“We Don’t Want a Multicultural Minaret, We Want an Islamic Minaret”: Negotiating the Past in the Production of Contemporary Muslim Architecture in Britain

Saleem, Shahed

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Shahed Saleem
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Abstract

Most of the 1800 mosques in Britain today have been formed through the conversion and adaptation of existing buildings, while some 200 are purpose built. With the larger adaptations and purpose built mosques, Muslim communities have attempted to architecturally represent their identities in the West. This has commonly been through the replication of easily identifiable architectural elements drawn liberally from across the history of Islamic religious architecture, such as domes, minarets, arches and arabesque decoration. This has resulted in a British Muslim architecture largely self-designed by mosque committees and characterised by the replication and reinterpretation of traditional and historic Islamic architectural forms. In this essay I explore how the symbolic meaning of the mosque created by mosque committees is challenged by the design process and ideologies of the professionally trained architect. Referring to a specific mosque design project, I attempt to explore how the mosque client and the design professional relate to and deploy Islamic architectural symbols and their cultural meanings.

Introduction

Britain’s Muslim population is one of the fastest growing religious denominations in the country, having risen from 2.7 million in the 2011 census to 3.9 million in 2021. Whilst there are records of a Muslim presence in Britain going back centuries, the first settled communities emerged in the early twentieth century when sailors working on imperial shipping routes from Bengal, Yemen and Somalia started settling in the port towns they docked in. These Muslim communities emerged in Cardiff, South Shields and East London and started to establish the country’s first mosques. These were prayer rooms in lodging houses or other converted premises, such as the Hilda Arms pub in South Shields, re-used as a mosque in 1936, and were followed by purpose built mosques such as the Peel Street mosque of 1946 in Cardiff. Although these were not Britain’s first mosques, those being a mosque in Woking built in 1889 and a house converted to a mosque in Liverpool in the same year, they were nevertheless the first mosques established by migrant and diasporic Muslim communities. Such mosques numbered only a handful by the second world war, but after the war, and the partition of India and creation of Pakistan and later Bangladesh, Muslim migration from South Asia to Britain rapidly increased along with wider migration from the new Commonwealth nations.

It was from these new Muslim communities that a wave of post-war mosques started to emerge starting in the early 1960s. These communities were engaged in a process of reproducing their traditional social and

cultural worlds [1], a process which was not restricted to South Asian settlers; a study of Yemenis in Britain described them as forming an, ‘‘urban village’..living within its own socially, linguistically and ethnically defined borders.’[2] Communal structures from places of origin were replicated in their new environments, for example the Muslims of Bharuch, Gujarat, already lived in India in considerably self-contained enclaves, a pattern which was repeated, and indeed intensified, in northern towns such as Blackburn, with chain migration reproducing village and kin networks. It was the arrival of families in the 1960’s that changed the nature of these early settler communities. Prior to this, ‘Indians, Yemenis and Turkish Cypriots [had] lived together in boarding houses…sharing more or less the same religious facilities.’ [3] It was the reuniting of families that led to the gradual separation of Muslim migrants to form ‘ethnic settlements’, and it was from within these distinct cultural and ethnic groupings that institutions started to form. It was the size and concentration of these emergent Muslim communities that enabled them to, ‘generate and sustain institutional and economic infrastructure that embodied and perpetuated specific religious and cultural norms’[4].

What emerged at the end of the 1970’s was a ‘patchwork of communities’, many of which established their own mosques onto which they impressed their particular national, ethnic, linguistic and doctrinal character.[5] These mosques, ‘were primarily concerned with the promotion of worship and religious life, the encouragement of ‘fraternal’ links in Muslim communities, the provision of assistance and moral support for individuals…and the improvement of social, cultural and educational conditions..’[6]

These early post-war mosques started appearing from the early 1960s and by the 1980s were making their presence felt across Britain’s urban landscape through their visual impact. They were mostly formed through the adaptation of existing buildings as these were more readily available to new Muslim communities who were self-organising and self-financing their social infrastructures. Consequently, mosques started emerging as adaptations of former pubs, warehouses, cinemas, banks, libraries as well as many in converted houses.

