow and prostrate, barefooted and regiment-like, first towards Jerusalem and thence Mecca. It was symbolic of the new religion's simplicity and identity. As Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair state in their book *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture* (2009): 'the form of the mosque of the Prophet [was] closely imitated in the early congregational mosques built in the Iraqi cities of Wasit, Kufa and Basra, and in the mosque built at Daybul in Sind'—garrison towns and settlements in the ever-expanding Islamic empire. (It is worth noting that historically there has been a distinction between a *masjid* (a neighbourhood mosque for the daily congregational prayers) and a *jami'* (a large mosque for *Jumu'ah* or the Friday congregational prayers). This distinction does not apply to western mosques as they serve both purposes.)

Being the hub for the Medinese community, Muhammad's mosque soon became integral to the religious, social, economic and political affairs of the city—a *Forum Romanum* of sorts. Over time, its multifaceted use as a building catered to the wide-ranging needs of the *ummah*. Muhammad's mosque was temple and court, tribunal and council, treasury and college. (Incidentally, in areas conquered by Muslim armies, the mosque would take an additional function as a military base.) 'It is not entirely meaningful in Islam [to] separate the secular and religious impulses in the formation and development of art', Grabar notes in *The Formation of Islamic Art* (1973), for there is no distinction between 'the realms of God and of Caesar'. The peculiarity, centrality and communality of the mosque in early Islam exemplified this contested nature of Muhammad's ascendant politico-religious movement.

While early mosque design in newly conquered lands adhered to the Prophetic model (due to praxis rather than prescription), the subsequent conversion of non-Islamic religious structures into mosques shaped the trajectory of Islamic architectural styles. These distinctive regional approaches to mosque design—Mesopotamian, Persian, Byzantine, Visigoth and Indian—often drew inspiration from both the external and internal stylistic elements found in temples specific to their respective geographical contexts. The sole Koranic injunction of mosque design, it seemed, was on its purpose as a "place of prostration". Adoption and appropriation, mimicry and mastery, reimagining and reinterpretation became the hallmarks of subsequent mosque design as Islam absorbed new countries and old customs. Over the course of Islamic history, these borrowed aspects of mosque design transmuted into precepts; the minaret and dome became the norm. The mosque's functionality, beyond its central purpose as a place of worship, became lost or obsolete in the ever-changing Islamic societies.



Exterior view of the Umayyad Mosque (also known as "the Great Mosque of Damascus") in Damascus, Syria. In the foreground stands the *Qubbat Al-Khazna* (the "Dome of the Treasury"), originally constructed to house the mosque's endowments and subsequently important manuscripts. The mosque has a rich historical lineage, having initially served as an Aramean temple, then a Roman temple dedicated to Jupiter, and later a Byzantine cathedral. Following the Muslim conquest of Syria, it was reconstructed as a mosque. This transformation exemplifies the adaptive and integrative nature of early Islamic mosque architecture. Photo by Juma Müllhem from Pexels.

Revivalism in mosque design, though attractive, is misplaced. Revivalist architecture often correlates with revivalist movements in Islam who yearn for a return to an abstract and idealised past. Notwithstanding the obvious issue of practicality, a 53 by 56 m mudbrick building in cold, grey Britain is both absurd and puerile. Besides, there are modern institutions which meet adequately the citizen's various needs, even if public perceptions of them in the United Kingdom and elsewhere are forever negative. And any attempt to create parallel institutions within a mosque space in the United Kingdom (whether quasi-parliamentary, judicial, financial, military and/or medical) is inane and injurious to the cause of integration. While both the spatial *sunna* and Islamic revivalism conceptually engage with the Prophetic model, the spatial *sunna* fundamentally diverges by eschewing ideological and doctrinal concerns. Instead, it emphasises spatial or geographical considerations, using Muhammad's mosque as a case study to understand mosques as socio-spatial community hubs. As Kahera (2002) argues 'the "spatial *sunna*" gives clarity to the distinction and the connection between the archetypal model and the [western] interpretation. In other words, we may argue that the [western] interpretation is clearly a heuristic adaptation for two reasons: design decisions influence the objective use of space; and each design decision creates conditions for a further aesthetic interpretation'. This would align our views of mosques with their foundational intent: places of prostration with the flexibility to realise them in whatever shape or form we see fit.





Interior view of the Mezquita in Cordoba, Spain. The image shows the former mosque's *mihrab* and dome. The architectural motifs incorporate elements of the Visigoth temple which once stood in its place.



# FIRST TIME DOME BUYERS





Islamic architecture—put simply—refers to the styles of religious and secular buildings developed in Muslim settings. As a result of aniconism in Islam (a prohibition which has often been ignored), this architecture incorporates structural and decorative elements like geometry, calligraphy and vegetal patterns. Buildings which are associated with Islamic architecture include mosques, *madrasahs* (religious schools), palaces and caravanserais. Amongst these, mosques are emblematic of Islamic architectural principles because they epitomise Muslim worship and community. Despite the existence of secular structures in regions of Europe formerly under Islamic rule, such as the Alhambra in Spain, mosques remain the most significant representations of Islamic architecture in the west. This has informed the focus of this report on mosque architecture in selected Anglophone countries. I do not examine other types of Islamic religious spaces which can be found in a number of western countries. Presently, there is no appropriate term which defines the mosque landscape in the United Kingdom. Consequently, I propose the term “Anglo-Islamic architecture” to encapsulate both the contemporary mosque idiom and the emergence of a distinctive vernacular that signifies the cultural and spiritual ethos of British Muslim communities.



Mill Road in Cambridge, England, is an ordinary yet bustling thoroughfare of independent shops, restaurants, cafes, pubs and student flats. The mundanity of this urban scenery was broken by an exciting addition in spring 2019. The £23 million Cambridge Central Mosque is perhaps the most audacious and successful attempt at innovative mosque design in the United Kingdom. Absent are the garish pastiche of Indo-Saracenic design features, common amongst many British mosques. Praise be to God: there are no dreadful minarets, tacky calligraphy or bearded *unclejis* to inform you that you are destined for hell on account of your fresh trim. And while the average worshipper may fail to notice it from street level, anyone over 6ft is able to discern a golden dome atop the magnificent building. Alas, a small and sad capitulation to orthodoxy. More interestingly, visitors are welcomed by a meticulously-manicured *chahar bagh*—a quadrilateral Indo-Persian garden evocative of the Muslim paradise—with English oak benches and crab apple trees adjoining an octagonal stone fountain. The calming murmur of falling water distracts the ear from the surrounding cacophony of pagan and holy tongues.

The garden leads to a portico with an adjacent café, and thereafter an atrium, both columned by the mosque’s crowning glory: octagonal, intertwined and latticed timber colonnades. ‘Say: God is One’—the muscular expression of Islamic monotheism—covers the walls of the mosque in geometric Kufic script, albeit not rendered in cheap gold paint or basic black but assembled skilfully in Cambridgeshire Gault brickwork. The interlaced arboreal theme, conceptually reminiscent of English Gothic vaulting, extends to the prayer hall: its walls bleached in austere white, its floor carpeted in delicate morning blue and the large space illuminated by skylights.

The Alhambra in Granada, Spain. The seat of Spain’s last Muslim rulers. Constructed primarily in the 13th and 14th centuries, this palatial complex encompasses a series of interconnected courtyards, gardens and buildings—each adorned with intricate stucco work, arabesques and Arabic calligraphy.



Photo by Chris Boland on Unsplash.



Though open to both genders (a rarity), the prayer hall is disappointingly segregated—an ornately latticed timber screen marking the sexual divide. My female companion, a practising 20-something English Anglican (another rarity), engaged in conversation with me across the barrier. We chatted, rather astonishingly, without the scolding of exasperated worshippers shocked by the wanton flouting of Islam's strict gender norms. If that came as a surprise, the ablution facilities were a revelation. Overcome by foreboding on approach to the area, I anticipated the inevitable effluvia of feet, rusty pipes and structural damp. Instead, the ritually unclean are greeted by resplendent turquoise walls—with argentine slate and exquisite plants, modern plumbing and tilework, glistening in a naturally sunlit space. Rainwater from the heavens, a key feature in the mosque's sustainable design, flushes away, spiritually and physically, their impurities.

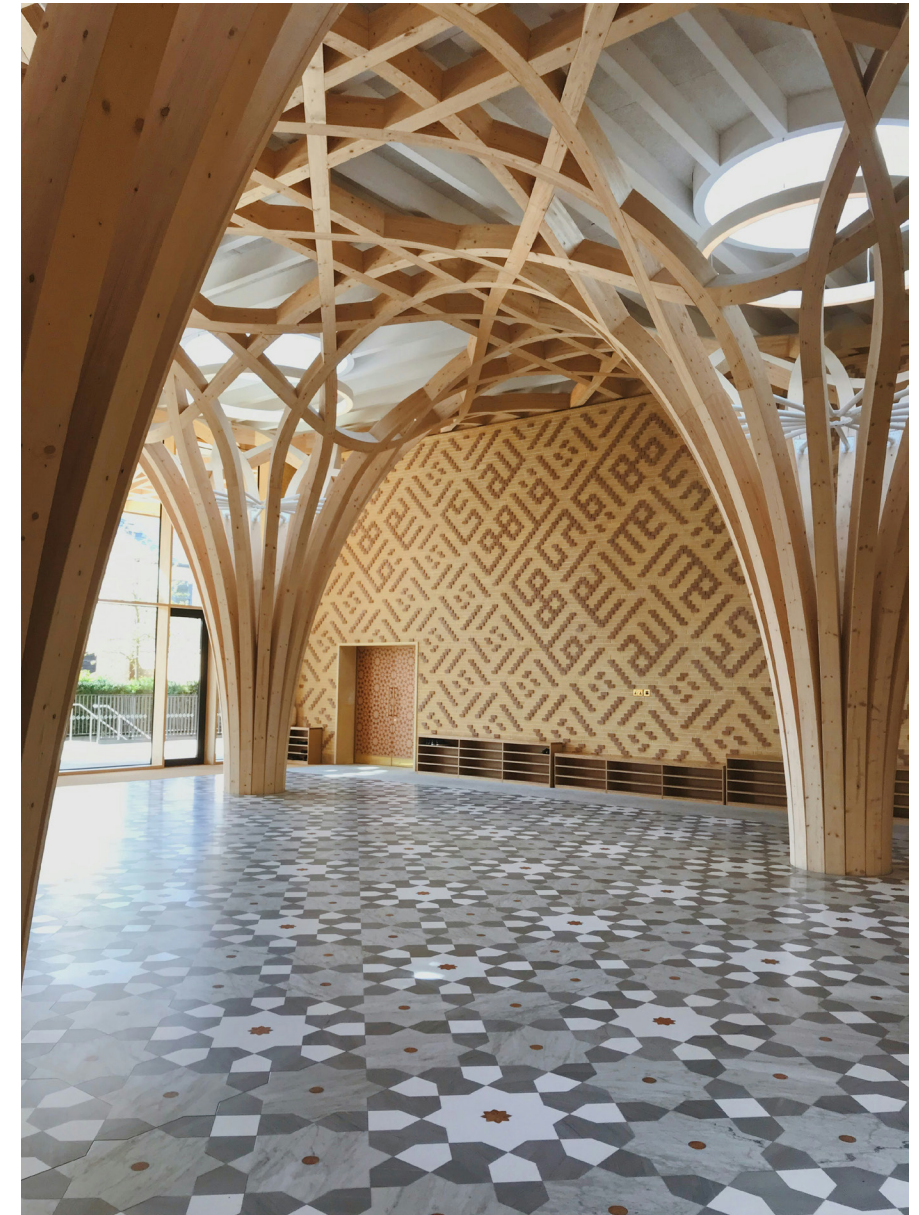
The mosque is the work of Marks Barfield Architects, alongside geometer Keith Critchlow, garden designer Emma Clark, and artists Amber Khokhar and Ayesha Gamiet. They have worked horticulture, sustainability, Islamic geometry and English craftsmanship together to create something unique. The mosque's architects and trustees wanted an English mosque. Yet the cultural reference seems misplaced at times as the minimalist arboreal design, subtle colours and simple furnishing could suggest Scandinavian. At any rate, the mosque generally is a triumph of Anglo-Islamic architecture.

Shahed Saleem in *The British Mosque: An architectural and social history* (2018) states that the Cambridge Central Mosque 'marks a step change in the narrative of British mosque design' as 'it is not a building conceived and commissioned by immigrant Muslims' but one which caters to a multi-ethnic and non-sectarian British Muslim polity. It should not come as a surprise that it has taken British Muslims 130 years to articulate an indigenous approach to mosque design in the United Kingdom. For British Muslims, 'the visibility of the mosque has been one of the fundamental strategies through which Muslim communities have made their presence in Britain known.' As such, 'the mosque needs to symbolise its identity quickly and easily to as many of its users as possible, in essence, replicating known and popular images from around the world.' Saleem's classification of mosque design in the United Kingdom is to be welcomed. His periodisation helps us more precisely to delineate the history of British mosque design. It aims to find, amidst the chaotic styles, an identity to define the different phases of British mosque development.

Much as English ecclesiastical architecture may be identified as Gothic Revival or Baroque, English mosques can now be distinguished as neo-historicist (e.g. Leicester's Mamluk-inspired Jame Mosque) or modernist (e.g. Sir Frederick Gibberd's Regent's Park Mosque). Across the border, the Edinburgh Central Mosque is an example of an Islamic Scots Baronial style.

It is important to underscore that the double-minareted, onion-domed caricatures we see in major British cities are not triumphalist manifestations of Islam's presence. These were an aesthetic attempt to signal to a nascent immigrant community a continuing link to (and nostalgia for) "home" in this "foreign" land. However, this narrative sits uneasily with younger diverse generations of British Muslims who find the current mosque landscape incongruent with their more rooted identity. Saleem's argument is historically accurate in describing the relationship of mosque aesthetics and identity in 20th century Britain, yet there seems to be no reason these now long-established communities should continue to adhere to the neo-traditionalist canon. In *Designing the 'Anti-mosque': Identity, Religion and Affect in Contemporary European Mosque Design* (2012), Oskar Verkaaik observes that 'it is not uncommon' to view these mosques as 'unreflexive and inauthentic imitations' which could be symptomatic of a failure to integrate in European society owing to these mosques' architectural expressions of loyalty to the "homeland": be it some obscure village in the Kashmir valley, the hills of Sylhet or backwater in the Middle East.

