Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The London Journal

A Review of Metropolitan Society Past and Present

ISSN: 0305-8034 (Print) 1749-6322 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/yldn20

ReOrientalism: Representing London's Muslim History Through its Adapted Mosques

Nur Sobers-Khan & Shahed Saleem

To cite this article: Nur Sobers-Khan & Shahed Saleem (2025) ReOrientalism: Representing London's Muslim History Through its Adapted Mosques, The London Journal, 50:1, 113-132, DOI: 10.1080/03058034.2025.2479659

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03058034.2025.2479659

Published online: 01 May 2025.

THE LONDON JOURNAL, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring 2025), 113–132

ReOrientalism: Representing London's Muslim History Through its Adapted Mosques*

NUR SOBERS-KHAN
University of Exeter, UK

SHAHED SALEEM
University of Westminster, UK

'Three British Mosques' was co-curated by Shahed Saleem, Christopher Turner, and Ella Kilgallon and exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum's Pavilion of Applied Arts at the Venice Biennale 2021. The exhibition took three of London's mosques, each created through the adapted reuse of existing buildings, and re-created 1:1 replicas of architectural elements from each building for display. Lidar digital scans of each building were also displayed alongside filmed interviews with mosque attendees. The adapted mosques were a semi-detached pair of Edwardian houses, a Victorian public house, and a Georgian church then synagogue. The mosques overlayed Islamic architecture and design onto the existing London buildings, resulting in complex cross-cultural architectural palimpsests. This article considers how this exhibition can be understood within the historical context of displaying Islamic architecture in European museums and galleries. We argue that 'Three British Mosques' subverted this art history by challenging orientalised and stereotyped representations of Muslim interior spaces, characteristic of the display of Islam in European institutions, by presenting instead the quotidian and intimate details of everyday Muslim life. In this way, this article demonstrates that the exhibition asked the viewer to see Muslim life and experience in London as complex, nuanced, and negotiated.

* This article is part of 'London's Past Today', a special issue edited by Aidan Norrie and Robert Shoemaker and published to commemorate the 50th anniversary of *The London Journal*. Readers are encouraged to engage with this theme by consulting the other articles that make up the special issue, which can be accessed at: https://tandfonline.com/toc/yldn20/50/1.

 DOI 10.1080/03058034.2025.2479659

KEYWORDS Islamic architecture; Muslim architecture; mosque architecture; British mosque; Venice Biennale; Victoria and Albert Museum; Great Exhibition; London's Past Today

London is somewhat unique in that its near 500 mosques are spread out across the city rather than concentrated in certain neighbourhoods, as is broadly the case in Britain's other towns and cities. What is similar, however, is that most mosques in London have been created though the adaptation and transformation of existing buildings, with a lesser—though still significant—number being purpose built. These mosques, fashioned from existing buildings, are created through intimate negotiations of space, built fabric, and visual language where spaces are re-shaped from a range of previous uses to serve a religious function and fulfil the needs of newly emerging Muslim communities.

This is a community-designed and -made architecture that is largely overlooked and unrecognised in the design and visual culture of the city. It was therefore a significant moment in art and architectural history when the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) chose the adapted mosque in London as the subject of its Pavilion of Applied Arts at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2021.

This article considers how the display of the London mosque in Venice can be understood within a European art historical context of representing Islamic architecture in museums, galleries, and expositions. It will explore how the representation of Muslim architecture in nineteenth and early twentieth century French and British museums involved the construction of idealised and partly fictionalised interior spaces for display, through which an ideological and cultural positioning of the Muslim world was enacted.

