

Creating Islamic Spaces and Places

The 52nd Annual (Virtual) Conference of the North American Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies (NAAIMS) focused on “Creating Islamic Spaces and Places.” It was cosponsored by the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, University of Indiana, Indianapolis on October 19, 2023, under the direction of its Executive Director, Philip Goff, and Conference Program Chair. He welcomed the panelists and guests for their participation in the conference.

The conference consisted of four panel sessions. Panel Session 1 highlighted “*Place-making at the Margins*,” with Alisa Perkins, (Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI) serving as discussant. The first presentation which examined “Making the Arctic a Muslim Home: Strategies of Place-making in Northern Canada” was by Bouchra E. Mossmann (University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark.)

Her paper focused on how the building of mosques in Northern Canada was driven by “wishes for rootedness, visibility and ... the desire to feel at home.” She spoke about how the building of mosques was a “strategy” of place-making to help Muslims “feel at home ... where Islamic ritual practices are severely complicated by extreme changes in daylight.”

Mossman’s presentation raised questions about “religious authority and the interpretation of Islamic traditions” because of the “different ethnicities, generations, gender groups, and branches of Islam,” represented in the new Muslim communities. She stated that her focus on the study of Islam in rural and Northern Canada was “part of a bigger research effort titled *The Arctic Muslim*.” She identified early Muslim immigrants as being Arabs from Bilād ash-Shām who worked primarily as traders, trappers, and peddlers in the north. Her presentation drew on “data from local news outlets and social media to census data and fieldwork.”

According to the discussant, Alisa Perkins, Mossmann explored the difficulty associated with community building in a “sparsely populated Canadian landscape” especially since there was “already a concern for ... establishing alliances for the Muslim newcomers [with Canada’s] Indigenous people ... and providing charity [and support] from food and clothes banks, which already serve the Indigenous community.”

The second presentation which focused on “Feeling Islam in Detroit City: Prophetic Neighborliness and the Making of a ‘Real’ Islamic Place” was given by Lucy Ballard (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA). In her presentation, Ballard explained how “DREAM of Detroit, a Muslim-led non-profit organization, is remaking a disinvested neighborhood once dismissed by the municipal government as a place of unsalvageable ruin.” Her presentation examines “what began as a limited home rehabilitation project has now expanded into a comprehensive vision for the entire neighborhood, anchored by the Muslim Center, an historic African American *masjid*, and powered by multiethnic Muslims from across the metropolitan region.” She examines how this project which is being “modeled as a new Medina” is “driven by the hope [of putting] Islamic values in proper practice [as a way to deconstruct the] endemic patterns of racial and class segregation.” In her talk, Ballard stated how DREAM of Detroit encourages young non-Black suburban Muslim volunteers to become part of the neighborhood and feel it “as a space of safety, belonging, and Muslim kinship,”

as opposed to an urban space which is “conceived as a metonym for Blackness, danger, and, often, derivative or less authentic forms of Muslimness.”

During Q&A, Perkins, the discussant, noted that Ballard’s talk examined how “inner city Black American Muslims, who sometimes refer to themselves as ‘Indigenous Muslims’ are working together to provide a ‘second home’ for more elite, ethnically diverse Muslim Americans from the suburbs, pouring their resources and time into offering a safe space for community building.” The discussant noted how Mossman’s discussion highlighted how the “Indigenous Canadian Muslims were concerned about welcoming newcomers from the start of their ‘mosque building’ by supporting them in their identification and alliances with the Indigenous community.”

This was followed by a talk by Nazreen S. Bacchus (Farmingdale State College-State University of New York, SUNY) on “Mobilizing for Islam: Community Organizing and Place-making in New York.” In her examination of projects that address place-making in New York, Bacchus stated that New Yorkers’ “experiences with Islamophobia and xenophobic stereotypes about Muslims have increased their community organizing tactics.” She noted that the concept of “place-making is a multifaceted process that occurs within immigrant communities, on college campuses, and through political advocacy.” She spoke about how spreading Islamic awareness to non-Muslims is part of the strategy of place-making, and that here is a difference in the “ways that men and women organize within their communities and within their interactions with non-Muslims.”

During the Q&A period, the discussant’s question focused on “what nourishes and sustains these givers, whether they are recently arrived Muslims in the Arctic, or Black inner-city Muslims in west Detroit, or ethnically diverse Muslim Americans in urban mosques?” She stated that if we read between the lines of these 3 presentations, we can actually “notice the great, financial and material costs, and great burden of emotional labor that Muslim minority communities are playing in repairing societal rifts.” She concluded that these papers equally discuss how the production of “Muslim minority identity is shaped by the contextual factors of place and space.”