Indeed, Christian Welzbacher in *Euro Islam architecture: new mosques in the West* (2008) sees it as indicative of a stagnant mentality. There is some merit in these arguments. The narrative of neo-traditionalist mosque architecture, as reflecting a wistful "home" or parochialism, is applicable to an older, unsettled immigrant population. But this does not square with the realities of young British Muslims whose identities and experiences are more grounded and multifaceted. As Asma Mustafa describes in *Identity and Political Participation Among Young British Muslims* (2015), their Muslim identity ranges from secular to 'cosmopolitan, internationalist and multicultural'; their British identity from 'dual' to 'secondary and purely pragmatic'. Young British Muslims want mosque spaces that reflect this multi-dimensional lived experience: a modern environment which communicates their temporal and spiritual feelings.

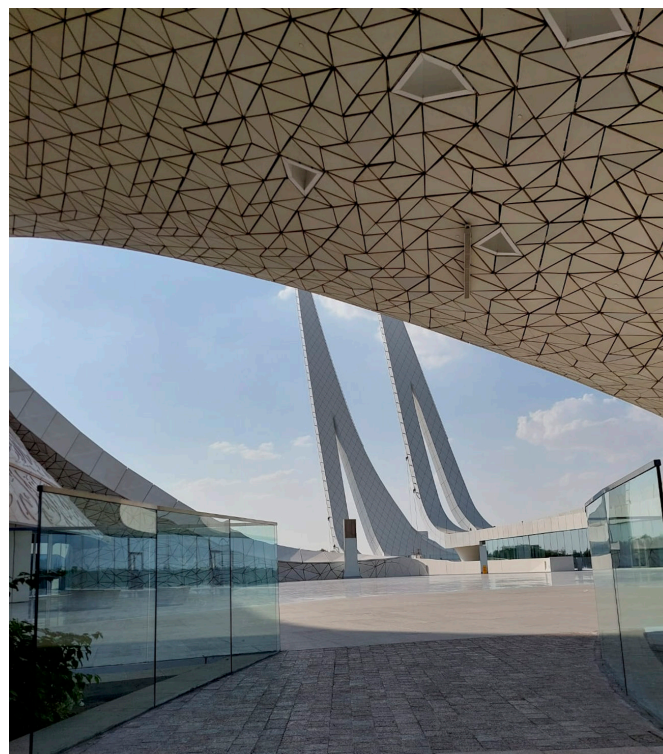




In the 20th century, Saleem observes that there was a need for the ‘preservation and transference of religious tradition [when] communities faced discrimination and exclusion in all spheres of their lives in Britain’. The mosque has always been a sanctuary—a *haram*—for the faithful. It is understandable that focusing on aesthetic sensibilities during a time of heightened racism was inappropriate. Hence, many early British mosques were converted terraced houses, disused pubs and unused churches: cheap buildings readily available to house the spiritual and secular needs of the community. The increase in purpose-built mosques (including the existing buildings consecrated as Islamic) designed in the neo-traditionalist way, not only showed an attachment to an ancestral “homeland”, but also cultural independence and financial security during a time in which British society became somewhat more accommodationist and tolerant. That said, the current discourse on mosque design seems stuck in the rigidity of a bygone era due to the “community leaders” who still run the various mosque committees in the country. In my discussions with young British Muslims, they have contempt for this *ancien regime* of men who still call the shots in informing mosque design (amongst many other things). In an interview Saleem has with Professor Yaqub Zaki, a Scottish convert and a historian of Islamic architecture, he describes the design process of Britain’s mosques:

‘[T]hey are commissioned by [the] mosque committee, and the mosque committee consists of the cash and carry walla, the take-away tycoon, who don’t know the first thing about mosques. So what they do is they take out the Yellow Pages, they pick out [an architect] quite arbitrarily, the man comes for a meeting with the mosque committee and the mosque committee are all contradicting each other, so he [the architect] goes to the library, takes out one or two books on Islamic architecture, picks a feature from here and feature from there and combines, and the result is an inconsistent mish-mash.

Considering their agency and expertise, I do not exonerate local architects from their negative influence on the quality of British mosque design. Nevertheless, I extend a measure of sympathy towards them. In *Design Criteria for Mosques and Islamic Centres: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (2009), Akel Ismail Kahera, Latif Abdulmalik and Craig Anz highlight the difficulty for an architect ‘to suspend the temptation to randomly borrow a priori ideas, arbitrary precedents, or eidetic representational forms from the corpus of examples that exist throughout the Muslim world’ when designing a ‘building type endowed with an over 1500-year history as well as a deep-seated array of traditional influences’. The buck, however, stops with their clients. It is sad that these old men have stymied the creativity and opportunity which could have inspired Muslims to commission beautiful and meaningful mosques.



The spaceship-like minarets of the Education City Mosque in Doha, Qatar, adorned with vertical calligraphy, elegantly symbolise the ascent of faith and knowledge.



Exterior view of the Sancaklar Mosque in Istanbul, Türkiye. Designed by Emre Arolat and completed in 2012, it embodies a minimalist aesthetic that harmonises with its natural surroundings, accentuating the essence of a sacred space through its subterranean structure and the nuanced interplay of light and shadow. The mosque prioritises the creation of an emotional and experiential environment that diverges from traditional stylistic conventions in mosque architecture. Photo by Cihan Çimen from Pexels.



Interior of the Sancaklar Mosque in Istanbul, Türkiye. Photo by Kaan Kesin from Pexels.



Exterior view of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Palestine. Erected in the 7th century, it stands as the world's oldest extant example of Islamic architecture. Its mosaics and overall design reflect the influence of Byzantine palatial aesthetics prevalent during its construction.

And for a group that never fails to invoke the pathos of the glorious Islamic past, they seem to overlook the visionary patronage of their antecedents in commissioning great buildings: Abd al-Malik (the Dome of the Rock); Al-Walid I (the Great Mosque of Damascus); Abd al-Rahman I (the Cordoba Mosque); and Muhammad I of Granada (the Alhambra). Such myopia extends to other European Muslim communities. Take, for instance, the competition to design the Strasbourg Mosque in France. The late British Iraqi architect, Zaha Hadid, submitted an innovative futuristic proposal: a mosque and community centre complex draped in rippling forms based on the visualisation of the mournful cadences of the *athan*. This was too much for the committee and instead a safe domed structure was selected (by the modernist Italian architect Paolo Portoghesi who also designed the Rome Mosque). This conservatism contrasts with advances in mosque design in Muslim-majority countries where one might expect the local minaret-dome model to reign sultan. One noteworthy example of this trend is the award-winning Sancaklar Mosque in Istanbul. Taking inspiration from the cave which Muhammad received his first revelation, it overturns the prevalent Ottoman mosque typology. The mosque is set partially underground in the Turkish countryside and it is surrounded by terraced landscaping with light-grey stonework, foliage and reinforced concrete. Another is the Education City Mosque in Doha whose conceptual reference is the cursive Arabic calligraphy; its structure is almost spaceship-like.

Nasser Rabbat, the Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), whom I interviewed for this research, is critical of mosque design more generally, despite his appreciation of Zaha Hadid's valiant but unsuccessful attempt at injecting sophistication in this area of Islamic architecture. 'Mosque design is one of the least advanced areas of design in the Islamic world. Mosques are extremely traditionalist in the way they are designed. And every now and again, you'll have a revolutionary design which is shut down.' He continued: 'As an architectural historian who has looked

at the history of the mosque across time, I don't think that the dome and the minaret are essential requirements of the mosque. Mosques can be built without them. Therefore, the cost [of building domes and minarets] could be diverted to something else, some other way of creating an impact in the community, for example, especially as a minority living in a larger community of non-Muslims.'

Jonathan Glancey, in a 2002 *Guardian* piece humorously titled 'the ideal dome show', juxtaposes the work behind the construction of Britain's first purpose-built mosque in Woking (a cute Grade I listed 19th century Indo-Persian style pavilion), as a 'meeting of high minds, with great learning and a degree of wealth and culture' with recent mosque design driven by 'zealous religion that all but eschewed luxury, sensuality and ornamentation... underpinned by poverty'. Glancey's comparison is somewhat lazy and simplistic. It fails to account for the construction of million-pound grandiose yet kitsch mosques the architectural failings of which can hardly be blamed on Muslim penury—even if wealthy royal patrons financed the likes of the Woking Mosque. However, he is not entirely wrong to point out that a puritanical fervour underlies the refusal to create extravagant buildings. This instinct has its roots in tradition: Muhammad built the first major mosque in Medina from beaten clay and palm leaves. As Saleem highlights, the austerity of the mosques of revivalist Muslim movements, such as the Deobandis (and to an extent, the Salafists), has been informed by their doctrinal puritanism in promoting the purely religious aspect of the mosque, rather than its decorative or aesthetic appeal.

When I put the argument to Professor Rabbat, he replied using an historical anecdote from the medieval Arab geographer, Al-Maqdisi. In a conversation with his uncle, a young Al-Maqdisi questions why the Umayyad caliph, Al-Walid I, exhausted the state's resources on building the magnificent Great Mosque of Damascus rather than investing in public infrastructure.



His uncle chastises him and justifies its construction as a response to the splendour of Byzantine religious architecture. ‘An attitude’, Grabar in *The Formation of Islamic Art* (1973) outlines, ‘of self-conscious superiority mixed with a formal rejection by the world one is trying to woo.’ Today, as then, it is perhaps only the trope of the perpetual Muslim-infidel rivalry which may tip the old men into supporting impressive modern mosques, as a veritable two-fingered salute to the Christians’ forbidding Gothic churches—a remaking of the Battle of Yarmouk in brick and mortar.

Another argument posited by traditionalist Muslims for favouring asceticism over aestheticism in mosque architecture is rooted in Islamic eschatology. They maintain that the ostentatious design of modern mosques evokes the various signs leading up to the end of times, such as, the increase in materialism, attachment to worldly goods and the rapid construction of extravagant tall buildings as narrated in the *hadith*. I asked Professor Rabbat whether British Muslims should avoid such extravagance and focus, instead, on spiritual growth as enjoined in Islamic teachings. He was exasperated. ‘I hope British youth are more open-minded than to fall for the discourse of the relationship between ostentatious architecture [and the end of times] which you see at every state of Islamic history.’ He provided another historical anecdote concerning the Dome of the Rock, which Grabar defines as a ‘unique monument of Islamic culture in almost all respects...a work of art and as a cultural and pious document’. During his reign, the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik faced significant financial challenges and public concern over the expenditure on the Dome of the Rock. To address these concerns, he took the unprecedented step of opening the tax revenues to public scrutiny. This move was intended to reassure the people that the funds were being used appropriately and to quell any unrest regarding the financial management of the state. This act of transparency helped to solidify his reputation as a capable and just ruler, and the Dome of the Rock is a lasting testament to his legacy. Professor Rabbat added that the Umayyads were ‘extremely wealthy’ and the Dome of the Rock and other Umayyad buildings remain to this day a heritage which Muslims ‘die to protect’.

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The Noor Cultural Centre in Toronto, Ontario, which I visited in September 2018, is a distinguished example of adaptive reuse in architecture, representing both historical significance and contemporary relevance. I was saddened to learn that it had to close its physical location in October 2021. The prolonged lockdowns, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, made it financially unsustainable to maintain.

However, the centre continues its mission virtually, adapting to the new realities of the post-Covid age while still promoting its core values of education, dialogue and community engagement.

Originally designed in 1963 by the late Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama, the building first served as the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre—a sanctuary which bore witness to the resilience of a community scarred by history. This initial design was a tribute to the Japanese Canadian community, incorporating traditional Japanese architectural elements such as lattice windows and rain chains. In 2001, the building was acquired by philanthropists Hassanali and Noorbanu Lakhani, along with their children Karim, Samira, Abdul Munim and Nizar. The Lakhani family envisioned a space that would promote Islamic education, social justice, and most importantly, gender equality. As Azeezah Kanji (granddaughter of Hassanali and Noorbanu Lakhani and daughter of the aforementioned Samira Kanji née Lakhani) informed me in an interview at the centre, her late grandfather wanted ‘a space where men and women have equal authority’. The Lakhani-Kanjis were keen to highlight that the vision for a centre of Islamic practice, learning culture and diversity had a Koranic basis: ‘We have created you out of male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, in order that you might come to know one another. In the sight of God, the noblest among you is the one who is most deeply conscious of God’. In 2003, the Lakhani family commissioned Moriyama to transform the one-time Japanese Cultural Centre building into their desired Islamic centre. The renovation emphasised the concept of *noor* (“light”); the latticed wooden screens were refashioned with Arabic calligraphy, augmenting the building’s natural illumination and spiritual ambiance. The subtlety of Arabic calligraphy was a masterstroke. It articulated the Islamic spirit of the repurposed building, precluding the temptation to apply the minaret-dome idiom as the signifier of Muslim sanctity. The motifs of the Noor Cultural Centre are an intelligent blend of Islamic and modern design principles. The wooden screens and calligraphy reflect the rich tradition of Islamic art. These elements are thoughtfully integrated with the building’s original Japanese influences, creating something fresh that transcends cultural boundaries and promotes spiritual reflection.



Exterior view of the Noor Cultural Centre in Toronto, Ontario. This image is reproduced with the permission of the Lakhani-Kanji family and Noor Cultural Centre.

The Noor Cultural Centre was also (and still remains in its virtual form) a vibrant community hub. A variety of facilities were offered to the local people: a prayer hall, classrooms and event spaces. The centre hosted *Jumu'ah* (the only prayers performed at the centre), *iftar* (fast-breaking evening meal) during Ramadan, Sunday school for children and numerous interfaith activities. Shunning the apoliticism of conventional Islamic centres and mosques in the west (owing to the strict separation of church and state in certain jurisdictions, apprehensions around government surveillance on *any* political activity within a religious space and/or perceived concerns around the potential oblique towards ideological extremism), the Noor Cultural Centre provided a platform for political and human rights activism. These were a mix of highbrow seminars (e.g. interfaith approaches to environmental preservation) and practical training sessions (e.g. on anti-Islamophobia and anti-racism).