The post-war mosques were being self-made in an iterative and ad hoc fashion by the migrant communities who were using them. When these communities were able to introduce architectural expression, they often turned to architectural references from historic Islamic sources, often adapted to fit their new contexts. Whilst some of these imported Islamic architectural references could be traced back to a historical origin, such a lineage was not always clear. In many if not most cases, the Islamic architectural references replicated on post-war mosques were more generic or approximations of historic Islamic architecture from places where Muslim empires once ruled.

By the end of the C20th the mosque landscape in Britain was composed of mostly adapted buildings, ranging from houses to cinemas, former places of worship, warehouses, public houses, shops plus many more. Practically any building type could be, and was, adapted to create the mosque. Although post-war purpose-built mosques had started to emerge from the late 1960s, they were fewer in number though

[1] Lewis, 2002 p.18
[2] ibid., p.19
[3] ibid., p.19
[4] Ansari, 2004 p. 343
[5] ibid p.343
[6] ibid p.343

increasing through the 1990s. This decade also saw examples of purpose-built mosques whose architecture was more firmly rooted in Islamic historical sources, and could be described as revivalist, attempting to replicate as far as possible an historic image of an Islamic past or golden age.

This revivalist tendency could be seen to echo the first representations of the mosque in Britain whereby a 1761 mosque folly at Kew Gardens and the 1889 first built mosque at Woking were expressions of a European fantasy of the 'East' as an exotic and flamboyant place. They mark the early and late periods of a cultural practice that saw literature, painting and architecture deployed in the construction of the persona of the Muslim world, as it was being newly experienced. Later termed Orientalism, part of this practice was the replication of the Muslim world architecturally through historicised and romanticised reconstructions of Islamic history. The result was not just in painting, but also in buildings such as the Brighton Pavilion, Leighton's Arab Hall, along with other examples across northern Europe. The mosque, and its design, for post-war Muslim diasporas in Britain exists somewhere between a continuation of and a reaction against the colonial control of the subject or minority population through this Orientalising vision.

The cultural logic of mosque design

My own architectural practice started in Bethnal Green in East London, in the early 2000s as a small general practice in a multi-ethnic part of the inner city serving a largely ethnic minority clientele of small developers, householders, businesses and community organisations. Very soon we were approached by mosques across East London, it being an area with a high Muslim population and historically a 'landing point', a place where migrants to London and the UK would first settle. The mosque projects would vary in scale and scope; from extending, adapting and rebuilding to purpose-built mosques. From the outset, I wanted to move away from the historicist turn in UK mosques and the way they tended to deploy domes, minarets and arches as a way of signifying their religious function. These standard forms were rooted in Muslim architectural history but I felt that they were being translated into generic motifs, made from synthetic materials such as glass-reinforced plastic, and devoid of their historical specificity when transplanted into the UK. I perceived this as a hollowing out of meaning of an architectural tradition and I pursued instead an architecture that I felt could reflect the contemporary Muslim condition, which for me meant one of migration, diasporisation and hybridity.

My understanding of this situation is based on my own lived experience as a second-generation migrant, as well as my research into the mosque in Britain, where I found that mosques are essentially a community-led endeavour, are mostly adaptations of existing buildings and are built in an iterative manner, often self-designed, over a period of time. In my lived experience I have experienced the making of mosques by migrant Muslim communities from the most initial stages of starting with prayer in house living rooms and religious education on dining room tables. This informs my perception of the diasporic condition as one of continuous and incremental cultural, religious and identity reconstruction.

For me this is a reconstruction of cultural identity across time, geography and historical events, namely colonisation, displacement, migration, and the violent experience of racism and being Othered within the new

place of settlement. The psychic condition that the migrant experience gives rise to is explored by the Indian-American psychoanalyst Salman Akhter. He lists a number of attitudes and fantasies that the migrant adopts; firstly there is the attitude of repudiation; a sensory denial of being in the new place. Then the fantasy of return, which is continuously delayed until, in most cases it is abandoned. After this comes the fantasy of replication, that if return is not possible then then migrant will remake their lost homeland in the new place. Such replication is a way for the migrant to deny loss and minimise the laceration of the self that they have suffered. Objects, then, that are used in this process of replication take on a shamanic and totemic significance onto which are transferred the traumas of dislocation and the loss of that environment that emplaced the person in the world.[7]