This article argues that, in contrast, the 2021 V&A Pavilion exhibition, titled 'Three British Mosques' and curated by Shahed Saleem, Christopher Turner, and Ella Kilgallon, challenges this history of the idealised and orientalised Islamic space by instead depicting the everyday mosque in London in all of its intimate practical detail. The exhibition featured three adapted London mosques: a pair of semi-detached houses that served as the Harrow mosque in the north-west suburbs until the 2010s; the Brick Lane mosque in Spitalfields, built as a Huguenot chapel in 1743 and reinvented as a mosque in 1976; and the Old Kent Road mosque in Peckham, which started life as the Duke of Kent public house in the mid-nineteenth century before becoming a mosque in the 1990s. In the exhibition, 1:1 replicas of fragments of each building were recreated in lifelike detail and placed around the exhibition hall (Figures 1–4) with explanatory text, filmed interviews of mosque users, and 3D lidar digital scans of each building.

To better appreciate how 'Three British Mosques' marks a shift in the representation of Muslim space, and to understand how London's adapted mosques encapsulate the social and cultural layering that is inscribed into its buildings, this article begins with a description of how these religious places have come into being, before going on to look at the historical context of museum displays of Islamic architecture.

FIGURE 1 Reconstructions of the interiors of the Old Kent Road mosque (centre and right), and Brick Lane mosque (left side object). 'Three British Mosques', Venice Biennale 2021, Installation view. Photo by Andrea Avezzu.

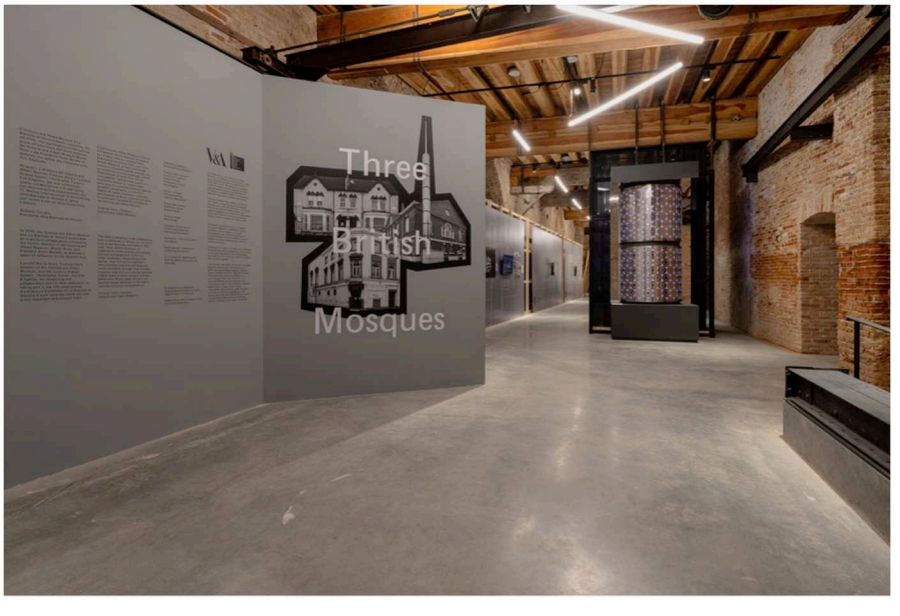

FIGURE 2 Main entrance to the exhibition with the sample of the Brick Lane mosque minaret. Photo by Andrea Avezzu.