Cultural programmes even included comedy nights. Informed by her academic and professional background as a lawyer and journalist, Azeezah spearheaded lectures and other educational initiatives in her role as the centre’s Director of Programming. Her sister, on the other hand, conducted the *khutbah* (sermon) during one of the *Jumu'ah* services I attended (the prayer and *athan* were led by a man in keeping with orthodox practice). Their mother, Samira, serves as the centre’s President. Their leadership ensured that the centre remained true to the late Hassanali Lakhani’s mission for women’s empowerment, cultural enrichment and spiritual enhancement in the Islamic space.



The *Jumu'ah* service was attended by a diverse cross-section of Torontonians Muslims. I went with a local friend, Grayson, a Texan-born American convert alongside his Canadian-Ethiopian wife and their children. The prayer hall was airy and open; there was no gender divide. Seeing a woman conduct the sermon was both exciting and very normal. The sermon itself was in English; the subject matter was relevant, concise and insightful. A welcome development to the traditional *khutbah* of experience: unattractive to the ears, uncomprehending to the mind and uninspiring to the spirit. 'I really enjoy coming to this place, it's forward-looking but traditional. You still get the fundamentals of Islam but it's in a cool space!' One of the *Jumu'ah* attendees was very complimentary. 'The entire whole—the architecture, *diniyat* [Islamic religious studies], the social justice angle and how inclusive it all is. It's definitely a place for me as a young Canadian Muslim. It's what my Islam is all about' another noted. Whereas the splendid physical structure no longer houses the activities of the Noor Cultural Centre, it exemplifies how innovative Islamic architecture can act as a bridge between faith and local identities.

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During my research, I interviewed a British Muslim parliamentarian who envisioned the ideal British mosque as a place where 'people would be seated in rows, praying as such and looking marvellous in their Sunday best'. I pointed out that their ideal mosque resembled a church; they did not dispute this observation. This conversation highlights the inherently nebulous and subjective nature of our individual conceptions of the ideal British mosque. One person's minaret may be another person's steeple. Moreover, advocating for a specific architectural style restricts the essential flexibility of mosque design, inadvertently establishing a certain order. This mindset has historically led to the proliferation of architectural elements in Islamic mosques that have become pervasive and, over time, unloved. Additionally, the parliamentarian's remarks carried a deterministic undertone. Their perception of integration as a process of conforming to English ecclesiastical customs implies that a church-like mosque could influence British Muslims to adopt more English behaviours. This reductionist view overlooks the complexity of human-environment interactions and undermines human agency in shaping their environments.

Accordingly, the future trajectory of Anglo-Islamic architecture is positioned at the confluence of tradition and modernity, poised to craft edifices that eloquently narrate the ever-changing British Muslim experience. The conceptualisation of structures that embody this dual heritage requires a nuanced and balanced approach—a sophisticated synthesis of Islamic architectural motifs with contemporary British design principles. Technological advancements, such as sustainable building practices exemplified by the Cambridge Central Mosque, offer unprecedented opportunities to reimagine spaces that are spatially functional, environmentally sustainable and spiritually resonant. As evidenced by the Noor Cultural Centre in Toronto, the repurposing of existing buildings should be undertaken with creativity, drawing intelligent inspiration from the past—the spatial *sunna*—while audaciously experimenting with new forms and materials. The inherent adaptability and fresh perspectives of young British Muslims are indispensable to this evolution.

In the context of this architectural renaissance, it is imperative to acknowledge the necessity for a concomitant transformation in intellectual paradigms, wherein creativity is not merely encouraged but is enshrined as the fundamental cornerstone of mosque design. The ongoing social mobility, dynamism and cosmopolitanism of young British Muslims may serve as a catalyst for the creation of inclusive, utilitarian, aesthetically pleasing and vibrant spaces that resonate with our collective Islamic and British ethos. Thus, Anglo-Islamic architecture possesses the potential to emerge as a paragon of cultural amalgamation, celebrating the distinctiveness of British Muslims while simultaneously embracing the inexorable evolution of society. It will be a style which Britons, Muslim or not, will recognise, value and appreciate—an intrinsic motif in our island story and scene.





OUT OF MANY,  
NONE?



The “unmosqued” phenomenon shows a rising trend amongst American Muslims, particularly the youth, who experience a sense of alienation from traditional mosque environments. This movement is marked by a disconnection and disillusionment with the mosque as a central institution for spiritual and communal life. The quintessentially millennial term gained prominence through the documentary *UnMosqued* (2014) which delves into the underlying causes of this estrangement. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), a research organisation with a focus on American Muslims, undertakes a comprehensive statistical study of mosques in the United States and publishes its findings every decade. The latest results published in 2020 show that 29% of adult mosque attendees are 18-34, which is far below the ISPU’s data indicating 54% of the American Muslim population are young adult Muslims (aged 18-34). It could be argued that the “unmosqued” phenomenon is a contributing factor in the recent decline of mosque attendance by young American Muslims. The documentary highlights several factors which might explain this disengagement. First, many young Muslims perceive mosques as unwelcoming spaces, often dominated by older generations who may not fully understand or address the needs and concerns of younger congregants. This generational divide is aggravated by cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as differing interpretations of Islamic practice. Second, issues of racism, tribalism and nationalism within mosque communities further alienate individuals who do not belong to the dominant ethnic or cultural group (and potentially cosmopolitan young American Muslims within such dominant groups). These internal divisions undermine the universal ethos of Islam, leading to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. Third, the management and operational structures of many mosques are seen as opaque and resistant to change. This lack of transparency and accountability can discourage active participation and generate a sense of disenfranchisement amongst community members.

During my visit to the American capital, I met with Jonathan A. C. Brown, an American Muslim convert and the Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He critiqued some of the motivations underlying the “unmosqued” phenomenon, which have resulted in complaints being misdirected at mosques and their religious leadership. ‘A lot of the people who complain that they are “unmosqued” are in their 20s-30s and don’t have families...If I didn’t have kids I wouldn’t go to the mosque. It’s not the way young people especially identify with their religion. When you have kids, then it becomes a big deal. A lot of the complaints around “unmosqued” are really about

“why don’t people want to understand Islam the way me and my friends understand it?” Then you get into a debate about what the proper understanding of the religion is. Have that debate. [But] don’t blame it on the mosque. It’s not the mosque’s fault that the *imam* [the person who leads the prayer in a mosque] is going to say what the universally agreed upon opinion in Islam about something is. If you have a problem with a certain religious position, you should debate it but don’t blame it on institutions’. While I acknowledge Professor Brown’s perspective on the matter, the scale and scope of the legitimate concerns raised in *UnMosqued* are indeed institutional. The primary locus of Muslim identity is becoming disconnected from the younger generation due to its deviation from the spatial *sunna*. The results from the 2020 US Mosque Survey, which indicate a downward trajectory in mosque attendance for young American Muslims, should alarm the community for this growing crisis in faith.

Parallels can be drawn with the situation in the United Kingdom, where similar patterns are observed amongst British Muslims. In the many focus groups of young British Muslims which I have conducted, participants continually emphasised the lack of diversity as to their disengagement from traditional mosques. As stated earlier in this report, it is no wonder some Muslim women in 2015 founded Britain’s first women-led mosque in Bradford, England (at the time of writing this report, plans to establish this building have not materialised). The gendered division in British mosques (and indeed others around the world) does not reflect the spatial *sunna*. In Muhammad’s mosque, Kahera (2002) explains that while the ritual space was gender-segregated (in prayer and facing the *qibla*, women lined up behind the men who in turn lined up behind the *imam*), the physical space was not. Such departure from the spatial *sunna*, as Kahera points out, owes to ‘the influence of extant regional practices that have placed emphasis on the segregation of women’. For those few (but growing) mosques in the United Kingdom which have female spaces, the facilities are derisory. Whereas the men parade exultantly through the main doors of the hallowed house, the womenfolk scuttle in through a back entrance like rats—lest the sight of their uncovered ankles or the sound of their honeyed voices cause the men to fall into ritual impurity. For Muslims who are rooted in a western environment, this has become simply intolerable.

The establishment of the Inclusive Mosque Initiative in London in 2012, for instance, underlines the exclusionary nature of current conventional mosques. The organisation seeks to promote the understanding of an ‘intersectional feminist Islam’ and is dedicated to creating accessible and inclusive Islamic events and places of worship. They take a very expansive interpretation on what constitutes a mosque (‘we call ourselves a mosque to demonstrate that a mosque is made up of a community, not bound by a building’). Whereas a long-term aim for the organisation is to build permanent, inclusive, carbon-neutral mosques, they are currently ‘nomadic’, offering religious activities in rented spaces. While it is commendable that the organisation is not beset by the linguistic, ethnic, political, doctrinal and/or sectarian cleavages one finds in other mosques, it is bold in offering alternative religious and devotional acts of worship which have been ostensibly designed to include marginalised communities. One female participant whom I interviewed attended some of their functions. She was struck by their non-conventional approaches to prayer: ‘I took part in a mixed-gender congregational prayer led by a woman *imam*. I have never experienced something like that before in my life. It felt weird and quite uncomfortable’. Another focus group female participant felt that their practices challenged their core Islamic beliefs: ‘some people would pray without having performed *wudu* [ablution] which, as we all know, is necessary for prayer. When I asked them why they said they felt “liberated” at not having done what is considered a fundamental aspect of prayer. I respect the group’s inclusive aims but not at the expense of basic religious principles.’

Mosques should be welcoming places for all. Mainstream Muslim views with regard to certain progressive movements have been negative thereby creating often hostile environments for marginalised groups in such spaces. These views might be rooted in societal prejudices against some of these marginalised groups who form part of these progressive movements within Islam (e.g. LGBT+ individuals) or informed by religious conservatism. Largely, focus group participants were supportive of the aims of the Inclusive Mosque Initiative, particularly as regards the inclusion of marginalised communities. It was interesting to note, however, their discomfort towards perceived changes in established religious practices. Regardless of their progressive views or level of religious observance, young British Muslims within my many focus groups were resistant to anything which interrogated the immutability of orthodox Islamic beliefs.

During my visit to Boston, Massachusetts, I was introduced to Garrett Kiriakos-Fugate, a doctoral student in Islamic studies at Boston University who is originally from the Midwest. Kiriakos-Fugate has an academic background in architecture from Kansas University where his research focused on mosque design. He writes a blog called *Ra/umblings of a Queer Muslim* which explores sexuality, gender, queerness and sacred space. Kiriakos-Fugate’s spiritual journey into Islam is particularly interesting. Born into a Greek Orthodox family, he became attracted to Catholicism primarily for its focus on ritual. This led him ultimately to Islam. Unlike many Muslim-born individuals who struggle with observing some of Islam’s more demanding practices (such as the daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan), Kiriakos-Fugate found in its rituals a deeper of sense of piety. In Boston, I became a regular figure at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC), considered to be the largest mosque in New England. Kiriakos-Fugate was familiar with this mosque having written an academic paper in spring 2012 on how architecture, ritual and sincerity have been negotiated in that space. He has often prayed there too.



Exterior view of the ISBCC in Boston, Massachusetts.



The ISBCC has no architectural merit *per se*. It is an imposing structure which follows what has now become the standard design features of mainstream western mosques: minaret, dome and austerity. The ISBCC's location in what has been termed as the “heart of Boston's Black culture” is evident in the makeup of its 1400-strong congregants: African Americans, both Muslim-born and convert, are the majority. Despite its protestant interior (no ornamentation due to financial constraints), the mosque prides itself in being a ‘dynamic cultural centre’. It contains a café and tuck shop, a body-washing chamber for funerals, school and multipurpose suites for various internal and external community events. During my visits to the ISBCC, the café was a hive of activity for senior citizens and families discussing the theatre of the day. I had many spirited conversations with them over tea and sweetmeats. One evening in late September 2018, I attended a *halaqa* (a religious gathering for the study of Islam) with some of the congregants. A young and diverse crowd were mostly in attendance. I noticed a heavily tattooed young man of Hispanic heritage and his semi-veiled girlfriend sat crossed armed opposite me. We exchanged the usual Islamic pleasantries. I expected objection from some sanctimonious elder or priggish congregant aggrieved by the romantic sight, the precarious veil and/or the ink. There was none. No one seemed to care. And even if they did, they did not articulate it. Everyone was focused on the *halaqa* and the ensuing discussion. It was a respectful and mature space.

Kiriakos-Fugate, as a queer Muslim, felt comfortable enough to pray at the ISBCC, but he did admit that ‘there is a “don't ask don't tell” situation’ when it comes to LGBT+ congregants. ‘They’re not going to kick you out of the mosque for being gay or trans, but in terms of making friends with people or being part of the community, it does get more difficult’. Kiriakos-Fugate, a member of Queer Muslims of Boston, was surprised when the ISBCC reached out to his group. ‘It was refreshing when they reached out and we met with them in one of the mosque's offices where we had a conversation.’ Was this just a case of good public relations for the mosque? ‘It was a serious conversation’. Kiriakos-Fugate valued the conversation and being welcomed into an orthodox Islamic space as an openly queer Muslim. ‘It was super cool to have those serious conversations and we discussed our experiences as Muslims and members of a marginalised group. It was a positive thing and it gives me hope for these bigger communities to be inclusive.’ He was quick, however, to disabuse me of my notion that this was the norm with American mosques when it came to LGBT+ outreach. ‘It's very exceptional, [the ISBCC] is pretty moderate in their views.’ He noted that, unlike many conservative Muslim spaces he has attended in the

past, the content of the sermons during *Jumu'ah* at the ISBCC was innocuous. ‘They’re not offensive. I feel like I get something from them.’ I put to Kiriakos-Fugate—given his experience with the ISBCC—whether he would want to see mainstream American mosques be more inclusive of the LGBT+ community. ‘I would like to see separate spaces for queer Muslims. A few years ago, if you asked me this question, I would have said we need to be included in mainstream spaces but it is such an uphill battle. It is more important to make our own spaces, whether that's us reserving space for prayer once a week or meeting at each other's houses for *dhikr* [devotional Islamic prayers]. That's my goal for the queer Muslim community.’ I challenged Kiriakos-Fugate that the establishment of separate spaces might exacerbate the exclusivity of the existing mosques. ‘That is a good point. You would want the community to be united. But I think on a practical level, it is important to have at least third spaces to do other religious activities. It is about comfort and safety. It is about having a sense of yourself; a place which validates your own identity. It is not just an LGBT+ issue. You can think about race; a lot of black Muslims don't feel comfortable in mainstream mosques as they're centred on Arab Americans where being an Arab Muslim is seen as a model of how you should practise Islam’.