My endeavour is for the architecture of the mosque to serve as an instrument through which to reimagine and reconstruct – but not to attempt to replicate - historical and cultural trajectories that have been interrupted and to reflect, and perhaps start to heal, the psychic fallout of migration by giving it a voice. For me, the reconstruction of cultural histories and past lives by diasporas is always partial and incomplete as it is not a reinstatement of the past. The process of reconstructing must instead negotiate a real and imagined past, and a new present, and this negotiation changes both the diaspora and the host. The diaspora is thus in a condition of reconstruction and invention, continuously and simultaneously doing both, and it is in this ever-shifting dialogue that, for me, the British mosque exists.

I pursued these ideas through a number of mosque projects through the 2000s. One of these was a 2008 project in Camberwell in South London to redevelop of a former 1960s public house into a mosque [Fig 1]. The building was to be remodelled internally and an extra floor added with a new façade enveloping the whole ensemble to give it a new architectural meaning. To design this façade, I referenced a slim book of Islamic geometric patterns by a Robert Field first published in 1998. This book, one of a several visual references of Islamic patternwork that I kept to hand in the office, followed in a long tradition of European visual guides to Islamic art and architecture presented in books, engravings, paintings and so on which were perhaps most popular in the 19th century when the fashion for representations of the Muslim world was at its zenith. From this book I selected a 13th century Persian eight-pointed star pattern which the author had sourced from the Victoria and Albert Museum. There was a simplicity and 'rationality' to this pattern which I felt could be read in multiple ways – as an Islamic pattern but also as a non-culturally specific decorative tile. I felt that this pattern was situated on the edge of being recognisably Islamic in the commonly recognised Oriental or Arabesque sense, and it could also be read as a 'modern' geometric form. I therefore developed the façade design from this Islamic pattern, situated as I felt it was between cultural categories, with which the whole building was to be clad and given a new unified architectural and urban meaning.

The first of my built mosque projects was the Shahporan Mosque on Hackney Road in East London completed in 2014 [Fig 2]. This project involved the refurbishment of the mosque which was a converted Georgian terraced house, plus a new 3-storey addition to its rear and fronting onto a side road. The house was being used as an office before it became the mosque in the 1990s, having been acquired by the local

[7] Salman Akhtar, *The Trauma of Geophysical Dislocation* 2008 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbdGHtWBwnc&t=1841s)

Bangladeshi Muslim community. In its previous history it had been a lock-making office with attached workshop – the historic signage of this locksmith remained carved in relief in the flank wall of the house, and was to be reinstated as part of our refurbishment works.

For the new 3-storey building, which was to be built on the site of the former workshop which had been adapted to serve as the prayer hall, I sourced an eight pointed star Persian tile pattern from Robert Field's pattern book, although this time I used a variation of it that Field also presented, which was sourced from a similarly dated Seljuk palace in Turkey on display in the Victoria and Albert museum, and used this as the basis for the design of a new façade. I scaled the pattern up so that only part of it formed the façade design, and it could not be read as a repeatable pattern continuing ad infinitum – which is a hallmark of Islamic patternwork. Instead, the building presents a fragment of the overall pattern, the rest of it needs to be imagined as occurring outside of the frame of the building. Rather than a literal and historic replication of a complete Islamic pattern, which for me is a futile attempt at reviving a temporally and geographically distant past, I instead pursued an abstracted, and somewhat fragmented recreation of it. For me, this was a crucial way of representing what I understood as the diasporic experience, where cultures, histories and traditions were being reassembled and reconstructed resulting in partial restorations mixed with new contexts, and from which an emergent architectural language would result.

The priority for my clients, who were migrants from the Sylhet region, was to create as large a mosque as possible to accommodate the already overspilling and growing congregation. They were concerned primarily with volume, and less so with the architectural language. Consequently, I had a fairly free reign with the design, with the client saying that it was my area of expertise. There was therefore very little if any client discussion about the architectural language that I was proposing. When it was finally built, the mosque were pleased with the result, and particularly that it gave them a distinctive presence in the local area with much interest from the wider community.