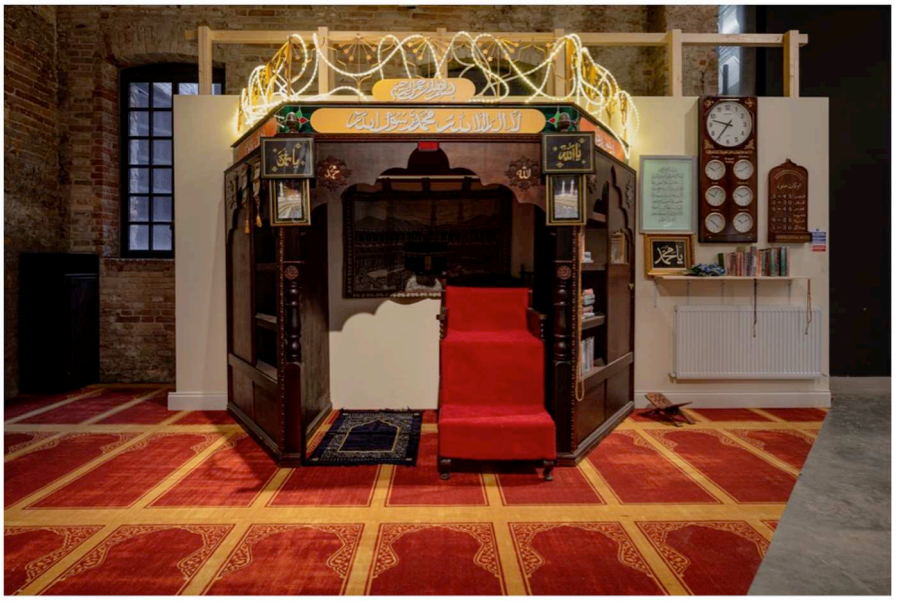

FIGURE 3 Reconstruction of the mihrab from the Harrow house mosque. Photo by Andrea Avezzu.

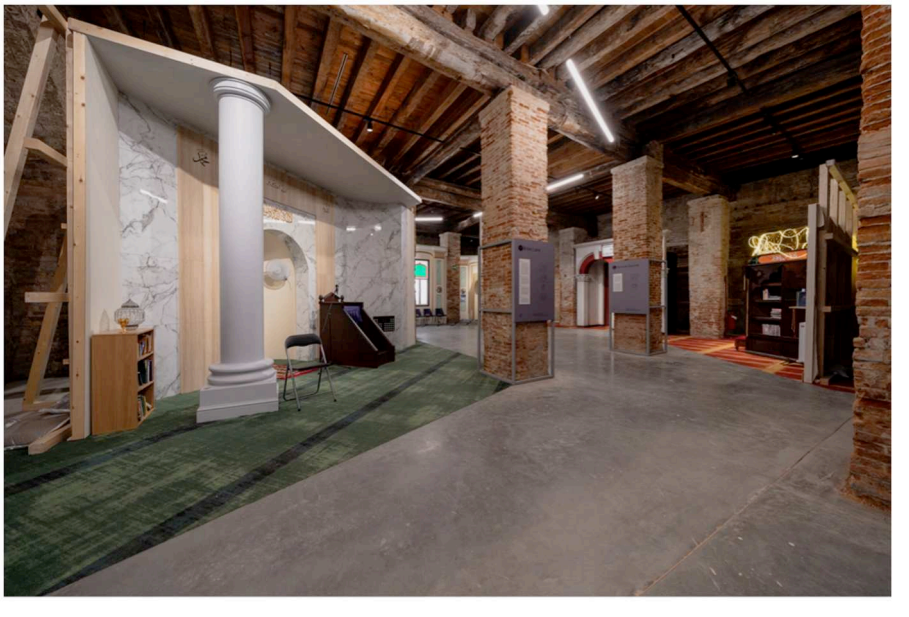

FIGURE 4 Reconstruction of the mihrab from Brick Lane Mosque to the left. Photo by Andrea Avezzu.