Kiriakos-Fugate conceded that a holistic approach to resolving the myriads of intersectional issues (race, gender, sexuality and class) in American mosques might not be practical or pragmatic. He agreed that ‘concrete examples from the Prophetic tradition’ can be powerful when advocating for inclusivity in mosque spaces. But this approach has its limitations when addressing LGBT+ inclusivity as there are few positive traditions in early Islam. Kiriakos-Fugate recounted one *hadith* in which Muhammad displayed kindness towards a man who was not attracted to women. The lesson Kiriakos-Fugate took from such tradition was that ‘the Prophet did not kick him out or exclude him from the mosque’, providing some theological basis for positive engagement with the Muslim community on the important question of queer inclusivity in mosques. While the interactions between the queer and non-queer Muslim communities in Boston remained minimal, Kiriakos-Fugate hoped for better allyship from his non-queer coreligionists, particularly providing appropriate signposting to resources for those struggling with their identities. ‘I would like to see Muslim chaplains be more supportive; a safe person to talk to and not feel judged. I would like to see some more generosity in terms of difference of views and humility on queer and transgender issues.’

Broadly speaking, “third spaces” represent a significant socio-religious phenomenon, emerging as hybrid environments that blend social and religious activities to accommodate the unique needs of certain Muslims, particularly the youth, who are often disconnected from traditional mosques. These spaces provide an inclusive and culturally relevant platform for Muslims to engage in both spiritual and social interactions and act as ‘enabling environmental infrastructure’ which supports the well-being and identity of their members. Some of these “third spaces” are not designed to replace the existing mosques (unless, as previously mentioned, such mosques are wholly inadequate for the needs of certain Muslim groups). They are seen as supplementary to such religious institutions, and accordingly, one would find that regular congregational prayers are not offered by these spaces. The primary characteristic of these third spaces, it seems, is their focus on socio-cultural enrichment. By providing a more informal, young and welcoming setting, they seek to contribute in a different way to spiritual development and social intercourse within a western context. It is worth highlighting that the emergence of these “third spaces” amongst Muslim communities in the west, like the Inclusive Mosque Initiative, have not been limited to progressive movements within Islam. There are some which are set firmly within the confines of theological orthodoxy. Such examples include Rumi's Cave in Kilburn. It was established to cater to the diverse spiritual, social and cultural needs of north-west London's Muslim community. It is an arts and community hub, rather than a simple place to perform the prosaism of prayer. Children run riot, boys and girls chat, giggle and flirt while the elders chill. At the time of my visit in 2018, the community was fighting a proposal by the local council to demolish the centre and nearby buildings in order to build luxury flats. This led one member of my focus group to proclaim, ‘I would rather see all the mosques closed down than to see Rumi's Cave demolished.’

These “third spaces” are not mosques in the traditional sense nor are they housed in architecturally interesting edifices. They are interesting, however, in that they are an example of new generations adapting the mosque to fit with their own complex modern identities. Saleem's survey of British mosques does not discuss these “third spaces” (admittedly they might have fallen outside the overall theme of his book given its focus on physical structure). As examples of social phenomena within the British mosque landscape, their inclusion in Saleem's survey would have enriched the narrative of Islamic religious space in the United Kingdom. It is also a model which requires serious consideration for future mosque design and renovation. Professor Rabbat recognised the value of embedding cultural spaces within

British mosques during my interview with him: ‘It would become absolutely crucial that British mosques should double as cultural centres. This has to be repeated for the benefit of the British Muslim community. I know that the clerics are probably resisting [the idea of mosques as cultural centres] based on the accusation that art is not Islamic. This is beyond short-sighted, in my opinion, it is a big, missed chance for them to integrate, to improve their image and to weed out some of the activities that are taking place in mosques.’

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The Lone Star State in United Sates, as its size denotes, does everything large: the meals I had, the cars I was in, even the guns which became an uncomfortable sight during my stay there. The same can be applied to its Muslim population. With the Muslim population in the United States at approximately 3.5 million, based on estimates by the PEW Research Center, Texas ranks third nationally in the number of mosques. Specifically, the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area hosts over 50 mosques, as documented by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim civil rights and advocacy group.

New Orleans-born Imam Omar Suleiman is a prominent Palestinian-American Islamic scholar, civil rights activist and public speaker. He has made his home in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area where he serves as the Resident Scholar of the Valley Ranch Islamic Center. He is widely recognised for his scholarly contributions, community leadership and advocacy for social justice. Imam Suleiman's popularity can be attributed to his eloquent and relatable approach to Islamic teachings, active presence on social media and commitment to addressing contemporary issues from an Islamic perspective. I met with him to discuss the American Muslim experience and mosques more generally. ‘Right now, as a Muslim community in the US, we are in negotiation phase. We are trying to negotiate our American identity with our Islamic identity. In that negotiation process, one of those identities will gain the upper hand. I do think that if we utilise the examples that we have from other faith communities and we take heed of the things that many of them wished they would have done differently, we can still preserve [our faith identity] because we can get ahead of that negotiation.’ Imam Suleiman considered the facilitatory role of the mosque as vital during this negotiation process. ‘There is an external social element which is reaching out to the broader community because I think that the Muslim community has realised that being socially isolated is not an option. It's important to be engaged with the broader community socially so the element of fear can be taken away since there is so



much fearmongering that's done through the media and different sources. That also plays a role internally in that because there has been so much pressure on the Muslim community and people have had such a difficult time being Muslim in their day-to-day spaces, it's important to reinforce their identity through the social spaces and gatherings that we have as a community together.' I asked whether this contributes to the development of a more culturally informed Islam that is applicable in a western context. 'Of course. Absolutely.'

Imam Suleiman has been a significant figure in interfaith dialogue and collaboration both locally and nationally. His interfaith work is characterised by efforts to foster understanding and cooperation amongst the diverse religious communities in the United States. This has made him sensitive to the common challenges which affect American Muslims and more established faith communities. 'I think we're subject to the exact same trends that affect other religious groups. I am deeply involved in interfaith work. In developing such close relationships at a personal level with clergy, their frustrations and problems are exactly the same but they are 20 years ahead. So we can project what our issues will be 20 years from now. I think other religions are quickly secularising so that they can maintain membership. What will inevitably happen to the Muslim community is that most mosques will swing very left and some mosques will revert to a pre-9/11 rite. Not in the political sense but going into preservation mode as a response to the mosque moving too progressively too quickly. What you end up is what is happening with the Jewish community where people want to be Jewish socially and culturally but not in a religious sense.' Incidentally, my kind host in Los Angeles, upon hearing the subject of my research, promptly arranged for me to speak to one of her relatives, Rabbi Lee Weissman. He is better known on his social media platforms as the "Jihadi Jew" (a name which I am sure produces much mirth). Based in California, Rabbi Weissman is an American rabbi and interfaith educator and co-founder and Director of Community Engagement at the Institute of Jewish Muslim Action in Orange County. We had a wide-ranging and pleasant conversation. Rabbi Weissmann warned that his Muslim compatriots should not fall for the appeal of the 'shul [Jewish synagogue] with the swimming pool' model to deal with faith and identity issues within young people as this has not been particularly productive within the Jewish American context. Imam Suleiman and others are indeed very prudent to take note of the experiences of other faith communities.

I wondered whether mosques should therefore provide a space for social justice given how socially, politically and civically engaged young people are in the United States.

Imam Suleiman still saw the value of the mosque being facilitatory as opposed to interventionist in a spatial sense. 'I think "providing" is an interesting word here because I don't think the mosque has to take it upon itself to "provide" that guidance. I think the mosque has to be the space where providers can come and be connected with the community because the *imam* is not going to be the expert on everything. For example, on civic engagement, the *imam* has to encourage people at a conceptual level to be civically engaged but then we would host forums with those who are experts in that field to talk about how to be effective on civic engagement. The mosque has to be the space which connects people and that connection is at various levels...we have a strong emphasis on social activities. We do a lot of social activities as a community.' Where did this leave critical thinking and discussion which young American Muslims, in my conversations with them, found to be of paramount importance in negotiating their faith and national identities? 'People feel there is not a space for that within the mosque as sometimes they feel alienated personally or alienated by the discourse because they feel it does not speak to their actual world so they attend third spaces. We bring those conversations to the mosques but we also don't want to bring an unrealistic expectation on people. We want to equip the right people to facilitate those conversations in the mosques.' The approach Imam Suleiman and others have adopted to addressing the identity crisis for young American Muslims is based on compassion and support. 'We understand why people are having questions and why they feel conflicted in their identity. It's not helpful to yell at the agendas that have both created and exploited that insecurity. It's important to process such insecurity together and walk them through it.'

In Irving, an inner-city suburb of Dallas, a "third space" called Roots Community Space defies conventional norms associated with religious institutions. Roots offers a refreshing approach to spirituality—one that resonates deeply with young American Muslims. I went to Roots with a number of local friends on a Monday evening to examine its unique features, impact and the factors contributing to its popularity. Located in a former office building, the space was inviting and intimate. The exposed brickwork and a coffee shop (suitably named *Suhbah* meaning "companionship") were the only points of interest. Monday nights at Roots attract a lively gathering of many young people: Muslim-born and converts, men and women, black and white. My visit was no different. True to the Prophetic tradition, everyone was seated on the floor, legs crossed. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee defined the ambiance.

They regularly participate in weekly sessions led by Imam Abdul Rahman Murphy, a thirty-something Islamic scholar of mixed Egyptian and Irish American heritage who is the founder and director of Roots. His sessions encompass a wide range of subjects—from Koranic exegesis (*tafsir*) to contemporary issues. The communal atmosphere encourages intellectual curiosity, spiritual growth and a sense of belonging. My attention never faltered from the important discussions at hand. Imam Murphy, sage-like, was indeed a captivating speaker. Before his talk, I sat with Imam Murphy over coffee to ask him about his inspiration for Roots.



Given his insights and clarity of thinking, I chose to quote him *in extenso*. First, he set the scene by summarising deftly the all-too-familiar story of the immigrant Muslim experience and its influence on the existing mosque order in the west. 'With the first wave of immigrants who came to the US, similar to Britain and other western nations, the *masjid* was the primary goal—the survival of faith—so a place to pray. And ultimately what you find is that the *masjid* has many different definitions based on the construct of the person, where they come from and their experiences. For some people, the western *masjid* is very different to the eastern *masjid*, because the western *masjid* has to wear so many different hats while the eastern *masjid* is very specific—it's solely for prayer. In the US, because of the lack of space and funding, we have to raise everything independently, we need to create spaces that could do different things. It starts off as a place to pray then we need to have a place for education, Sunday schools etc.'

At the core of Roots lies an unwavering commitment to inclusivity, Imam Murphy envisioned a space where young American Muslims could engage in open conversations without fear of judgement. 'Roots is a community space that is meant to be collaborative and supplementary to the already existing community initiatives in the United States'. Here, authenticity is supreme. The absence of rigid rules allows individuals to connect with their faith organically, unencumbered by cultural conservatism but with a basis in Prophetic custom. 'What you find [with traditional mosques] is everything is heavily focused on the educational experience and not at all focused on the social experience. "Social" might be a tough word to use as it conjures different images and, a lot of the time, it is seen as a waste of time, or something recreational.'



We believe that the Prophet Muhammad socialised in a way that benefited people and there was always education happening. So, what medium did the Prophet employ to educate people? People were learning from him by eating with him, standing with him, talking with him.’ A frequent visitor to the United Kingdom, Imam Murphy was aware of the challenges facing Muslim communities on both sides of the pond. Roots is by no means a panacea, but it did provide the opportunity to solve some of the issues affecting young western Muslims. ‘In the US and Britain, we have seen people leaving the religion at an incredible rate. They are finding it irrelevant. It’s not the faith which is irrelevant but the way it’s articulated. The way we thought to remedy this haemorrhage of people leaving the faith was to provide spaces that were social in nature but meaningful enough to be sacred. We don’t do birthday parties and weddings here but what we do is to have a social element to all our programmes and this is facilitated by the coffee shop as coffee initiates conversation. We have classes but they’re always framed as a social experience.’

His approach to teaching spirituality at Roots is ‘practical’, adding that ‘spirituality is accessible to everybody so long as you come with a humble heart and you are willing to reflect about yourself and your state’. Although Imam Murphy was understanding of the historical trajectory of mosques in the United States (and laudatory of the earlier generations’ contributions to the formation of such institutions and communities), he seemed disappointed by their pace of adaptation to contemporary developments due to recalcitrant mosque boards. ‘A large percentage of the *ummah* do not go to the *masjid* because the intention of the founder who started that *masjid* did not include such people’s needs. It was not necessarily their fault; I don’t encourage an adversarial perspective against these people who founded these mosques. They were in survival mode. We appreciate and revere their effort but, at the same time, we understand that it has been two decades since most of these mosques have been founded and they still haven’t changed. The greatest adaptation which they have made [to these mosques] is building a multipurpose hall that could include some iteration of a basketball court. And this was not authentic enough to compete with established community centres that people go to and they would rather play at the gym. So, it was not fully bought in to the needs of the young people.’ I put to Imam Murphy whether Roots provides a safe space to engage critically on difficult subjects. ‘Absolutely. Often, I am the devil’s advocate in some of our discussions! We encourage an understanding, just like in medicine, plumbing, law or flying a plane, that you have to be certified. Scholarship, like other professions, requires certification. You can ask the questions you want but I cannot guarantee that you



will understand the answer. So, we ask people to come with a sense of humility. It becomes a safe space for people to ask questions but there needs to be academic humility.’ It was particularly enlightening to hear that Imam Murphy, in his role as a religious leader, tried unsuccessfully to inspire change within mosque governing structures. ‘I waited my entire life to see something. I worked as an *imam* in mosques for seven years and I tried to push from that perspective but it became a constant conversation on what is the purpose of the mosque. So instead of trying to transform something to something that it was not designed to be, we thought we should provide something that is a supplement to the community.’ This has led Imam Murphy to maintain Roots’ unique identity and independence as a supplementary Islamic space despite interest from certain benefactors to turn it into a *musala* (prayer space). ‘We do not provide *Jumu’ah* here; we only pray *salah* [the Muslim daily prayer] if we are here. We do not want this place to be “*masjid*-centric”. That is not our purpose. There is no need to have another *masjid* here when there are others nearby. It is inauthentic to what we are; we are not here to compete with anybody. That is where Roots came from: it is providing a solution to an age-old problem. Everyone knows the answer but no one knows how to get there. So, we thought a social-spiritual space.’ It was clear from my discussion with Imam Murphy that there were *inter alia* practical, institutional and cultural challenges associated with embedding such “third spaces” within established mosques. It remains to be seen, however, whether American mosques would adapt in the future so as to include these social-spiritual spaces within their institutional frameworks. ‘I don’t know. I think people might see it in that way.