Panel Session 2 examined “*What is Islamic Space?*” with Najib B. Hourani (Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI) serving as discussant. Omar M. Ramahi (University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada) discussed whether there is “Such A thing as ‘Islamic Space.’” In his presentation, Ramahi argued that the concept of “‘Islamic’ space or ‘Muslim’ space has evolved through the past 1400 years, albeit under different designations ...[but] anything that would qualify as ‘Islamic’ has to be traced back to the *Mus’haf* (aka the Qur’an),” and not Muslim traditions. Although various physical places, like Mecca, mentioned in the *Mus’haf* are in reference to being a sanctuary, rather than a sacred place (*muqaddas*), Ramahi argued that Islam focuses on the “functionality of those physical spaces rather than on anything intrinsically ‘sacred’ about them.” He noted that it would be a daunting task to make comparisons to other religions when it comes to what is holy or sacred and concluded that “Islam does not attach the concept of ‘holiness’ or ‘sacredness’ to a place.” He spoke about other places referenced in the *Mus’haf* used by Christians, Jews and others, dedicated to multiple activities, including the remembrance of God (see Qur’an 22:40).

Although mosque-building and creating space and/or social institutions is essential for establishing the cultural presence and social identity of the Muslim community, but as Ramahi concluded, with the “concept of a physical space/place is critical to [community development] there

is a significant danger to ‘Islamizing’ a space for power and dominance based solely on concepts created by [Muslim] traditions, and not the *Mushaf*.”

In fact, based on today’s presentations on contemporary discourse of Islamic architecture, the discussant noted that “Ramahi is skeptical of the notion of reductionist or essentialist notions of Islamic space or architectures ... [while] exploring what [would be] a necessary founding premise of any such discourse ... [by stating that] premises or strictures defining such space would be evident in the Qur’an.” He concluded that Ramahi “locates no such explicit idea of the intersections of faith, practice and urban form in terms of physical architectures. He argues, we might be skeptical of those who would invent traditions in the service of larger forces, be they the economic interests of the real estate market eager to produce ‘Islamic’ architecture or nationalist and islamist movements seeking to overwrite cities and spaces in their own ideological image.”

Hazem Ziada (Emory University, Atlanta, GA) reviewed the meaning of Islamic space in his presentation “Space for Religious Experience: Contemporary Synthesis” by exploring the work of Abdelhalim I. Abdelhalim (1941-2021), a leading Egyptian architect who focused on how architecture examines religious space through Islamic spirituality. Ziada stated that Abdelhalim- “sought to reinvigorate a pre-modern ‘traditional code,’ a language of form- and space-making grounded in community commitments and traditional knowledge.” He argued that this code “was abruptly interrupted and forcefully repressed since the early nineteenth-century by a fast-encroaching colonial modernity imposing its own knowledge, practices and technologies.”

Ziada highlighted how this leading architect centered traditional knowledge on “contemporary natural sciences [in order to] infuse the code with a new apparatus for reflection, towards synthesizing a worldview which dismantles modernity’s rigid materialism.” To explore this architect’s point of view, Ziada referenced a 1983 mosque project where “Abdelhalim contended that the traditional dome has lost its cosmic symbolism after space travel and astronomical findings ... and reinterpreted the mosque’s dome, minaret and light-distribution through complex crystalline formations developed from a basic triangular prism.”

According to the discussant, Ziada shows how “Abdelhalim’s work sought to explore architectural representations of the spiritual or the divine and to think through how such cosmic expressions might be updated to reflect the contemporary knowledge of the universe rooted in science.” In fact, since the discussant’s academic focus has been on the emergence of urban projects, it is noteworthy that he is “sympathetic to efforts to resist essentialism in architecture and urban design, whether religious or nationalist in origin.”

This was followed by a talk by Salah D. Hassan (Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI) which examined “A Paradoxical Place: The North American Mosque.” His paper identified the first mosques built in North America and stated that mosque-construction was historically a component part of Muslim integration in the U.S. where Muslims represented a minority in the following states: Michigan, Iowa, Ohio, North Dakota; and in the provinces of Alberta and Ontario in Canada. In his discussion, he commented that mosques in North America in the 21st century represent a paradoxical place because their construction “underscores the crucial role of place-making in ... establishing Muslim social and cultural presence [and highlights that] ... hostility to the number of mosques indicates the persistent ‘unbelonging’ of Muslims in the United States and Canada.” In his exploration of the historical development of the Muslim community in the U.S.