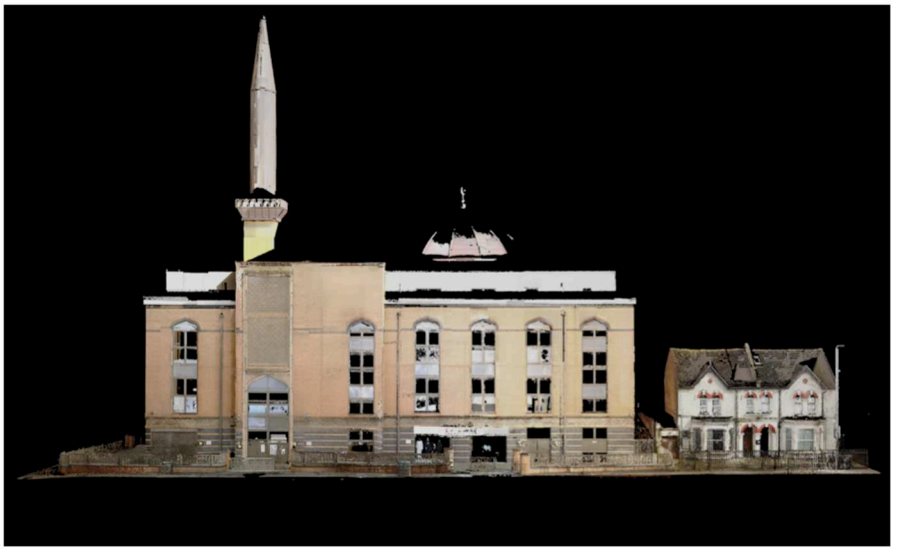

FIGURE 5 A 3D Lidar scan of Harrow Central Mosque, which was displayed in the Biennale exhibition, showing the 2011 new mosque building alongside the original house mosque that it replaced.

Harrow Central Mosque

Looking from the train heading north out of Euston station, Harrow Central mosque looms large on in the landscape of tightly packed two-story terraced or semi-detached houses. The mosque replaces four houses built in the late nineteenth century, when Wealdstone was a cluster of streets emerging around the new railway and Harrow and Wealdstone station.

The mosque, a five-storey buff brick monolith opened in 2011 (Figure 5), dwarfs neighbouring houses, with an Ottoman style zinc clad dome and minaret providing a distinctive marker in the townscape and denoting a multiculturality that has transformed London's post-war cultural and urban life. This impressive facility, providing worship, education, community, and a range of social services, is the latest phase of the Harrow Mosque story, which started in 1985 in a pair of semi-detached Edwardian houses, part of the Metroland housing boom. The new-built mosque is immediately adjacent to the two houses, and once the new building was opened they reverted from their religious use back to residential.

In transforming the houses into a mosque, they were altered in incremental fragments to facilitate religious use so that both the domestic and religious resonated in the hybrid space that was created. There is no formal sanctification of Muslim worship spaces, so sacralisation comes about through daily use and the piecemeal physical adaptations that enable that use to take place.

The hallway, once used for the daily comings and goings of family life, became a public entrance and was lined with shelves for the shoes of worshippers. The staircase, once leading to bedrooms, was signposted for prayer halls or women's spaces, along with the paraphernalia of fire safety notices and installations, room

labels, directional signs, and community notices. What were domestic bathrooms or toilets were adapted to provide facilities for ablution before prayer. The bath was removed and replaced with a series of taps and seats to enable as many people as possible to wash for worship, so while the remnants of a family bathroom remained in the scale and positioning of the room on a first-floor landing, its refit spoke of communal gathering.

Dramatic changes were made to the formal arrangements of the house where once separate rooms, designated for living or dining, were combined to create collective prayer spaces. Party walls between the two houses, in the downstairs dining rooms to the rear of the house and upstairs front facing bedrooms, were knocked through. The syntax of domestic spaces from living rooms at the front of the house for receiving guests, with their importance magnified by the bay window, to private kitchens at the back leading to the garden, was transformed into one singular prayer space winding its way through this domestic frame and unifying it into one use. Internal walls were removed as much as possible in this attempt to turn the cellular domestic layout into an expansive religious one. But traces of the domestic always remained, in the dado rails, the skirting boards, the positions of ceiling lights still serving the rooms that have gone, and what had become the awkward position of doors.

Perhaps the most profound alteration, however, which is also the singular sacred move of a mosque, is the orientation. Prayer must be performed in the direction of Mecca, which is approximately south easterly from London. In most cases, this is at an awkward angle within existing buildings, as was the case in the adapted Harrow houses, resulting in the prayer carpet which unifies the spaces being at an oblique angle to the perpendicular layout of the house, resulting in the lines or patterns of the carpet becoming a dynamic form in the space. Worshippers, therefore, found themselves shunted into corners or alongside walls at unwieldy angles as they navigated this new sacred geography within the suburban dwelling.