Others might see it as a temporary solution. It depends on a lot. The governance structure is one. If you are going to have a different mosque board every year, how can you guarantee that the experience will be consistent? Most American mosques are run by boards who are up for election every year. It’s rare for board members to stay and rarer for those who stay to be good. There is also a point around people who come to the *masjid*. At Roots, we have non-Muslims and unveiled Muslim women, would they feel comfortable entering a *masjid*? The *masjid* needs to be a neutral space; it cannot exclude people. It needs to be a culturally relevant experience for people but authentic to the Prophetic tradition.’

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Bo-Kaap, as its Afrikaans name suggests, sits on the slopes of Signal Hill overlooking the once small trading post established by the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company or VOC) on the Cape of Good Hope. That trading post, which evoked an era when European sails driven by ambition and avarice billowed across distant seas, is now an African metropolis. Yet Bo-Kaap has retained the quaintness of the old *Kaapstad*. Its cobblestoned streets, worn by centuries of footsteps, wind sinuously. Its dwellings and buildings are fine specimens of the vernacular Cape Dutch and Georgian architectural styles. They stand neatly, terraced and sometimes gabled, down the steep *Seinheuwel* inclines. The streetscape is congruous save for the facades. Sprung from an artist's palette, they are a riot of colour: turmeric, saffron, azure, crimson. It is reputed that all the houses in Bo-Kaap were painted white while on lease. When ownership was granted, homeowners expressed their elation and liberation by painting their homes in sumptuous hues. The story, whether fact or lore, adds to the area's enduring appeal. And consequently, Bo-Kaap has become both the subject and victim of the Instagram influencer's lens and the gentrifier's greed. Realtor's reek wafts in, cranes in the CBD hover close by, Transvaaler twenty-year-olds host tourists in that turmeric building, an army of Americans gawp at this green dwelling, a veiled *ouma* sat outside her ochre home looks on. I too, mesmerised, engaged in the millennial frivolity of numerous golden hour shots, often captured by disgruntled local friends as I stood in front of one bright house or another.

Cape Dutch architecture, a distinctive style that emerged in the Cape Colony during the 17th and 18th centuries, features prominently in Bo-Kaap. The architectural design of the buildings, particularly the use of gables, fanlights and doors, unmistakably reflect Cape Dutch influence. Several houses have *stoeps* (verandas) with benches. These *stoeps* extend across the front of the houses, providing a shaded area conducive to social interaction. The addition of benches further augments this communal space, fostering neighbourly gatherings and conversations. Similarly, Cape Georgian architecture, which emerged during the British occupation of the Cape, also significantly influenced the architectural landscape of Bo-Kaap. This style is characterised by its symmetry, classical proportions and decorative elements.

The integration of Cape Georgian elements with the existing Cape Dutch architecture resulted in a unique blend that is evident in many of Bo-Kaap's buildings. This architectural synthesis not only enhanced the aesthetic allure of Bo-Kaap but also reflected the area's historical evolution and cultural amalgamation. It is no wonder that Bo-Kaap boasts the largest concentration of pre-1850 architecture in South Africa. Beyond the vivacity of the scene, beguiling and beautiful, each window and doorway of these charming dwellings frame a story—a tale of resilience, forced migration and the steadfast spirit of a proudly Islamic people. Bo-Kaap was for many years known as the “Malay Quarter”. And the formation of its inhabitants, the Cape Malays of South Africa, was not a singular event but a gradual process marked by the



convergence of diverse peoples driven often by painful circumstances. And ‘through their adherence to Islam, as well as a distinct Cape Dutch linguistic identity through their connections with the Dutch East Indies and the Islamic world’, Gerald Stell, Xavier Luffin and Muttain Rakiep state in *Religious and secular Cape Malay Afrikaans* (2007) that the Cape Malay culture developed.

When the VOC established its presence at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, Dutch settlers demanded cheap labour to produce supplies for the VOC ships and corresponding colonial settlement. The VOC seized this opportunity to

import political exiles, enslaved people, prisoners and free-born labourers from other maritime colonies of the Dutch Empire to the Cape. The first enslaved people arrived in the latter half of 17th century, initially from other parts of Africa. However, the majority of enslaved people were gradually brought from Asia. A significant proportion of them was Muslim, some of whom leaders and scholars from the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia) exiled to the Cape for resisting Dutch colonial rule.







A selection of traditional Cape Malay dishes I enjoyed during my visit to a local restaurant in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town.

In the complex socio-religious milieu of the 18th century colonial era, a distinct bifurcation emerged amongst the enslaved populations of the Cape. The majority of those from Southeast Asia and India were adherents of Islam, contrasting sharply with those from Madagascar and various African regions who did not share this religious affiliation. This divergence had significant implications for their social mobility and integration. Enslaved Asians, often employed in semi-skilled and domestic positions, were disproportionately represented amongst those granted emancipation. This overrepresentation facilitated their establishment in Bo-Kaap, a community that became a cultural and religious enclave. The skills and domestic roles of these enslaved Asians likely made them more valuable in urban settings, where their manumission was more feasible and beneficial to the colonial economy. Conversely, enslaved people from other parts of Africa (including Madagascar), predominantly engaged in agricultural labour and experienced lower rates of emancipation. Their roles as farmhands tied them to rural economies, where the demand for labour was high and the opportunities for emancipation were limited. This disparity reinforces the economic motivations behind manumission practices and the intersection of labour, geography, social status and freedom.

Promulgated in 1642, the *Statuten van Indië* (Statutes of the Indies) provided the legal framework for the VOC to govern its colonies in the Dutch East Indies. These statutes covered *inter alia* governance, trade regulations and social order, entrenching the VOC's control over its territories. In 1770, an amendment to the *Statuten van Indië* provided a pathway for emancipation in the colonies. It mandated Christian masters to teach their slaves Christianity. Once baptised, they obtained the right to purchase their freedom. This amendment reflected the VOC's attempt to

impose European religious and cultural norms on the local population and address the moral concerns of the epoch. While the *Statuten van Indië* and its 1770 amendment illustrate the VOC's strategies for maintaining economic control and social order in its colonies, underlining the connection of religion and law in their governance approach, it inadvertently stimulated Islamic conversions amongst rural enslaved non-Asians. Slave owners, fearing the loss of their labour force, ignored their legal and religious responsibilities under the amendment, thereby facilitating the penetration of Islam amongst the enslaved non-Asians. Following British control of the Cape and the phasing out of slavery in the 19th century, the newly converted non-Asian Muslims moved to Cape Town to join their Asian coreligionists, freed from the bondage to the rural areas which they toiled for years. This phenomenon illustrates the unintended consequences of colonial policies. It also highlights the complex interplay between religious conversion, colonial authority and resistance, revealing how enslaved individuals navigated and negotiated their identities within oppressive systems.

Bo-Kaap became a nucleus of Islamic faith and culture. Cape Town's Muslims (especially those from the newly converted groups) adopted a Malay linguistic identity. Notwithstanding the prestige of the Malay language as the tongue of earlier scholars forcibly exiled to the Cape (and indeed the Southeast Asian origins of the clerical establishment at the time), it had a practical use as a *lingua franca* for the Muslim population. This was replaced by Afrikaans, a language which evolved from the Dutch spoken in the Cape Colony, and one in which the Cape Malay community contributed significantly to both its linguistic and literary development.



Under apartheid, Cape Malays were classified as “Coloureds”, placing them in a racial hierarchy below white South Africans but above black South Africans. This classification led to significant social and economic marginalisation, limiting their access to quality education, healthcare and employment opportunities. The Group Areas Act of 1966, for instance, was particularly devastating. This legislation enforced racial segregation by designating specific areas for different racial groups. As a result, many Cape Malays were forcibly removed from their homes in areas like District Six and Claremont and relocated to less desirable townships on the Cape Flats. (Bo-Kaap remained Cape Malay during the apartheid era due to the efforts of a sympathetic Afrikaner author and researcher on Cape Malay culture, I. D. du Plessis, but it did result in the forcible removal of non-Cape Malay residents.) This disrupted their communities and severed social ties, leading to long-term socio-economic challenges. Despite these forced relocations, the Cape Malay community maintained strong social networks and continued to practise their faith in private homes and informal settings. The community continued to celebrate religious festivals and maintain their cultural traditions, often in defiance of apartheid laws. In 1994, the Cape Malays celebrated the tercentenary of Islam in the region, a historic milestone in their deep and continuing socio-religious presence. It also saw them, like the majority of South Africans, participate in the nation's first democratic elections. Thus, 1994 was a year of both reflection and renewal for the Cape Malays, intertwining their past with the promise of a more inclusive future.

The “Malay” term is misleading in its implication that Cape Muslims are solely of Southeast Asian extraction. Their heritage is uniquely multicultural: African, Asian, Arab and European. Indeed, Richard Carl Heinz Shell in *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (1994) postulates that the community is formed of near equal proportions of the aforementioned African and Asian groups. But it is easier to imagine that the “Malay” term owes more to the commonalities between such disparate and diverse people in the Cape who shared above all an Islamic faith and a language closely associated with such religious heritage. A cultural-linguistic identity, perhaps, but it is one which consolidates and roots the Cape Malay Muslims in a very interesting context. I was fortunate to arrive in South Africa during *Mawlid Al-Nabi* (the “Prophet's Birthday”) celebrations. Although *Mawlid* is not commonly observed in some Muslim communities due to differing theological interpretations on its validity, it remains a deeply significant festival for the Cape Malays. It provides them with the opportunity to express publicly their Islamic identity, Sufi traditions and unique musical

heritage. In South Africa and elsewhere, *Mawlid* is marked by lectures on Muhammad's life, devotional poetry recitations, *dhikr* and songs praising his virtues. Schabir, a local friend, invited me to a *dhikr* gathering in Cape Town. We met in the home of a respected elder, where we began reciting devotional poetry and Islamic hymns. The congregants were both young and old, in traditional red or black fezzes and white caps. The experience was special. It was distinguished by the Cape Malays' idiosyncratic intonations and cadences when reciting the religious Arabic hymns. Similarly, I attended a *dhikr* celebration in Johannesburg at the home of an *imam*. The nearby tables were filled with abundant plates of mouth-watering *samoosas* and *koeksisters*. Spiritually uplifting prayers were sung, praising Muhammad and appealing for God's mercy. In speaking with congregants at these events, it was clear that this religious devotion is vital to preserving and celebrating the exceptional cultural heritage of the Cape Malay community.

Rooted in the historical amalgamation of Indonesian, African and European influences, Cape Malay music is vivacious and different. In Cape Town, I was introduced to Masturah Adams (affectionately known as “Auntie Masturah”), a Cape Malay cultural custodian. She was proud of both the secular and religious cultural customs of her community. She invited me to a choir rehearsal in a community hall near the seafront. A short drive from Bo-Kaap, we went in her brother's pickup. Here, young Cape Malay musicians were practising traditional choral singing. This genre is characterised by harmonious vocal arrangements and interplay of local instruments. The songs are often melancholic. They might narrate the story of a certain historical personality, some unrequited love or impart moral lessons to listeners. The melodies—imbued with the poignant echoes of their ancestors' struggles and triumphs—serve as a cultural repository. Indeed, it is an indicator of the Cape Malays' multi-layered identity. After the rehearsal, I had some lively discussions about my research with the young musicians. They saw choral singing as a foundational aspect of their identity as Cape Malays. Did it conflict with their Islamic identity? The response was a defiant ‘*nee my bru*’. The musicians gave me a spontaneous performance when they learnt that it was my last night in Cape Town. Quickly, they hustled together in formation; one was trying to have the last exquisite puff on his cigarette before he got into position. The jollity which framed our discussions before turned to sorrowful Afrikaans. The subject of the song was fitting: a Cape Malay longing for the return of their loved one from beyond the seas.

Muslims in the west can gain insights into their future by observing the experiences of more established faith groups within their own countries. The Cape Malay community— notwithstanding their unique socio-political and historical circumstances—offers a vignette to the future for Muslim minorities in the west. They are an example of the indigenisation of a minority Muslim group in a non-Islamic society. And it is the reason I chose South Africa for my research.

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Tuan Guru (1712–1807), meaning “Master Teacher” in Malay, is revered amongst Muslims of the Cape. He was prince, prisoner and pioneer. While Sheikh Yusuf (1626–1699), an Indonesian nobleman, is often hailed as the father of Islam in South Africa due to his exile to the Cape in 1694 and the subsequent establishment of a fledgling Muslim community, it is Tuan Guru who is credited with laying the foundations of a unique Cape Malay identity. Born in the verdant and spice-laden archipelago of Tidore (modern-day Indonesia), Imam Abdullah ibn Qadi Abd al-Salam was destined for a life of profound spiritual and communal leadership.