I deployed a similar approach to Islamic pattern and contemporary abstraction in the mosque I designed in Aberdeen, the Alhikmah Mosque, completed in 2017 [Fig 3]. Through the design stage for this project I was exploring how existing geometric patterns from the canon of Islamic design and architecture could be referenced and adapted to generate a new visual language. I chose an historic Islamic geometric pattern which was cast in concrete to create cladding panels and these formed the main feature of the front façade. Ceramic tiles were individually artist-designed and placed in the centre of each panel, thereby setting up a dialogue between the historic pattern and a contemporary interpretation. The rest of the façade was made up with off the shelf concrete cladding panels and granite blockwork to relate the building to the street and city, which is traditionally built in granite. In this way the architecture of the mosque became a site where the historic and contemporary, and local and global, could negotiate new compositions and relationships, and so through this interplay generate new cultural meanings.

The client for Alhikmah Mosque in Aberdeen had specifically sought me out after seeing the Shahporan Mosque on Hackney Road. He was a successful Aberdeen businessman, who wanted to build a new mosque as the existing mosque was a series of interconnected adapted buildings and was becoming too small and inadequate for a growing and cosmopolitan Muslim community. This mosque project was patron-

led, rather than by a mosque committee who would be minded to keep their congregation placated which generally resulted in a conservative approach to mosque design. The patron was instead able to pursue a more singular architectural vision than a committee, in this case for a mosque that spoke a contemporary language and reflected a British Muslim identity.

Designing the multi-cultural minaret

It was through one of my early mosque projects that the narrative for this article developed. In 2004 the Baitul Amman Mosque in Bethnal Green was operating out of a series of temporary cabins and it sought to redevelop these into a purpose-built mosque. I was duly appointed as architect for this project, and my ambition was that the new mosque should be a *modern* building; a contemporary interpretation of traditional Muslim architecture, that delivered a new architectural language reflecting a mixture of cultures and traditions, as was my approach. I sat with the mosque committee on a number of occasions, and as I made my case for this architectural vision, with drawings and diagrams, the mosque chairman, Mr. Abdul Kadir, thoughtfully turned to me, and softly said, 'brother, we don't want a multi-cultural minaret, like the one at Brick Lane, we want an *Islamic* minaret'.

The chairman was referring to the 29m minaret that was added to the nearby Brick Lane Mosque in 2009, That mosque was established in 1976 by the local Bangladeshi community in Spitalfields in a building that was built in 1743 as a Huguenot church, which then became a Methodist chapel then a Synagogue until its current iteration as a mosque. The minaret, designed by London practice DGA Architects, is a series of stainless steel cylindrical volumes wrapped with arabesque fretwork which glow with changing coloured lights at night. The minaret stands slightly apart from the historic building on its own stone plinth, As much as it is a marker of the buildings Islamic use, it also serves as a piece of street sculpture symbolising a historically multi-cultural area currently branded as BanglaTown to reflect its recent phase of Bangladeshi migration and settlement. The Brick Lane Mosque building itself, with its religious reuse over 250 years, has become synonymous with cultural change and coexistence and has come be seen as the architectural embodiment of a multicultural city.

The mosque chairman, then, was rejecting this *multicultural minaret* for a more explicitly understood *Islamic minaret.* The process that followed involved the passing back and forth of design and counter-design between myself, as the architect with a vision of Muslim identities in diasporic transition, and the mosque committee; a diasporic Bangladeshi community with a vision of a clearly locatable Islamic past. In my proposals recognisable Islamic motifs were abstracted and applied in fragments combined with contemporary modernist-inspired architectural form. The mosque committee reviewed these designs and made suggestions as to how they could be made 'more Islamic' through, for example, the introduction of arches along the facade to disrupt my modernist rationality. These were sketched over the drawing that I presented in a design meeting with the committee. [Fig 4]