All of this resulted in a very particular experience of religious space for worshippers, many of whom will have attended the mosque as children and grown up with it as a significant community and cultural space. For others, it may have been the first mosque they came to when new to the country, and so was an important space where they became connected to communities that played a fundamental role in their journeys of settlement. These ad hoc adapted spaces therefore carried great emotional resonance for their users, and as they become replaced with new purpose built mosques that are fit for purpose as institutional public buildings, this intimacy with the adapted mosque only remains as an endearing memory.

How these adapted mosques were founded is not a history that is well documented or archived, as is generally the case with working class and migrant histories, and so must be excavated through oral histories and pieced together from diverse sources. In 2023, one of the founders of the Harrow Mosque, Mohammed Abdullah Qureshi, self-published a history of the mosque. His account of how it was started and transformed into a major civic landmark, along with news cuttings, correspondence, fundraising, and event flyers and other ephemera, constitutes a valuable social and personal archive and record of the institution's history.

Qureshi's description of the founding of the mosque profoundly conveys the grass-roots endeavour that such projects were, including accounts of how funds were raised by men donating their whole salaries and women selling their jewellery.[1] He originated from an old religious family of Mirpur, Azad Kashmir (near the north-eastern border of Pakistan), and moved to the UK in 1963 where he first worked for London Transport, then the Post Office, before starting his own business—a Halal meat shop in Wealdstone in 1965. Through various business enterprises over the subsequent years, including fitting out a bed and breakfast facility, Qureshi describes how he gained building experience that he could then put to work in adapting the houses into the mosque.[2] The ad hoc nature of these adaptations, responding to immediate needs the mosque faced, is succinctly illustrated in Qureshi's account. The growth of the congregation meant that people were spilling out of the building and praying on the footpath. In response the mosque committee decided to utilise the flat roof of the rear extension for prayer leading to the installation of an iron ladder.[3] Later, the whole of the rear garden was covered over with an improvised roof structure made from corrugated sheeting to transform it into a prayer hall to accommodate the increasing number of worshippers.

For the Biennale exhibition, the mihrab (prayer niche) that had stood in the prayer room of the mosque (Figure 3), adapted from the former domestic living spaces, was recreated along with the pair of entrance doors to the semi-detached houses with their mosque signage denoting the building's transformation.

Old Kent Road Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre

The story of the Harrow mosque, from houses that were adapted in a piecemeal fashion to a purpose built mosque building, is the typical trajectory of mosques in the UK. That is not to say that every mosque in an adapted building will eventually evolve into a purpose built facility, but rather the archetypal journey for built mosques will have been through this step-by-step process.

The second mosque in the exhibition was that of London's Nigerian Muslim community, created through the adaptation of a former Victorian public house on the Old Kent Road (Figure 6). *Layers of London*, a crowd-sourced online project where members of the public contribute historical information about sites across the city, notes that the pub ceased operating in 1978.[4] The Muslim Association of Nigeria UK purchased the building in 1993 when it was being used as a night club and after some rudimentary adaptations the mosque started functioning very soon after the building was acquired, whilst community fundraising continued to enable ongoing adaptation and decorative works.

The building provided two large spaces on the ground and first floor. The first floor hall benefitted from high ceilings and was probably the pub dining room, with the walls adorned with pilasters and elaborate cornices. The ground floor hall had a lower ceiling and would have had a central bar and been the main pub floor. The original doors and glazing to the street seem to have been long gone when the mosque acquired the building, having been infilled with a small

FIGURE 6 Old Kent Road Mosque interior, 2020. Photo by Shahed Saleem.

high-level window inserted in each bay. This served the mosque use well as it provided privacy and security, and the building could be conveniently adapted to create a male prayer hall on the first floor and female on the ground floor. It was particularly fortunate that the direction of Mecca aligned with the long south-easterly wall of the building, so the prayer lines could be arranged to efficiently align with the geometry of the building.