The son of a princess and a religious judge, Tuan Guru found himself ensnared in the geopolitical machinations of the VOC, that formidable leviathan of mercantile ambition. Due to his resistance to Dutch colonialism, he was exiled to the Cape of Good Hope in 1780, a land as alien as it was inhospitable. Upon his arrival, Tuan Guru was interned on the desolate and windswept Robben Island, a place known since the late 17th century for imprisoning political detainees, including Nelson Mandela (1918–2013). It was here, amidst the salt-laden gales and the mournful cries of seabirds, Tuan Guru wrote the first of several copies of the Koran from memory. He later authored a book on Islamic jurisprudence. These monumental feats of devotion and scholarship were but a prelude to his greater mission. In 1793, Tuan Guru established the first *madrasah* in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town. This institution, modest in its beginnings, became the crucible in which Cape Muslim identity was forged. It formed the backdrop for the literary development of Afrikaans-Arabic. It was also here that the enslaved and the free alike gathered to learn and preserve their Islamic identity, finding solace and strength in the teachings of their faith and the solidarity of their community. Indeed, as Phoebe Hirsch states in her thesis *Islamic architecture in the Cape South Africa, 1794–2013* (2016) ‘Tuan Guru’s resistance to the Dutch in the Malay Archipelago, his religious writings, his piety and his hardships before his arrival at the Cape may have evoked empathy with the enslaved communities, many of whom were already Muslim and who identified with all these hardships, giving them comfort and solace and courage to follow his example in their determination to perpetuate their religion’. Tuan Guru’s manuscripts on Islamic jurisprudence, written in both Malay and Arabic, served as the main reference for Cape Muslims in the 19th century. These manuscripts are now preserved by his descendants in Cape Town. One of the copies of Tuan Guru’s handwritten Korans is housed in a fire- and bullet-proof casing in the oldest mosque in South Africa, Auwal Mosque in Bo-Kaap.

Transcendent in dried sage green and shaded by towering palm trees on the adjoining pavement, Auwal Mosque (meaning “first” in Arabic) is ensconced within Dorp Street’s viridescent and well-proportioned buildings. Erected in 1794, this edifice echoes the quiet prayers and aspirations of generations past. The mosque’s genesis is inextricably linked to the saga of Tuan Guru. Oral tradition suggests that he was the mosque’s first *imam*, notwithstanding that his *madrasah* was housed within the compound and his handwritten Koran still remains there. The mosque is also special for having been built on land owned by a *Vryezwarten* (a freed black slave), Cordon Van Ceylon. His descendants, save for Tuan Guru’s inaugural mandate, held its religious leadership until the 1980s.



Hirsch (2016) highlights that ‘[m]any workers brought to the Cape as enslaved labourers brought their skills with them. To these they acquired many more skills learned from their Dutch masters, and soon developed expertise so that when they later built their own religious buildings, they would naturally display modified learnt Dutch features’. The Auwal Mosque incorporates elements of Cape Dutch and Cape Georgian architecture, two styles that are deeply rooted in the history and culture of the Cape. The mosque features wooden sash windows with external shutters. These windows are designed to allow maximum light and air into the building while providing protection from the elements. There is a clear slant towards Arabesque-style arches in certain places. The mosque reflects other

Cape Dutch (and later Cape Georgian) principles which typically emphasise symmetry and horizontality. The mosque, like others in Bo-Kaap, is long and low, with a central entrance flanked by evenly spaced windows. The interior of the mosque is simple. The prayer hall features a *mihrab* (the niche indicating the *qibla*) adorned with Islamic calligraphy. The walls, painted in light hues, are punctuated by arched windows. The floor is covered with plush green carpets. A small wooden *minbar* (pulpit) stands at the front. A group of boys and girls were being taught Koranic recitation and Islamic religious studies in English and Afrikaans. They were uniformed in traditional white Islamic garb. Some of the younger members of the class wanted to display their newfound knowledge of the Koran to me. I obliged and lauded them with heaps of praise for their reciting the *Fatiha* (the first chapter of the Koran and akin to the Lord’s Prayer in length and substance) with eloquence and fervour. The *imam* observed the impromptu performance with restrained pride.

The minaret—the sole characteristic revealing the building’s Islamic identity—breaks the conformity of Bo-Kaap’s flat-roofed skyline. Though modest in height and style, it commands a quiet dignity as it stands, sentinel-like, over the colourful neighbourhood. Its initial tier is square, seemingly encircled by a balcony, likely intended for the *muezzin* (the person who does the *athan*). This balcony is upheld by what appear to be Georgian corbels. Ascending further, the second and third tiers transition into an octagonal form. The entire edifice culminates in a hexagonal dome, its dimensions constrained by the uppermost tier. The minaret is a later addition (I was informed during my visit by an elderly congregant that it was constructed in the interwar period as part of structural renovations following a storm). Hirsch (2016) underlines that ‘in early Cape masjids, minarets were either absent or simple wooden structures’. Nonetheless, it is important to note that careful consideration has been given to designing a minaret which integrates with the building’s overall facade. Like the addition of the minaret, the Auwal Mosque has undergone several renovations and expansions since its inception to meet the growing needs of the Muslim community. For example, a second storey was added in the 1990s and only two walls of the original structure remain. These changes reflect the dynamic nature of the community: resilience in the face of socio-political challenges and self-confidence in their identity. The mosque’s architecture, therefore, is not static but a tribute to the community’s evolution.





A painting titled *Images of South African History I* (1998) by Sipho Ndlovu, portraying key phases in South Africa's historical journey—from the 1800s to the present—through themes of colonial resistance, the armed struggle and the apartheid era. This work is part of a four-piece series on display at the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Imam Abdullah Haron (1924–1969), an important figure in the resistance against apartheid, epitomised the intersection of religious leadership and political activism. Born in Claremont, Cape Town, Imam Haron emerged as a formidable critic of the apartheid regime, leveraging his clerical position to galvanise the Cape Malay community. His appointment as *imam* of the Al-Jamia Mosque (also known as the Stegman Road Mosque) in Claremont in 1955 marked a journey of resistance. Within this sacred space, Imam Haron initiated discussion groups and engaged in fervent community activism, laying a robust foundation for his anti-apartheid endeavours. Imam Haron's sermons were not mere religious discourses. They were powerful denunciations of the regime's policies which he unequivocally condemned as 'inhuman, barbaric and un-Islamic'. His activism transcended the confines of the mosque. In 1958, he established the Claremont Muslim Youth Association. And in 1960, he founded the community newspaper, *Muslim News*. These platforms served as vital conduits for amplifying his voice and mobilising the community against the oppressive apartheid system. The apartheid government, wary of Imam Haron's influence, subjected him to intense scrutiny. Despite the omnipresent risks, Imam Haron remained undeterred, continuing to vocalise his opposition. His pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca in 1968 was not only a spiritual journey but also an opportunity to engage with international leaders and anti-apartheid activists, further solidifying his commitment to the cause. Tragically, Imam Haron's relentless pursuit of justice led to his arrest in May 1969 (incidentally as he prepared to attend *Mawlid* celebrations). Detained at Caledon Square Police Station, he endured severe torture. After being held incommunicado for 123 days by South African state security, Imam Haron died on 27 September 1969. During the inquest into his death, the apartheid-era police attributed his death to a fall down a flight of stairs at the Maitland police station in Cape Town. An autopsy revealed 28 bruises on his body, primarily on his legs. Additionally, he had internal bleeding near the

base of his spine, an empty stomach and a broken rib. The claim advanced by the apartheid-era police was met with widespread scepticism in South Africa. Indeed, I remembered the ending of *Cry Freedom* (1987) which presented a list of anti-apartheid activists (including Imam Haron) who died under suspicious circumstances while imprisoned by the apartheid-era government accompanied by the official explanations for their deaths. "Fell down the stairs" was a frequent one. At times, the apartheid-era government sought to break the monotony of this repeated claim by being more imaginative; they began delineating on the number of floors from which the deceased fell.

1994 was famous for another landmark event, particularly for South African and indeed global Muslims. Claremont Main Road Mosque, a place where Imam Haron was reared in his childhood and youth, hosted someone who later came to be known as the "Lady Imam" in an event which generated both widespread interest and opprobrium. On Friday 12 August 1994, Professor Amina Wadud, a female African-American theologian and feminist, delivered a talk called "Islam as an Engaged Surrender" before the *khutbah* to a mixed-gender congregation. A woman conducting the *khutbah* (or even a prior talk as Professor Wadud had done contrary to media reports at the time) to a mixed-gender congregation was both unprecedented and controversial in the Islamic world. It symbolised an audacious challenge to entrenched patriarchal norms and sparked a critical discourse on women's rights in religious leadership. Professor Wadud became bolder over a decade later when she led the *Jumu'ah* prayers to a mixed-gender congregation in Manhattan, once again breaking with orthodox Islamic custom. It is worth noting that while Professor Wadud's actions at the time were seen as revolutionary—even blasphemous—such practices have become more common in the west albeit these remain unaccepted by more conservative Muslims. (Unfortunately, Professor Wadud was unavailable for an interview as part of my research.)





For Claremont Main Road Mosque however, Abdulkader Tayob writes in *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams, and Sermons* (1999), '[t]he response to the pre-sermon was overwhelming. The mosque was flooded with local media to record the event. Mosque officials had made sure that such an event would not be lost to posterity, nor should this public statement for the place of women in Islam be ignored. While South African newspapers lauded the mosque's stand [sic] for women's rights, most Muslims were alarmed at this development. Religious scholars particularly organized a campaign to halt the new trend in Claremont. Their indignation took the form of pamphlets, lectures against Claremont's modernism, joint 'ulema [Muslim scholars] meetings and conferences, and a petition calling for the imam's removal from office'. The event had 'an impact on the local community' Abdul Taliep Baker reflects in his thesis *Exploring the Foundations of an Islamic Identity in a Global Context: A Study of the Nature and Origins of Cape Muslim Identity* (2012), 'in a sense that local Muslims generally viewed the developing mosque as being modern and liberal, and ultimately disassociating themselves from it, it still continues to attract a number of youth and liberal minded Muslim intellectuals'. I disagree with Baker in his suggestion that Claremont Main Road Mosque could be seen as liberal doctrinally, particularly given my experience with progressive Muslim "third spaces" whose Islamic practices are radical interpretations of, or digressions from, orthodox custom. I arranged to meet Dr Abdul Rashied Omar, *imam* of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, during my visit to Cape Town. The mosque adheres to mainstream Sunni Islamic rites (though it does not follow certain jurisprudential traditions practised by the overwhelmingly Shafi'i Cape Malay mosques). It is also open to members of other Islamic denominations. I did not observe any divergences from established practice in respect of *salah* or other basic tenets of the religion during my visit to the mosque. In espousing a 'socially responsible version of Islam', Imam Omar said that the mosque engages with 'controversial issues' in the community. 'But we don't advocate permissiveness' Imam Omar was quick to point out. Those who are opposed to such views being discussed within a sacred space (such as a *khutbah* Imam Omar told me he conducted on anti-homophobia) are invited to 'forums' inside the mosque where divergent views are debated.

The history of the Claremont Main Road Mosque is set out in detail in Fahmi Gamiel's *The History of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, its people and their contribution to Islam in South Africa* (2004), a copy of which Imam Omar gifted to me, and which I have studied extensively on my return to England for my report. Slamdien, a Cape Malay mason and coachman, purchased a property in Claremont

from Johan Michiel Liebbrandt for twenty-four pounds and ten shillings. Claremont was a farming community that produced wine and grain with labour provided by enslaved Muslims. The land purchased by Slamdien was conducive for his realisation of an Islamic place of worship. The location had a natural water source; ideal for performing *wudu*. Claremont Main Road Mosque was thus established in 1854; Slamdien entrusted the building to a local *imam* as a *waqf* (religious endowment)—the first in Cape Town. The *imam*'s progeny held the mosque's custodianship until the late 20th century. Claremont Main Road Mosque became a focal point for local Muslims who settled in the vicinity. Its external architecture remains mostly unchanged (Hirsch (2016) posits that 'additions and alterations have been difficult because of this masjid's position on a main thoroughfare, with no available land adjoining the building'). It is documented, however, that certain renovations to the roof and interior prayer hall were made following a storm in 1984.

Claremont Main Road Mosque's facade frustrates any pretensions of what a mosque should or ought to look. Indeed, during my visit to it in November 2018, I expected a structure which reaffirmed the Cape Islamic architectural typology. Its appearance, however, indicates an Anglican parish church plucked from a picturesque English village. It has a steep roof with four flying buttresses on the long wall and Gothic-like windows. With the encroaching concrete jungle of commercial buildings, the Claremont Main Road Mosque makes for a discordant note in the area's urban landscape. I asked Imam Omar whether the mosque was previously a church. 'It's the original structure. It has been built like a church but there is a little minaret.' Slamdien must have been influenced by the local building practices, which were brought by the British following their occupation of the Cape. It is noteworthy that aspects of local church architecture have been appropriated in order to design an Islamic place of worship. It could be argued that the location of Claremont Main Road Mosque, as its name suggests, might have hindered any desire for the subsequent additions of Islamic signifiers like a dome or a more prominent minaret (the latter in the case of Bo-Kaap's Auwal Mosque). This obstruction in the urban geography could have helped in preserving the mosque's unique character. Imam Omar was keen to focus on other aspects of the mosque: 'our *masjid* is much more functional. We have lots of activities taking place; it's not only a place for prayer. It is a concept of an Islamic centre'.

Exterior view of the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa.



Imam Omar is both charismatic and charming. With advanced degrees in religious studies and international peace studies from the University of Cape Town and the University of Notre Dame, respectively, he has dedicated his career to interfaith dialogue and social justice. He has been a larger-than-life figure at the Claremont Main Road Mosque since 1986. As *imam*, he has played a crucial role in rebuilding the mosque's administration and advancing this 'socially responsive version of Islam'. He recognised my motivations to visit South Africa for my research. 'When you are looking at Muslim minorities, the case of South Africa is very useful in terms of learning lessons because these minorities have been here longer. [It is useful to learn the lessons of] how they have indigenised themselves, how they have built bridges between their religious faith identity and national citizenship. [The latter] is a struggle: how can you be a conscientious practising Muslim and a good British citizen.'

Interior view of the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa showing the *mihrab*.





Some of the lessons might be good, others might be lessons we should not repeat again. I think you have come to a good place.’ Imam Omar underscored the socio-political and historical context of Claremont Main Road Mosque in how it has shaped its activities. ‘Claremont was declared a whites-only area and the Muslims who lived around the mosque were forcibly removed. This created a lot of anxiety around the future of the mosque. This began a struggle in Claremont and District Six (which contained three mosques). In defiance of the apartheid regime, the Muslims fought for their own homes and then were forced out. However, they were willing to give their lives to defend the *masjids* in the areas declared as whites-only. They said [to the apartheid authorities] that these mosques are sacred, they have been established as *waqf* and the rewards of our forebears who have struggled [for their establishment] shall not be taken away. And they won that battle. The *masjids* in all these whites-only declared group areas remained. People began to patronise these mosques and they would come from far to these mosques as a form of resistance against apartheid. It was a silent resistance by praying in these mosques. Your son would ask “Dad, why are we coming to this mosque and not the local one?” and you would reply “because we lived here, we lived around the corner”. It is very significant in that sense.’