My aim was to avoid pastiche, as per my modernist training, and the literal replication of historical reference. I struggled, therefore, to incorporate the mosque committee's desires into an architectural language that would remain, as far as I was concerned, credible, that is to say not attempting to historically replicate, and

so presented further options [Fig 5]. Patiently the mosque continued to put their case forward, showing me examples of the type of building they were thinking of, through other UK examples where traditional domes and minarets had been recreated as closely as possible. I continued to edge towards what might be an acceptable compromise, and the mosque continued to articulate their ideas, this time through a sketch by the daughter of one of the committee member's, of how the mosque should look on the site. [Fig.6]

The mosque treated me with a mixture of support and exasperation through the design process, perhaps unable to decide whether I was unschooled in Muslim architecture, so needed to be made aware, or incompetent. Eventually, we reached a proposal that we were able to agree on, the tropes of traditional Islamic architecture, with arched bays, a dome and minaret, were recognisable and unadulterated enough for the mosque to accept. [Fig 7] Whilst I was unconvinced by the dome and minaret, the pointed arches and material treatment of the facade offered enough distance from any specifically historic precedent and so introduced the hand and enquiry of the designer to be, to my mind, a credible architectural proposition. [Fig.8]

Designs were prepared, planning permission obtained fairly quickly and building work commenced. Early on the mosque committee realised that there would not be enough money to build the dome and minaret, and these were therefore omitted in the final construction. In 2018, after a protracted and intermittent construction period due to the need to raise funds, the mosque opened. It was still incomplete, and it was intended for building work to continue whilst the mosque was occupied, this being a practicable arrangement as work could be completed as funds became available. To date the mosque has been built and is functioning, but is incomplete. The facade is rendered and without the intended decorative cladding that would secure its Islamic character, and the dome and minaret are, and probably will, remain unrealised. [Fig.9]

Modernity, multiculturalism, assimilation and erasure

Is the mosque chairman's rejection of the multicultural minaret a clear sign and assertion of an Islamic identity; an act of self-determination and self-identification, rather than one of segregation as it might seem at face value? As the anthropologist James Clifford identifies, one of the characteristics of diasporas is that they, 'believe they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country', and that therefore they develop an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations. 'Furthermore, diaspora consciousness is produced through identification with world historical cultural and political forces, through translocal or global connections'. The mosque in Britain therefore can be understood as the vehicle through which diaspora communities attempt to identify and connect with historical and global Muslim cultures, placing them in both a historic and contemporary cultural space, and the mosque therefore offers them, 'a sense of attachment to a different temporality and vision, a discrepant modernity'.'[8]

There is perhaps a paradox here in that multiculturalism as UK state policy originating in the 1980s was

[8] Clifford, J 1994 p.312

intended to enable minority communities to maintain their distinctive cultural practices and identities, but that by the 2010s it was being rejected by mainstream politicians on the right, who instead advocated for a more hegemonic idea of Britishness into which everyone was required to assimilate. In this campaign of a unified Britishness, terms such terrorism, loyalty, radicalism, circulated in the mainstream media and were used to enact a process of Othering which was disproportionately focused on British Muslims. The right-wing English Defence League's anti-Muslim rhetoric has been described as a 'rational Islamophobia and a socially acceptable form of racism, 'also common among the media, politicians and intellectuals.'[9]

Through such racist formulations the mosque was cast as alien and foreign, representing a culture out of step with Britishness, with democratic values and unable to exist alongside and indeed within a liberal secular nation. Indeed, in what appears a self-infliction, the Muslim peer Baroness Sayeeda Warsi argued in 2015 for a 'quintessentially British form of Islam', where she opined on mosque design saying that there was, 'no need for a minaret, no need for a mosque to look like it doesn't fit in to its environment. It doesn't need to be like that. I would love for there to be English-designed mosques.'[10]

There is, therefore, a hegemonic pressure from a dominant White orthodoxy to assimilate minorities into its vision and understanding of the world. This is identified by Tuck & Yang as one of the processes of a White desire to erase the 'native' and to resolve the colonial situation, 'through the absolute and total destruction or assimilation of original inhabitants'. (Tuck & Yang 2012). Whilst they write about colonial regimes abroad, the coloniser/ colonised dynamic continues in the post-colonial condition where the 'native' has now re-settled in the coloinal homeland and so continues to be subject to regimes of assimilation and erasure. Multiculturalism, therefore, can be seen as as one such assimilationist strategy; as a discourse formulated n a political and cultural arena to which the mosque community has no access nor were they invited. The multicultural minaret, therefore, becomes a visual symbol of that dominant and totalising cultural vision which the mosque chairman, in his demand for an *Islamic* minaret perhaps instinctively, sought to resist.