Between 1993 and 1996, the mosque carried out extensive refurbishment works to the building fabric including structural repairs, replacing the roof, installing services, as well as adaptations for mosque use such as providing ablution facilities and creating community and classroom spaces. The only external alterations to signify the building's new religious use were a green painted window and door surrounds and replacement windows that included dome profiles in green glass. The crowning glory of the new mosque was the ornately decorated first floor prayer hall. The existing pilasters, capitals, and cornices were repainted in cream, gold and green and Islamic calligraphic emblems were painted onto the walls. Along with a new mihrab and minbar (pulpit and prayer niche) in the same decorative style and new chandeliers, the hall became a fitting celebration of this new religious space. One of the attendees, Sideequah Salawu, describes how members of the mosque would take part in repainting the prayer hall every year before the fasting month of Ramadan, in a collective activity that bound the community to the building in an intimate and invested way.[5]

As was the case for mosques across London, the congregation grew and the space needs increased. By 2013, another round of upgrading works were required to the building, and after careful consideration the committee decided that it would make more sense to find a new and larger premises. As larger sites in such a central London location were hard to find or beyond financial reach, it was then decided that the most effective route would be to demolish the former public house and rebuild a more extensive building on the plot. Designs were prepared and in 2019 planning permission obtained for the demolition and rebuilding the site with a new six-storey purpose built mosque and community centre, to also include retail space, sports facilities, dedicated community halls and business incubator spaces. Work commenced in 2021 with the demolition of the public house, and the concrete frame of the new building was erected, with progress paused in 2022 to allow for more fundraising, which at the time of writing is still ongoing.

A section of wall of the resplendent first-floor prayer hall of the Victorian building was recreated for the Biennale exhibition, along with the mihrab and minbar whose hand-painted calligraphy and decoration eloquently capture the self-made nature of these religious spaces. There was a poignancy to the timing of events, as the original mosque was demolished while the exhibition in Venice was running, so the recreated fragments on display became a memorial of the religious space made by the community that was now no more as the next stage of the mosque's life was underway.

Brick Lane Mosque

The story of the Brick Lane Mosque in Spitalfields offers another dimension to the story of the adaptive reuse of buildings for religious use (Figure 7). With this example, rather than a single change of a building built for one use to a religious one, the site has been continuously adapted for multiple religious uses over more than 250 years. It was built as a Huguenot church in 1743 in a style characteristic of the period, 'with a rectangular plan, box pews on the ground floor, and deep galleries with seating on the first floor.[6] Rather than expressing itself as a French church, the building instead adopted a Georgian style with its main elevation designed with 'two arched doorways marking either end of a slightly projecting central bay, both recessed into Neoclassical casing'.[7] The first floor contained six large, round headed windows with stone dressings, with a Venetian window on the Brick Lane elevation and oculus above. Both elevations were topped with a large brick pediment, with the Fournier Street pediment containing a sundial inscribed with the Latin phrase 'umbra summus' (we are shadows). This building was to contain numerous religious uses over the centuries, without any external adaptation, partly because of the building's listed status, which it gained in 1950. Indeed, a characteristic of Spitalfields and Whitechapel is that the area has long served as a hub where new migrants to London arrived and settled, before dispersing to other parts of the city or further afield after some generations. Recognising this history, Brick Lane Mosque was

FIGURE 7 Brick Lane Mosque exterior view showing minaret, 2021. Photo by Shahed Saleem.

described as 'Irreplaceable' in Historic England's publication, *A History of England in 100 Places*, and was cited as exemplifying 'the diversity of London, and the way its culture and society have been enriched by a pattern of immigration adaptation and change'.[8]

The first change came in 1809 when the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews leased the building from the church. Subsequently, from 1819 to 1897, it became a Methodist chapel. Some internal alterations and repairs took place during this time, but they were not extensive, perhaps due to the similarity of religious uses. It was with the next use, as a synagogue from 1898, that more substantial internal alterations took place to adapt the space for Jewish worship. This included removing the chapel's organ, refitting the ground floor, and reconfiguring part of the first-floor gallery to accommodate a women's gallery.[9] With the demographic shifts of the East End continuing, and the decline

of the Jewish population through the twentieth century, the synagogue was eventually closed and then sold in 1976 to a local Bangladeshi Muslim group, the London Jamme Masjid Trust (now Brick Lane Jamme Masjid)[10] who henceforth instituted it as a mosque.

