



Opposite left:
William I Chambers,
The Shah Jahan
Mosque, Woking,
1889. The first built
mosque in Britain.
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Saleem.

Opposite right:
T.H. Mawson &
Sons, Fazl Mosque,
Southfields,
London, 1926.
The second built
mosque in Britain,
and the first
in London.
Photo © Shahed
Saleem.

Towards a New Vernacular? The Architecture of the Mosque in Britain

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The mosque has a 130-year history in Britain, from the first built example in 1889 to new mosques being built today. Over this period the architecture of the mosque has both reflected and informed the emergence and evolution of Muslim cultural and religious identity in Britain. Through my 10-year study of, and writing about, this building type and alongside my own design practice, I am asking what a new visual and architectural language of the mosque could be that is responsive to the diverse and complex history of migration, new identities and religious practice in Britain today.

The first mosques

The first mosque built in Britain was in Woking in 1889. *(above, left)* It wasn't built as a congregational or community place of worship, but rather as a symbol or an expression of the Muslim world as imagined through a European gaze. It was built by a Jewish Hungarian linguist, Gottlieb Leitner, who spent his working life in India; on retirement, he settled in England and set up his 'Oriental Institute' in Woking, of which the

mosque was a part. It was very much in keeping with a fashion for the exotic, in architecture, art and literature, through the nineteenth century.

Contemporaneous with Woking was a mosque established in Liverpool in 1889, made from an adapted terraced house. It was initiated by an English convert to Islam, William Quilliam. A local lawyer, he converted to Islam while travelling in Morocco and, on his return to Britain, he opened this mosque. His congregation was made up of English converts who came to Islam through Quilliam's preaching. In the interior design of the mosque he started to introduce influences of North African Islamic architecture.

The next mosque came in 1925 in the London suburb of Southfields, built by a small Muslim community from India. Here the language of the mosque is influenced by the contemporary architecture of European interwar modernism. *(above, right)* The decoration displayed in Woking and to a certain extent in the interior of Liverpool has been stripped away and this building is now much plainer and simpler. There are hints of Art Deco and the dome is very reminiscent

of how Edwin Lutyens was designing in India at the time by fusing Classical and Indian Mughal architecture. The application of these global influences begins to be seen in this small mosque in London.

The earliest settled Muslim communities in Britain were found in port towns: Cardiff, Liverpool, South Shields, and East London. Sailors (or lascars) from Yemen, Bengal and Somalia, working on the Imperial shipping routes, were settling in the areas around the docks. Cardiff's Butetown, or Tiger Bay, became one of the earliest multicultural communities in Britain. Consequently, this is where some of the country's earliest mosques were built. As well as a number of unbuilt proposals, the first mosques took the existing, Victorian, urban, residential syntax or language of the street and altered it, bringing in a new culture, new language, new way of using space.

The first mosque that was eventually built in Cardiff was in 1946, on Peel Street. It was built incrementally: first the terraced house façade was kept, with lattice work replacing the windows and a temporary mosque building created behind. The front wall was then taken down and a new mosque built to replace the houses. This was an interesting and sophisticated way of altering the existing fabric to accrue these inflections of Muslim architecture into the street scene. The eventual purpose-built mosque shows how a completely new cultural language has emerged through these gradual alterations.

The second mosque built in Cardiff was the South Wales Islamic Centre in 1969. Here again you see the continuing exploration of the language of the mosque by referencing and pulling in architectural styles which were contemporaneous at the time, such as the concrete shell roof, the clerestory windows, the circular prayer hall and simple forms which make up the rest of the building with inflections of Islamic traditional design. This design shows an attempt to fuse a contemporary postwar modernism with Islamic architectural history.

In these early mosques we see how architectural styles of the period were being employed and adapted to generate a new mosque architecture in Britain. The combination of traditional Islamic architectural elements with a contemporary architectural language led to the emergence of a new visual and aesthetic language.

Post-war migration and new British Muslim identities

There are two key stages to the architecture of the mosque in this country, which is essentially pre- and post-1947, this year marking the end of British rule and the subsequent violent partition of India. Pre-1947 there were a handful of mosques, then after partition came large scale Commonwealth migration into Britain, and the proliferation of mosque-building across the country.