The leadership and personality of the anti-apartheid activist Imam Haron were instrumental in making the Claremont Main Road Mosque a socio-political hub for the local Muslim community and nurturing the civic and political engagement of the young in apartheid-era South Africa. ‘In 1955, when Imam Haron was appointed *imam* of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, he began to develop a symbiotic relationship with the youth. Young people then were going to public secular schools and they were being politicised. The same challenge you have in the UK now. The youth felt very marginalised. They could not relate to what the *ulema* were speaking about as they were very apolitical. Imam Haron was young and could relate to them and developed this symbiotic relationship with them. And so began a project called “Islamic liberation theology”: a commitment to being a conscientious Muslim and a good citizen. A good citizen, not in the sense of political patronage, but in terms of social justice and human rights for all. Imam Haron began to be taught political struggles from the youth and he in turn taught them religion. The Claremont Youth Association was then founded which inspired a number of Muslim youth movements including the Muslim Youth Movement of District Six. The youth movements in the late 50s and early 60s began to change the scene. This caused tension with the clerical establishment as they felt their authority was being challenged.’ Following Imam Haron’s death in 1969,

‘there was a split in his students: half went to the Claremont Main Road Mosque under the leadership of Imam Gassan Solomon and the rest went to Al-Jamia Mosque on Stegman Road.’ Imam Gassan Solomon (1941–2009) followed the activist legacy of his mentor. ‘He began to take this project of Islamic liberation theology further, and together with young people at the time such as Farid Esack and Ebrahim Rasool, joined the UDF [United Democratic Front: an anti-apartheid popular front] in 1983–4 which played a massive role in the anti-apartheid struggle and so they were the Muslim constituency. Imam Solomon was forced into exile in 1985 and that’s how I became the *imam*. Imam Solomon returned in 1990 following the new political dispensation in South Africa and became the first *imam* to become a Member of Parliament (for the ANC). When he returned, I asked him to take back his leadership role at the Claremont Main Road Mosque but he refused.’ It is worth noting that Ebrahim Rasool later served as the Premier of the Western Cape (2004–8) and thereafter as the South African ambassador to the United States (2010–15), while Farid Esack became a prominent writer and Islamic scholar. (Unfortunately, both were unavailable for interview as part of my research.)

I asked Imam Omar to expound further on the Claremont Main Road Mosque’s adoption of Islamic liberation theology. ‘Islamic liberation theology is very much political which other Muslims find very problematic. But in terms of South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement, there was no such thing as being apolitical. There is an important Christian document called *The Kairos Document*, issued by black South African theologians in 1985, which talks about three theologies: state theology, church theology, prophetic theology.’ *The Kairos Document* incisively critiques the ecclesiastical complicity in the apartheid regime. The document is structured into five chapters, each elucidating distinct facets of the church’s response to the prevailing political exigency. The inaugural chapter, “The Moment of Truth” delineates the exigent context, underscoring the imperative for the church to adopt a resolute stance. The document assails both “State Theology” (which sanctifies the apartheid apparatus through religious rationalisations) and “Church Theology” (which is castigated for its passivity and tacit complicity). The authors advocate for a “Prophetic Theology” that unequivocally aligns with the oppressed and mandates tangible actions against systemic injustice. *The Kairos Document* exhorts the church to transcend perfunctory rhetoric and to unequivocally oppose the repressive apartheid system. It calls for ecclesiastical solidarity, urging Christians to affiliate themselves with the disenfranchised and to actively engage in the liberation struggle. The document posits that authentic reconciliation and justice

are attainable only when the church commits itself to the cause of the marginalised. By championing a theology that is intrinsically intertwined with the lived experiences of the oppressed, *The Kairos Document* epitomises liberation theology and has galvanised analogous movements in disparate global contexts. *The Kairos Document* and Islamic liberation theology share a common foundation in their commitment to social justice and the liberation of the oppressed. Both theological frameworks critique the misuse of religious doctrine to justify systemic injustice and call for a more active, engaged role of religious communities in the struggle for equity and human dignity. Islamic liberation theology, much like *The Kairos Document*, emphasises the importance of aligning religious practice with the lived experiences of marginalised communities. It draws on the principles of justice, compassion and solidarity found in the Koran and *summa* to advocate for social and economic reforms. This theology challenges both political and religious authorities that perpetuate inequality and calls for an adaptation of Islamic teachings to support the liberation of the oppressed.

Imam Omar campaigns for a “prophetic theology” in mosque spaces. His sermons (most can be accessed online) routinely condemn authoritarian political figures at home or abroad and highlight human rights abuses. The *minbar* has regained its historical role as a platform for political activism and one which aligns with young Muslims in South Africa. ‘We are political but not party political. We do not advocate for people to vote for a political party. The best strategy is for religious leaders and institutions to be part of broader civil society and hold elected officials and politicians accountable for their political and moral mandates. Because we believe that the only insurance for a vibrant and robust democracy is to have an independent civil society that can hold the feet of elected officials and politicians to the fire.’ He emphasised the importance of civic engagement for Muslims in western societies. ‘A confidence in citizenship. In South Africa, we can criticise the government because we have the confidence that our citizenship will not be questioned. The Muslim minority is around 2% [of the population] in South Africa, but our influence is far greater. We were not only concerned about ourselves as large sections of our community participated in the anti-apartheid struggle. This is a key lesson for the UK and US. The communities there cannot be concerned with Muslim issues, you have to be concerned about other issues. We need to forge links with other communities, not for opportunistic strategic purposes, [but] because that is what Islam means.’ In keeping with his “prophetic theology”, Imam Omar had a warning for Muslims in the west. ‘Because of Islamophobia and the way in which the media is depicting Islam with Islam as the pariah, sometimes I feel Muslims are looking for state patronage.

They want to aggrandise themselves with the state and I think that is dangerous. Whilst you have to support the state on issues in which it is promoting goodness, you have to withhold your support on issues which you think that they are not promoting wholesome values.’

So what has been the level of youth engagement since Imam Omar’s leadership? ‘Young people have always played an immensely important role. Young people would feel marginalised but they found champions in Imam Haron and Imam Solomon both of whom gave young people opportunities. They also learnt from the young people as they live on the cutting edge of the real world. I am a product of them and I take their legacy very seriously.’ I insisted on what this means for attracting young South African Muslims. ‘Currently, we are looking at including children into the ethos of our mosque. We recently did an event to commemorate the Prophet’s birthday with five- and six-year-olds. The mosque has five missions: youth empowerment, *jihad* [struggle] against poverty, gender justice, interfaith solidarity and environmental justice. These are the five focus areas for the mosque’s activities. We are thinking of adding a sixth dimension which is compassion for the elderly.’

The political activism of the Claremont Main Road Mosque is critical to the identity of young Muslims in South Africa as it symbolises a legacy of resistance and social justice that resonates deeply with their historical and contemporary struggles. The mosque has been a bastion against racial oppression and apartheid, with individuals like Imams Haron, Solomon and Omar providing leadership, advocating for justice and mobilising the Muslim community. This activism has not only provided a framework for understanding Islam’s role in social justice but has also empowered young Muslims to see their faith as a catalyst for change. It seeks to reflect the political and social views of young Muslims in how Islam is adapted to the current age and environment.

The South African Muslim experience provides us with the opportunity to understand the significance of activist *imams* and mosques. Figures like Imams Omar Suleiman and Abdulrahman Murphy in the United States represent an emerging trend of native-born charismatic and socially activist Islamic leaders, who combine traditional religious scholarship with a proactive engagement in socio-political issues. They tackle pervasive issues like Islamophobia and social justice, while also addressing internal community challenges such as youth alienation and identity crises. Their engagement strategies, which include leveraging social media and participating in interfaith dialogues, ensure their message’s accessibility and relevance. This is “prophetic theology” in action.



According to the 2020 US Mosque Survey, 22% of full-time paid *imams* were born in the United States, up from 15% in 2010. The ISPU noted that the preference of hiring American-born *imams* is slowly increasing. While the figures are disappointing, the direction of travel is encouraging. In the United Kingdom, there is a lack of comprehensive and recent data on native-born *imams*. In 2020, Cardiff University initiated the *Understanding British Imams* research project, which aims to thoroughly examine the positions, experiences and profiles of *imams* within the United Kingdom. As of September 2024, the findings have not been published. However, a 2008 telephone survey by Ron Geaves found that out of approximately 300 British mosques (from 537 attempted contacts), 24 *imams* (8%) were born and educated in the United Kingdom. It is crucial to underline that *imams* who are cultivated within a western cultural milieu possess an acute awareness of the manifold challenges confronted by their communities. This cultural immersion endows them with a nuanced comprehension of the intricate socio-cultural subtleties at play. It is equally imperative that the training programmes for these home-grown *imams* are not transplanted into the United Kingdom from other parts of the world. The 2020 US Mosque Survey found that only 6% of all *imams* received their Islamic degree from an American institution. The findings noted that the absence of a leading US-based Islamic seminary is an ‘impediment’ for increasing the number of American-born *imams*. This evaluation can be readily applied within the British context.

I looked to the South African Islamic model. The Cape Malay community in South Africa primarily adheres to Sunni Islam, with a strong emphasis on the Shafi’i school of jurisprudence and a rich tradition of Sufism. Many participants in my focus groups in both Johannesburg and Cape Town have noted the recent construction of mosques in South Africa by foreign powers or individuals. One particular example is the Nizamiye Mosque, which I visited in November 2018. It is an immense neo-Ottoman mosque and *madrasah* complex in Johannesburg, considered the largest in the Southern Hemisphere. It was funded by a Turkish businessman. (A clinic was added to the complex at the request of Nelson Mandela.) I asked Imam Omar what the response has been from the Cape Malay community to foreign influence in the establishment of mosques in South Africa. ‘It has not been widespread. Most of our mosques are more organic and grassroots. It does not appear that these new foreign-funded mosques have influenced much of the Islamic orientation of the local community.’ Auntie Masturah explained that the local community was concerned by South African Cape Malays who pursued religious studies or training as *imams* in Egypt or Saudi Arabia—prominent centres of Sunni

Islamic scholarship. When they returned to South Africa, they held divergent views on Islamic practices and culture, acquired during their time abroad, which conflicted with the cultural norms of their birthplace. In response, the community established local centres and seminaries to adapt and integrate the knowledge acquired abroad, ensuring it aligned more closely with local realities. Imam Omar confirmed this point. ‘Increasingly now, the community is discovering that we need more organic *ulema* as someone who has spent most of his life abroad is out of touch with reality here. So, we have established the International Peace College of South Africa and the Madina Institute to train scholars locally. One of the things you see with *imams* [in Europe] who train abroad is that they often can’t speak the language. The good thing with Muslims in South Africa is that we have developed a language—Afrikaans’.

Speaking to young South African Muslims during one focus group, it was clear that the South African mosques’ involvement in political discourse and community issues has encouraged them to engage actively with socio-political matters while staying rooted in their religious and cultural heritage. They pointed to the appeal of mosques like the Claremont Main Road Mosque and Stegman Road Mosque with their focus on Islamic liberation theology. First, it resonated with their desire for social justice and equity which, as they informed me, form core tenets of their Islam. Second, this theology provided them with a framework for understanding and addressing contemporary issues such as poverty, discrimination and political oppression in South Africa and beyond through the lens of their faith. Third, it empowered them to see their religious beliefs as a catalyst for positive social change, aligning with their aspirations to make a meaningful impact in their communities. Some of the participants identified that, for them, Islamic liberation theology stimulated critical thinking and reinterpretation of religious texts in light of modern challenges. They felt that this offered a way for them to bridge the gap between traditional teachings and contemporary realities. It was interesting to note from my discussions with them that active engagement in the social and political spheres has inspired young Muslims to become leaders and change-makers, grounded in the ethical and moral principles of Islam. Two of whom have since become elected representatives in South Africa’s provincial and national legislatures.

Musjid Al-Yaseen, situated in KwaThema—a predominantly black township on the outskirts of Johannesburg—was established by a community of Zulu Muslims and appears to embody elements of the “prophetic theology” referenced by Imam Omar, with a focus on simplicity, social justice and community engagement. The mosque’s modest architectural design reflects the urban context in which it is located. In addition to serving as a place of worship, it functions as a community hub: a vegetable garden provides fresh produce for local residents and regular skills workshops are held for women from the township, welcoming both Muslim and non-Muslim participants. One of the images captures an *ugogo* engaged in embroidery, offering a glimpse into the mosque’s broader role in fostering local empowerment and inclusion.





# THE INBETWEENERS





Young British Muslims have complicated identities. There is a difficulty in balancing our faith identity and our national identity. The mosque, the focal point for Islamic worship, started and has remained for many centuries as an open, inclusive and cohesive communal hub. However, mosques in the United Kingdom, and indeed across the west, contradict this historical trajectory. Their scope is often limited to congregational prayer, Koranic teaching and rudimentary Arabic learning. They are private fiefdoms of male authority and seldom cater to an ethnically, culturally, socially and doctrinally diverse religious polity. The reasons for this backdrop are well-established and I have woven these for the benefit of lay readers throughout this report. For young British Muslims, the status quo had to change; the mentality around mosque design and functionality had become too sclerotic. The resulting challenges (derisory facilities, lack of accountability, insularity, pastiche designs etc.) and public debate have continued with every mosque development in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the west.