Alterations were carried out internally to reconfigure the synagogue for mosque use; in particular, the floors were cleared of all fittings, the gallery was built over except for an octagonal light well around the chandelier, and a new mihrab was installed in the south-east corner. Due to the building's listed status, these alterations reused the fabric of the building where possible, including original wall panelling and doorcases. The upper floors were left as they were with rooms used for classrooms or community purposes. Externally, the building remained unaltered, again due the listing, but the mosque did want to find a way to signify the new religious use. In 1995, they submitted a planning application for the erection of three minarets on the exterior and elaborating the window surrounds with an eastern arch. This was refused and a further application was submitted for a single minaret with two glass fibre finials on the entrance door, which was also refused again citing the special architectural and historic character of the building.[11]

Success came in 2006 with planning approval for an iconic stainless-steel 29 m high minaret structure that would stand separate from the building as part of a Second World War concrete stair enclosure that was to be re-clad in stone as part of the proposal. With the minaret completed in 2010 (Figure 6), this was the signification of the building as an Islamic space that the mosque community had been seeking for many years, showing how significant the external demarcation of the building was to them.

A number of architectural pieces from Brick Lane Mosque were recreated for the Biennale to represent how its historic fabric had been adapted to its new faith use: the new mihrab (Figure 4), the women's prayer room in the building's vaults, a dormer window from one of the classrooms, and the sundial. This selection of architectural elements highlighted parts of the building that had been built by different faith communities, and emphasised how these were all still present in its contemporary use as a mosque.

Representing British Muslim Architecture at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2021

The personal and collective histories and memories of Britain's mosque users and founders has largely remained undocumented and therefore essentially hidden. Over the last decade, there has been a greater awareness of the historical value of the early mosques made by migrant Muslims, as is evident from the publication of *The British Mosque: An Architectural and Social History* by Shahed Saleem and the community-based heritage projects by Muslim heritage organisations such as Everyday Muslim and Muslim History Tours.[12] The value and importance of these social histories in narrating the migrant experience have received recognition institutionally through support from Historic England and

the Heritage Lottery Fund, and with 'Three British Mosques', they were joined by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Saleem came to the attention of the V&A through his architectural work designing mosques in London, and the museum took a particular interest in his design drawings and acquisitioned some of these for their permanent collection. Saleem had been researching the architectural and social history of the mosque in Britain for Historic England, which resulted in the publication of the 2018 monograph. The V&A's director for Design and Architecture, Christopher Turner, considered that this body of work could be used as the basis for the V&A's 2021 Pavilion to articulate architectural and social histories that are otherwise underrepresented in the arts and in national institutions. For Saleem, creating a display about the British mosque and so making visible its intimately social history was a way to progress his work in recording and disseminating the histories of minority communities and so giving them recognition and a place in histories of visual culture.

Historical Representations of Islamic Art and Architecture in European Museums

The V&A has a profound and complex history of collecting Islamic architectural reconstructions that were displayed in world's fairs, and so when the display of these three reconstructed London mosque interiors are considered within the larger history of displaying Islamic architectural reconstructions, it can be read as a commentary—ironic, disruptive, and tongue-in-cheek—on the history of exhibiting Islamic architectural reconstructions in Europe. Turning the conventions of the architectural reconstruction of the 'Oriental interior' on its head, the display of the interior of the British mosques at the Venice Biennale offers a critique and architectural mirror to the culture of Islamic architectural reconstructions that historically served to demonstrate the otherness of Muslims, particularly in the nineteenth-century context of universal exhibitions and world fairs. By appropriating the same strategy of display, namely, the architectural reconstruction of an Islamic interior and its visual culture of eclecticism and ad hoc adaptation of a range of architectural and visual registers, but using this interior to show the lack of exoticism and the mundane nature of British mosque interiors, the display at the Venice Biennale serves as commentary on the history of display of 'Oriental interiors', an ironic half-smile aimed at audiences anticipating fantastic exotic interiors who are met instead with the unpretentious reconstructed interior space of the three mosques.