The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act restricted migration from the Commonwealth into Britain, accelerating the settlement of Muslim communities in Britain. The Act effectively 'closed the door'. It meant that people who were already here had to make a decision, do we stay or do we go back? For those who had already started to build a life here, it would have made sense to stay, and if your family was in India or Pakistan, then you would bring them over to join you. It was therefore after 1962 that Muslim families started to come and settle.

This heavy influx led to the emergence of familial structures. A cultural or ethnic separation within Muslim communities started to emerge, because families were coming from specific towns and villages and recreating the social structure of those towns and villages in different parts of Britain. Alongside this, a re-emergence or revival of religious thinking began with the birth of a new generation; as families grew and children were born, people began to feel it was important to prevent their children from losing the cultural heritage and religion of the family.

A significant moment in Muslim postcolonial diasporic history happened in 1989. This was the year of what came to be known as the Rushdie Affair, when Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa on the author Salman Rushdie following the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses*. It marked the first time that Muslim identity or Muslimness was brought into existence as a distinct category. Before 1989 migrant or diasporic identities were largely discussed in racialised terms; it's really after this moment that the idea of Muslim as a separate religious racial category came about and, with it, the emergence of a new type of Islamic identity. This identity was driven internally, by the Muslim community self-identifying, and also externally, in terms of the way in which Muslims were described by the wider media. The question, for me, is, how has this emerging Muslim identity had an impact or an influence on the architecture of the mosque?

In my research I have observed that from about 1990, this ad-hoc, improvised mosque architecture gave way to the mosque as a distinct architectural and cultural idea, with a much more conscious attempt to control its meaning and identity.

In this period of new-build mosques, the combination of local domestic and historic Islamic architecture, which was present in the – mostly adapted – buildings, is no longer there. Instead an Islamic historicist revival in the mosques of Britain is underway. These new-build mosques are attempting to be fully authentic Islamic buildings, in whatever way authenticity is understood. There is a confidence here, and certainly a more explicit articulation of a certain type of Muslim identity.

At the other end of the scale, there have also been a lot of proposals for modern or avant-garde mosques. These examples remain largely unbuilt, but what you see in these is the rejection of traditional or historicist Islamic architecture in favour of what might be described as more progressive visions.

This historicist vs progressive debate in mosque architecture then becomes conflated with politicised debates about British Muslim culture and identity; that is to say, are Muslims or is Muslim culture forward- or backward-looking; are communities progressive or

conservative; and crucially, do Muslims share 'British values', and do they belong. The architecture of the mosque then becomes a proxy through which these discourses of acceptance or rejection can be visualised. It is within this context, where identity and architecture have become entwined, that my own approach to mosque design is situated.

Mosque design in practice

I'm interested in what happens when, rather than trying to recreate Muslim culture, heritage or history in an exact and intact way, we allow ourselves to refashion or attempt to reconnect with a historical past in a way which contains mistakes; through those mistakes, a creative space opens up and a series of reinventions might happen.

This is a series of drawings, in which I follow guide books on how to make Islamic patterns, but I'm not using rulers, I'm not using compasses or measuring anything – I am not trying to get it right. I leave construction lines in place, and then add my own colouring or pattern, and see what happens through this process of ad hoc interpretation of the pattern. I am exploring the mis-making of these geometries, and seeing what

emerges through that process of inexactness. I'm then interested in how that same process might translate into architectural projects.

For the mosque that I designed on Hackney Road, for example, I was looking at a thirteenth-century Anatolian tile as the basis for the façade design of this mosque. *{opposite, bottom}* The mosque itself was a converted house. There was a single-storey industrial unit which was being used as a prayer hall which we rebuilt. I'm interested in the historical process being fragmented, leaving gaps and spaces that need to be filled. I wanted to take the tile and, rather than replicate it exactly, to reference it in different ways through the building, so part of the tile influenced the façade of the building, while the rest of the tile's geometry is traced through the space of the mosque.