Muhammad declared that ‘the whole world is a mosque’; a simple, clean area can act as a prayer space for a Muslim to perform their religious duties. As Kahera, Abdulmalik and Anz (2009) state, the mosque is a ‘system of temporal spatial coordinates; it carries no preconceived order’. The absence of religious stricture in Islamic architecture allowed it to adopt and synthesise the styles of conquered polities or local contexts: from Byzantine domes to West African mudbrick, Hindu chhatris to Chinese pagodas, Roman temples to Dutch gables. Though it may be a while before we see a Stirling Prize-winning British mosque, attitudes are changing given the open-mindedness and activism of young British Muslims to inspire renewed thinking around religion and identity. Current Anglo-Islamic architecture does indeed remain unimaginative and perfunctory. Yet it is ludicrous to propose the replacement of aesthetically undesirable mosques with new culturally relevant and impactful structures. Architectural styles—much like the societies that birth them—are subject to the inexorable march of time, often falling out of favour as cultural, social and aesthetic paradigms shift. These mosques possess cultural and historical value, despite their perceived architectural inadequacies, because they serve as tangible links to the past and embody the struggles and aspirations of a once unsettled generation. Thus, their preservation maintains community heritage and identity and, more importantly, communicates the historical foundations of British Islam.

However, the passage of time allows for a re-evaluation of the historical contexts in which such architectural styles

were conceived. Their omnipresence (and associated mentality) can lead to a collective weariness; a yearning for novelty and diversity. Though the physical structures remain, transformation in the collective mentality around mosque design lies with the next generation of British Muslims. As they take the mantle of administrating mosques in the United Kingdom (it is hoped with the active support of current leaders for their representation and participation in applicable mosque governing structures), they will more likely influence decision-making around mosque design and functionality in the future. Saleem in *The British Mosque* is therefore wise to conclude with the Cambridge Central Mosque in his detailed survey of British mosques. It is a source of optimism for the future of mosque design in the United Kingdom.

The mosque represents a remarkable polyvalence, performing myriad functions that extend far beyond its primary role as a place of worship. This multifaceted nature is deeply entrenched in the historical and cultural fabric of Islamic societies, where the mosque has always been more than a mere place of prayer. Certainly, mosques are sanctuaries for the devout, where the faithful gather for their prayers. Their role as social institutions and community centres are similarly significant. They are the heart of social interaction, events, discussions and support activities. Muhammad’s mosque in Medina stands as a quintessential example of this multifunctional paradigm; the spatial *sunna* which guides how we conceive mosque design in our local contexts. Muhammad’s mosque in Medina was not merely a place of worship, but a nucleus of the early Muslim community. This legacy should set a precedent for current and future mosques in the west, underscoring their integral role in serving the spiritual, cultural and social needs of the community. It is crucial to focus efforts on restorative work and adaptive reuse of current British mosques, ensuring that the space reflects the ever-changing needs and visions of the local Muslim communities, particularly in accommodating better female spaces and social and/or cultural activities. To the extent that such adaptation to the current mosque structures is prohibitive in terms of practicality and/or cost, support should be given to supplementary “third spaces” in the community.



Interior view of the Cambridge Central Mosque in Cambridge, England. Photo by Rumman Amin on Unsplash.



These “third spaces” are vital loci for community cohesion, particularly within diasporic contexts. They facilitate the negotiation of cultural and religious identities, providing a sanctuary where young British Muslims can engage in communal activities and discourse free from external judgement or discrimination. By fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support, “third spaces” mitigate the social isolation in religious spaces often experienced by the young and other marginalised groups. Furthermore, they function as informal support networks, offering emotional and social resources that are crucial for the well-being of their members. Thus, the development of Muslim “third spaces” is instrumental in promoting both collective resilience and social cohesion.

During my discussions with the MCB, the closest thing British Islam has to a synod, it was clear that they were involved in efforts which chimed with the wishes of the young British Muslims I had interviewed. The organisation had plans which involved training mosque leaders around best practice in design, diversity and good governance. Although I have not followed up with the MCB on the progress of these initiatives since our meeting in 2018, I am confident that they would involve an iterative process incorporating feedback and further refinement to address specific local contexts. It is imperative, therefore, to ensure that such training and/or guidance provided to existing mosques emphasises the importance of (a) creating spaces for women and other marginalised groups and (b) focusing funding efforts (to the extent feasible) for the achievement of the said objectives.

I have shied away from proposing more radical recommendations as the question of faith and national identity in respect of British Muslims is complex. First, concerns around disengagement by young British Muslims from mosques are broadly known. Though recent

accurate figures on mosque attendance are unavailable, many young Muslims whom I had interviewed did not regularly attend the mosque. Similarly, in my discussions with mosque leaders in the United Kingdom (and indeed elsewhere), they have expressed their consternation over the declining number of attendees, noting that their current congregations are primarily composed of elderly individuals. This indicates that mosques are, at best, trying to address and mitigate such disengagement. Conversely, one could argue that they exhibit a fatalistic attitude towards the declining trend, resulting in complacency. It is best to let whatever initiatives reform-minded mosques are currently undertaking run their course. Second, as with any organisation, there needs to be buy-in from existing mosques on fundamental changes to their spaces and governing structures. Imam Omar Suleiman underscored a fundamental point around the future trajectory of American (and arguably other western) mosques. He noted that most mosques will adopt a more progressive stance, while some will revert to pre-9/11 practices, clarifying that the latter is not political but rather a preservation response to perceived rapid progressive changes. Consequently, while this report stresses (a) the paramount importance of British mosques to be socio-spatial community hubs so as to engender a cohesive Anglo-Muslim identity and (b) the examples of good practice in other countries, I have refrained from prescribing the nature of such functionality or advocating for a wholesale adoption of best practice elsewhere into a British context. As previously explained, there is a question of spatial practicality. Most British mosques, owing to their nature as repurposed buildings, are not structurally adequate to accommodate other facilities and/or activities beyond the daily prayers, even if the prayer space itself is under-utilised. One must be mindful of the fact that mosques serve primarily as a place of worship and, as such, this will take priority over other potential or desired functions.

Exterior view of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, Egypt. Built between 876 and 879, it is the oldest well-preserved mosque in Egypt and a significant monument of Islamic architecture.





Indeed, it is worth emphasising the point made by Imam Abdulrahman Murphy, founder of the Roots “third space”, who noted the resistance of mosque boards to any accommodation or changes to the primary function of mosques as places of prayer, even if such changes were conducive to the community at large. It is reasonable to suggest that there will be similar opposition to such changes in the United Kingdom. Therefore, I have qualified such recommendation so that existing mosques are under no obligation to host social and/or cultural activities if it is impractical to do so and instead focus should be on the development of supplementary socio-spiritual spaces. I have also been sensitive in proposing recommendations that would not be seen by the mainstream mosque establishment as challenging orthodox Islamic practice (or the spatial *sunna*), in the hope that this does not further exacerbate the inevitable bifurcation in mosques into the progressive/conservative paradigm, as Imam Suleiman noted.

In conclusion, the debate over whether Anglo-Islamic architecture should look to the past or remain in the present is not a binary choice. It is a spectrum of possibilities. Both historical references and contemporary ideas have their place in architectural practice. The key lies in finding a balance. The concept of spatial *sunna* in mosque architecture enables us to learn from the past, understand the needs of the present and embrace the opportunities of the future. Accordingly, British Muslims (and other western Muslims) can create mosques that are not only functionally optimal but also aesthetically meaningful and culturally harmonious. This approach ensures that Anglo-Islamic architecture remains relevant and responsive to the evolving secular and spiritual needs of the British Muslim community, particularly those of the upcoming generations. The aspirations and activism of young people are the stimuli towards this Anglo-Islamic architecture. I end with the words of Professor Rabbat who is inspired by the younger generations’ willingness to create something new and cohesive:

“The youth of today have the tools and confidence of who they are, specifically of how hybrid they are. Through that hybridity they could create some sort of “in-between” [between the faith and western identities]. The “in-betweenness” is what is needed. You have an opportunity and here is where I become optimistic.



# GLOSSARY





Where a technical term is first used within the main body of this report, a simple definition has been provided either in parentheses or as part of the sentence which follows such term. Similarly, if there is an exposition of a certain concept, the technical term is provided in parentheses (or in square brackets if such term or its definition appears within a quotation to indicate that this was an addition by the author). This approach has been adopted primarily to facilitate reading. It seeks to avoid the need for the lay reader to refer repeatedly to the glossary when first encountering such technical term in the main body of this report. While this may preclude the requirement for a glossary, it has been provided here for completeness. Please note that this glossary does not include general non-technical non-English terms (which have been translated into English in parentheses in the main body of this report or left untranslated for stylistic purposes).

**ATHAN:** the Islamic call to prayer performed by a *muezzin*. See also MUEZZIN.

**DHIKR:** the Arabic word for “remembrance” and used in the context of Islamic devotional prayers.

**DINIYAT:** an Urdu term which broadly refers to Islamic religious studies.

**FATIHA:** the Arabic word for “opening” or “key”. It refers to the first chapter of the Koran and consists of seven verses asking God for guidance and mercy. See also KORAN.

**HADITH:** the recorded sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, considered by Muslims to be second only to the Koran as a source of religious and moral guidance. See also SHARIA and SUNNA.

**HAJJ:** the pilgrimage to Mecca, a spiritual journey which Muslims are expected to make at least once during their lifetime if they can afford to do so.

**HALAQA:** the Arabic word for “circle”. In an Islamic context, it refers to a gathering of Muslims (traditionally seated in a circle) for the study of Islam and/or the Koran.

**HARAM:** the Arabic word for “sanctuary”. This word is closely related to the Arabic word *haraam* meaning “forbidden”.

**HIJRA:** Prophet Muhammad’s flight from Mecca to Yathrib (later, Medina), both in modern-day Saudi Arabia. This event also marks the start of the Islamic lunar (or *hijri*) calendar.

**IFTAR:** the Arabic word for “to break fast”. This is the evening meal consumed by Muslims to break the daily fast (*sawm*) during Ramadan. See also RAMADAN and SAWM.

**IMAM:** in the context of mosques, this is the title of a person (a cleric or a *primus inter pares* amongst the congregants) who leads people in prayer. If the *imam* is a cleric or a scholar in the religion (*alim*), they often have an additional role in providing spiritual guidance to congregants. In Shiite Islam, this term has an additional politico-religious dimension as it denotes the infallible leaders of the Islamic community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. See also ULEMA.

**JAMI’:** a congregational mosque designed to host the special Friday noon prayers (*salaat al-jumu’ah*). Historically, there was a distinction between large central mosques which held Friday prayers and local neighbourhood mosques which hosted the regular daily prayers. This distinction has diminished over the years in Muslim-majority countries. Furthermore, it does not apply in western countries as mosques have always performed both functions. See also JUMU’AH, KHUTBAH, MASJID and SALAH.

**JIHAD:** the Arabic word for “striving” or “struggling”. This refers to the spiritual introspection (or struggle) against oneself or a struggle against some injustice. However, it is most frequently associated with war and violence.

**JUMU’AH:** a community prayer service held on Fridays at noon. The service involves prayer and the *khutbah*. Friday (or indeed any other day in the calendar week) is not considered a Sabbath in Islam. See also JAMI’, KHUTBAH, MINBAR and SALAH.

**KAABA:** a large cuboid-shaped stone shrine inside the Sacred Mosque of Mecca (*Al Masjid Al Haram*), modern-day Saudi Arabia. The mosque compound is considered the holiest site for Muslims in the world.

**KHUTBAH:** a sermon which forms part of the *Jumu’ah* service and is delivered by the *imam* atop the *minbar*. It is also conducted during the special prayers offered on the two Islamic religious festivals (*Eid*) and certain other special prayers. See also JAMI’, JUMU’AH and MINBAR.

**KORAN:** the Islamic holy book and considered by Muslims to be the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. See also FATIHA, SHARIA and TAFSIR.

**MADRASAH:** the Arabic word for “school”. This term refers to all forms of educational institutions—whether secular or religious, and regardless of faith tradition—ranging from primary schools to centres of higher learning. In architectural and historical contexts, however, it more specifically denotes a distinctive type of institution in the Muslim world, primarily dedicated to the study of Islamic law, though occasionally encompassing other religious disciplines as well.

**MASJID:** the Arabic word for “mosque” (and from which the English word derives) meaning a “place of prostration”. It is the place of worship for Muslims. See also JAMI’, MUSALA and SALAH.

**MAWLID:** the festival marking Prophet Muhammad’s birthday.

**MIHRAB:** a niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the *qibla*. See also QIBLA.

**MINBAR:** a pulpit in a mosque where the *imam* stands to deliver the *khutbah*. See also JUMU’AH and KHUTBAH.

**MUEZZIN:** the title of the person who performs the *athan* traditionally from a mosque’s minaret. See also ATHAN.

**MUSALA:** the Arabic word for “prayer space”. This term is either referred to the main space within a mosque or any other space where the *salah* is performed. See also JAMI’, MASJID and SALAH.

**QIBLA:** the direction towards the Kaaba which is used by Muslims as the direction of prayer. See also MIHRAB.

**RAMADAN:** the ninth month of the Islamic *hijri* calendar and one of the holiest in Islam. Muslims observe daily fasting (*sawm*), offer special prayers and seek spiritual reflection during this period. See also IFTAR and SAWM.

**SALAH:** the principal form of worship in Islam. This consists of five daily prayers offered at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and night. On Fridays, the noon prayer is replaced by a special form of prayer. See also JAMI’, JUMU’AH, MASJID, MUSALA and WUDU.

**SAWM:** the Arabic word for “fasting”. This usually refers to the daily fasting observed by Muslims during Ramadan. See also IFTAR and RAMADAN.

**SHARIA:** the Arabic word for “path [to water]”. This refers to Islamic law which is based on the teachings of the Koran and the *hadith* and *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad. See also KORAN, HADITH, SUNNA and ULEMA.

**SHUL:** a Jewish place of worship or synagogue.

**SUNNA:** the practices and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and which form a model for Muslims. See also HADITH and SHARIA.

**TAFSIR:** Koranic exegesis. See also KORAN.

**ULEMA:** sing. *alim*, Muslim scholars who are recognised as having specialist knowledge of *sharia* and theology. See also IMAM and SHARIA.

**UMMAH:** the Islamic community or commonwealth.

**Waqf:** an Islamic endowment.

**WUDU:** ritual ablution performed by Muslims before *salah*. See also SALAH.



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# TOWARDS AN ANGLO-ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

THE SOCIO-SPATIAL ROLE OF MOSQUES IN SHAPING  
A COHESIVE BRITISH MUSLIM IDENTITY





لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ عَبْدُهُ وَرَسُولُهُ