Hassan spoke about mosques as spaces of congregation, which simultaneously serve as centers for social and educational activities, and identity formation.

During the Q&A period, the discussant noted that one of Hassan's major argument was that "in the post 9/11 era of the War on Terror, Muslim communities, and the mosques so central to them, become targets of political forces seeking to 'Other' Muslims and to marginalize them, a project furthered, intentionally or otherwise, by the repressive apparatus of the state, which has tended to view Muslim communities as suspect, as potential incubators of terrorism."

This was followed by the Keynote Speaker: Mahbub Rashid, Dean of School of Architecture and Design (The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS). Rashid's dynamic address scrutinized various historical "*Notes on the Social Production of Islamic Spaces and Places*." In his talk on the core of Islamic space and place from an architectural perspective, Rashid examined the social processes of spatial production with a focus on Muslim societies. He argued that these social processes "help establish a dialectical relationship between society and space." It is evident that what constitutes "space" is the key to understanding the impact of this relationship. According to Rashid, "Lefebvre tells us, these spaces can include structurally defined spaces of practice, spaces of representation, and representations of spaces."

To illustrate the harmful effects imposed on Muslim societies through the disruption of existing social processes of spatial production, Rashid cited that the "actions of colonial rulers of these societies ... caused significant harm." He explained that these disruptions "can be modified, but it requires awareness, appropriate strategies, and intentional acts of compliance and resistance. It also requires that actors do not get fixated with visible physical spaces, but to take note of all the other invisible spaces that evolve synchronously or asynchronously with physical spaces."

The first paper in Panel Session 3 addressed "*Muslim Spaces in Secular Places*," with Siti Sarah Muwahidah (University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK) serving as discussant. The first panelist, Krista Melanie Riley (Vanier College, Montreal, Canada), spoke about "A Space Just for You: The Role of a Prayer Room for Muslim Students in a Quebec College." Her presentation clarified the importance of having space dedicated to Muslim spiritual practice. This paper was based on Riley's "three-year Participatory Action Research project on Muslim students in Quebec, in which 50 students at three Quebec *cégeps* (junior colleges) were interviewed about their experiences." She stated that over half of the students interviewed described the Muslim prayer room at Vanier College was "one of the safest places on campus."

Based on the students interviewed, the prayer room became a place of refuge from continuously explaining their identity to a majority non-Muslim community college, and a space on campus where they developed friendships. According to the discussant, Muwahidah, the prayer room served as a "sanctuary offering spiritual comfort, emotional and physical safety," especially in today's context of Islamophobia. During Q&A, Muwahidah noted that this paper may serve as a way to "explore how the prayer room facilitates interactions among Muslim students from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds ... [which could] contribute to a deeper understanding of the internal diversity within Muslim societies." The discussant felt that one of the most important questions raised by this paper, was the "sustainability of such a space, especially in light of concerns that the Quebec government may ban religious facilities in public colleges, following the precedent set in elementary and secondary schools."

The second talk in this session by Rahimjon Abdugafurov (Macalester College, Saint Paul, MN) which focused on “Cultural and Institutional Dynamics: Shaping Uzbekistani Mosques in the United States” demonstrated how ethnicity influenced the development of mosques in the U.S. With the collapse of the Soviet regime, the U.S. witnessed a substantial increase in immigration from Uzbekistan. Abdugafurov analyzed the dynamic nature of religious practices of three Uzbekistani mosques based on public records and data available on the websites of these mosques. His research demonstrated how “Uzbekistani mosques in the United States serve as spaces for communal engagement and foster a sense of belonging, surpassing their function as mere houses of worship.” During the Q&A session, the discussant noted that this sense of belonging and community created by these mosques “serve as essential tools in helping the [Uzbekistani] community preserve its religious identity while adapting to American society.”

Since Abdugafurov’s paper argued how the “cultural and doctrinal differences among Uzbekistani Muslims necessitated the creation of new mosques,” the discussant noted that the exploration of these “doctrinal distinctions, such as how Uzbekistani Muslim communities have predominantly adhered to Maturidi theology ... would have enhanced the paper’s theoretical engagement.”