In *Race and Modern Architecture*, Cheng, Davis and Wilson articulate how modernity is, as they say, a product of the intertwined forces of capitalism, slavery, and Empire. Ideologies of European scientific progress and rationalism were put into service in the construction of racial difference and informed architectural thought. Architecture responded with historicist frameworks that stressed development in time and produced what they call hierarchical linear chronologies that place non-White human groups at an earlier lower stage of cultural development while representing White European and American populations and their cultural outfits as the most advanced edge of civilization and progress.

The privileging of modern architecture required positioning other building traditions as non-modern, vernacular or primitive. Modernism then served as a philosophical, technical, stylistic and aesthetic movement promoted through educational and professional institutions through which I had been trained and which now placed me in opposition to the aesthetic desires of the mosque community. If my multicultural

[9] http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/57545/1/democraticaudit.com-The_English_Defence_Leagues_rational_Islamophobia_is_a_racist_discourse_but_it_is_not_confined_to_the.pdf

[10] https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/2898/islam-should-have-a-quintessentially-british-version-with-minoret-less-mosques-and-no-burqas-warsi-says

minaret, and abstraction of Islamic references was the embodiment of the modernist project, then this what the mosque *had* to resist this if they were to maintain control over their self-image and identity, just as self-designed mosques across Britain had done. Criticism, therefore, of the 'historicist', revivalist or 'Islamic' mosque in Britain which I was embodying, has its roots in the architectural ideologies of modernity and progress versus tradition and backwardness.

Conclusion

The mosque in Britain is caught between discourses of historicism and contemporaneity and is the vehicle through which debates of regressive versus progressive are played out in architectural form. The historicist and revivalist mosque design has been much critiqued in contemporary scholarship, the architectural historian Nebahat Avcioglu sees it as fixing Muslim identities in a permanent past, writing that such mosques represent, 'worn-out Orientalist clichés of Islam as either unchangingly distinct from the 'West 'or identical everywhere in the 'East'..... a representation of identity which traps Muslim communities in a perpetual state of 'otherness', foreclosing change and distorting reality'.'[11]

The control of the colonial subject through its representation by the coloniser is the basis of much of Edward Said's work, who writes, 'From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work.'[12] I would argue that this contest over the representation of the colonial subject, now the diasporic and subaltern Other, is embedded in this debate between the multicultural versus Islamic minaret. The 'multicultural', in this version, is a western construction of the Other where it is sanitised and domesticated to live compliantly within a Eurocentric logic in which the western world and its colonial legacy maintains political and cultural dominanation. As Gayateri Spivak describes, these are post-colonial strategies that continue the colonial cultural order by serving to;' reinscribe, co-opt and rehearse neo-colonial imperatives of political domination, economic exploitation and cultural erasure'. [13]

The mosque chairman, through his rejection of the multicultural, is resisting the positioning of himself and his community according to a dominant state-endorsed logic. Instead, the chairman, through his assertion of the 'Islamic', seeks a distinct identity that he is in control of, and by which he would like to be identified. So who controls the image of the mosque and its users - is it myself, as a product of the architectural academy, or the mosque committee as the self-designers and builders of their building. Between the Multicultural minaret and the Islamic minaret are a series of overlapping discourses revolving around who is in control of the discursive formations through which identities of postcolonial diasporas are made and articulated. The mosque chairman, through his rejection of this dominant architectural agenda, raises the question of whether the mosque in Britain, marginalised by the artistic academy as being of no value in architectural culture, actually represents one of the most successful and determined forms of cultural resistance to the continued

[11] Avcioglu, N '
[12] Said, E 1978 p.283
[13] Spivak, Gayateri 1988

cultural hegemony of post-colonial formations, and if this is true then it is actually one of the most politicised, and culturally significant, types of architecture in late 20th century Britain.

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