The metal mesh in the middle references the mashrabiyya, fretwork screens, common to Islamic architecture. In my design it is copied from the windows of the first UK mosque in Woking. In this way, the building draws from the global diaspora of Islamic architecture, as well as a global diasporic Islamic history.

In the mosque I designed in Aberdeen, a former industrial unit was adapted and a new build element added to create a new frontage. *{below}* Again, I was

interested in the ways in which you can use, adapt and reinterpret patterns which are well established Islamic artistic traditions. I worked with the ceramic artist Lubna Chowdhary, who designed a series of stars that would be incorporated into the façade of the building. The granite references Aberdeen's local materiality and the concrete panels reference an Islamic arabesque, with the individual stars inserted into them.

As I have described, the mosque in this country has essentially been a self-designed and incrementally built building, combining as-found and Islamic architectural styles. In an attempt to capture this architectural type, I made a series of drawings of partly-remembered, partly-imagined mosque buildings, elaborating on the things that I was seeing in towns across the country. For example, the terraced house and the dome, which sits on the plinth at the end of the terrace; *{p. 84, top}* a kind of urban, Victorian, industrial, residential landscape, becoming occupied or adapted with elements of Muslim Islamic architecture, as people try to reconstruct their religious cultural world. These gradually started to develop into slightly more formalised drawings and paintings. *{p.82}*

I'm interested in whether these drawing studies offer us a language for an architecture of the mosque

Shahed Saleem, Shahporan Mosque East London, 2013.
Photo © Shahed Saleem.



Shahed Saleem, Aberdeen Mosque, Aberdeen, 2016.
Photo © Shahed Saleem.





Shahed Saleem, 'Fieldwork' sketch of a mosque, as it is embedded in the local townscape. Image © Shahed Saleem.



in Britain. The question of what the architecture of the mosque in Britain should be is a question that resonates and has persisted, certainly since the turn of this century. In these drawings I am speculating on what the mosque in Britain might be if it were to reflect the actual built history of Muslim architecture here. I haven't persuaded anybody to build these yet, but I do live in hope.

I have continued to explore these ideas in a number of projects. The installation for the Victoria & Albert Museum architecture gallery responded to a nineteenth-century model of a mosque in India. My model, which had to be made out of paper, is a combination of different elements from models that are found in the gallery: the Trelick tower, Aldo Rossi's Teatro Mundi, the roof from a traditional Indonesian house, and so on. *(p.84, bottom)* This paper-amalgamated mosque, then, becomes a reflection of the way in which the mosque in this country has been built, by drawing from and adapting the architectural language around it.

The second project for the Victoria & Albert Museum draws on the museum's collection of hundreds

of drawings and paintings depicting the Muslim world as it was experienced by European travellers and artists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The idea is to take the history of the mosque in Britain from 1889 and extend this history backwards, to incorporate the mosque as it has been represented in the European gaze through the colonial period. The European imagination of the Muslim world, and the diasporic imagination of the Muslim world then become a continuum, and this work explores the relationship between the two.

The pavilion, which will be built in the Sackler courtyard of the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2020, is an arrangement of the traditional elements of the reassembled into a new structure. *(below)* These are the key elements that have always circulated through the architecture of the mosque in Britain, and which have remained very important signifiers for Muslim communities as they have made, and continue to make, their new religious and cultural worlds.

This is an edited version of a talk given at the Art Workers' Guild, London, in July 2019.



Above: Shahed Saleem, Idealised mosque designs, drawing on the history of ad hoc mosque design in Britain. Image © Shahed Saleem.

Left: Shahed Saleem, Paper mosque model, Victoria & Albert Museum Architecture Gallery, July 2019. The paper model responds to the model of the nineteenth century Miyan Khan Chishti mosque in Ahmadabad, on display in the Victoria & Albert Museum Architecture Gallery. Image © Shahed Saleem.



Shahed Saleem, Mosque pavilion (concept model), Victoria & Albert Museum, planned for May 2020. The pavilion design encapsulates the history of the mosque in Britain. Image © Shahed Saleem.