In Panel Session 4 the concept of “*Internment/Interment*” was highlighted and defined in meticulous detail with Abdulkader Sinno (Indiana University, Bloomington, IN), serving as discussant. The first paper in this session was presented by Leila Tarakji (Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI) on “Negotiating Muslim Identity and Occupying Empty Spaces in Samira Ahmed’s *Internment*.” Her very detailed study of the novel, Tarakji examined stories that were reminiscent of despair and suffering experienced during World War II. She referenced how the “Trump Administration’s Muslim Ban and in the broader contexts of globalized detention of Muslims, Samira Ahmed’s dystopian novel *Internment* (2019) imagines a near-future America where American Muslims are stripped of their civil rights and forced into an internment camp.” Tarakji highlighted the relationship between “citizenship, identity, and place” in her examination of the “ways in which Muslim American internees’ circumstances in the novel are compared to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.” She also noted how, the “Guantanamo Bay detention center also operates in the text as a point of reference and a specter of the horrors that may take place.”

Her statement that Muslim Americans in Ahmed’s *Internment* are “in exile and defined by their potential for terror ... [and] subject to erasure and relegated to occupying empty spaces,” actually illustrates the “risks of claiming *Muslim* space in the War on Terror Culture, and the subsequent reality of occupying *no* space.” During Q&A, the discussant, Sinno, added that Tarakji’s paper “describes invisibility and visibility in Samira Ahmed’s *Internment*, a novel that describes the internment of Muslim-Americans in camps, as a metaphor for the real Muslim Americans’ invisibility, powerlessness and isolation in the American context.” Tarakji explains during Q&A that “not only is the physical internment of Muslims in the novel premised on the U.S. government’s historic responses to perceived threats, but it also serves as a metaphor for the marginalization and dehumanization of Muslims in American society.”

Her presentation also argues how Muslim Americans are actually creating Muslim American space through their literatures and cultural productions. In fact, it was Sinno’s concluding remark that shows how “Samira Ahmed’s act of writing the novel [in English] is an act of integration. ...

[And that] its references ... put Muslim Americans of today on the trajectory of the now successfully integrated Japanese Americans. It also seems to facilitate Muslim-American integration by familiarizing other Americans with the fears and concerns of the minority.” Tarakji also noted during the Q&A period that “Ahmed’s novel proves to be a story of resilience and resistance, as a community of people fights to reclaim its *Muslim American* places and voices.” She added that “at risk of being rendered silent, invisible, and alien, Muslims in America are forced to grapple with these burdens and engage with the risks of *being* Muslim, and identifying as such, in the War on Terror culture.”

The second presentation was by Sharmin Sadequee (University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada) on “Secular Populism and Disputes Over Islamic Green Burial in the American Public Sphere.” Based on Sadequee’s ethnographic fieldwork in the southeastern region of the U.S., she encountered a great deal of controversies pertaining to Islamic burial practices and Muslim cemeteries. She explored how these controversies produced “discourses and images that incorporate Muslims in the American political and cultural landscape. Through a case study [she demonstrated how] these disputes [have introduced a crucial debate in the] democratic process through which Muslims construct a place and identity for themselves.”

Her discussion highlights how Islamophobia maintains a strong presence in the American public sphere. Her presentation confirms how the establishment of “religious institutions like cemeteries and mosques ... [which are basically] symbols of Islam [that occupy] spaces in American cities and neighborhoods have become a battleground where these conflicts manifest [as] competing cultural value systems and raise questions about the role of Islam in the public sphere.”

According to the discussant, Sadequee’s paper discussed “how Muslims make space for themselves in the American imagination by creating burial grounds.” In addition to her remarkable and fascinating way of creating “new space” in the American consciousness, Sinno added, “just as interestingly, she explored the opposition to Muslim burial grounds in some American locations [and explored] ... how Muslims marshal social skills [and acquire] understanding of local regulations and federal laws to get around opposition.”

This was followed by Muhammad Izzul Haq (McGill University, Quebec, Canada) who outlined the role of mosques in Canada and examined “Marking New Face Creating New Space: The Establishment of a Refugee-Friendly Mosque.” This paper provided information that can “unmask the role of mosques in refugee resettlement in Canada.” Haq used “empirical data based on a case study of a mosque in Montreal ... [to elaborate how] Muslim congregations ... are creating new space for newcomers.” Haq explained that extending a “welcoming space for refugees is an expansion of social services [which is reminiscent of mosques] of the 7th century era of Prophet Muhammad when mosques became a shelter and a place of refuge.”

According to the discussant, “Mosques in Canada are following in the pattern of established churches in becoming sponsors of immigrants and refugees.” He added that this paper’s argument is an extension of the same one “made by Soper and Fetzer in their classic book *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany* [which examines] ... the way that Muslims are accommodated by the state follows the same patterns of recognition taken by other religious groups.”

It is noteworthy that based on Haq's overall research, "mosque engagement in refugee resettlement will be aligned with the [current] Canadian project in immigration unless an unwelcoming society based on Islamophobia and unsupported government policies prevail."

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