To understand in more depth the manner in which the 'Three British Mosque' display turns the history of European Islamic architectural exhibitions on its head, it is worth examining the well-studied history of displaying Islamic art and architecture during Europe's colonial domination of large parts of the Islamic world. The display of Islamic art and architecture in exhibitions and museum settings in Britain and particularly London has a lengthy and complex history, a pertinent example being the Whitechapel Gallery's 1908 exhibition 'Muhammadan Art and Life', which featured reconstructed displays of Islamic

architecture that are pure orientalist pastiche dissociated from their original surroundings.[13]

In their discussion of the collecting practices of nineteenth-century Europe and the Middle East, Moya Carey and Mercedes Volait describe the architectural dimension of Islamic art collection as the creation of an assemblage of disparate architectural and decorative elements re-purposed to create an exotic interior: 'diverse fittings, furnishings and salvaged fragments were reformulated as private interior space, and typically the resulting visually-eclectic "themed rooms" consolidated a social identity for collector networks', demonstrating how such imaginative architectural re-creations underpinned European art collectors' fantasies of 'oriental' interiors.[14] In the 1908 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, this was displayed in the architectural reconstruction of a Cairene house, which was described in the catalogue of the exhibition thusly: 'The model is not an exact copy of any ancient building, destroyed or existing, but an endeavour has been made to infuse into the arrangement as much of the spirit of Saracenic architecture as is possible with constructional materials.'[15] While it was not an accurate rendering, the interior played to notions of exoticism amongst European exhibition-goers, and drew on a method of architectural pastiche, as outlined by Carey and Volait, relying on 'infusing' the spirit of 'Saracenic' architecture through an 'arrangement' of fittings and materials. Similar exhibitions of Islamic art and architecture followed across Europe, with the 1910 Munich exhibition, 'Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art and Life',[16] which had been preceded by the 'Exposition d'art musulman' in Paris in 1893,[17] and comparable colonial initiatives on the art of the colonies taking place across Europe. Influential and large-scale exhibitions displaying Islamic art and architecture through an orientalist framework continued up to and including the World of Islam Festival in London, which took place in 1976 and sought to depict the richness of the visual culture and architecture of the Islamic world. Examples of these large-scale exhibitions are manifold and have been studied in detail in the work of Zeynep Çelik, whose research explores the display of 'Oriental' architecture in the world's fairs of the nineteenth century, whereby 'cultural representation' became a 'microcosmic spectacle' by which the cultures of colonies, in particular, were inscribed in the exhibition space for European viewers.[18]

Çelik's extensive research into the framing of Muslims and Islamic architecture in the world's fairs and great exhibitions of the nineteenth century and the intersection with colonialism also demonstrates how an orientalist framework extended to the display of Muslim individuals themselves in tableaux vivants: 'Muslims were often treated as curiosities in the exhibitions, not so much for any physiological abnormalities as for differences in behaviour, customs, and the traditions they acted out before large audiences in the Islamic quarters built at the fair ground.'[19] For instance, the 1867 and 1900 expositions in Paris featured craftsman on display making filigreed metal jewellery in the Egyptian bazaar, and Tunisian basket and carpet weavers, respectively, with an emphasis on staging scenes of indigenous craftsmanship.[20] Musical and theatrical performances meant to exemplify daily Egyptian, Turkish, and Sudanese life were staged at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, and unsurprisingly, belly dancing featured

prominently in the turn of the century expositions.[21] Not only were the architectural settings of the Islamic world subject to display, but Muslims were also subject to colonial hierarchies and framing within the setting of the universal fair or exposition that intended to order the cultures of the world according to strict civilisational hierarchies. As Çelik elaborates, 'The displays of non-Western peoples at the nineteenth-century world's fairs were organised around the anthropologist's concept of distance. "Natives" were placed in "authentic" settings, dressed in "authentic" costumes, and made to perform "authentic" activities, which seemed to belong to another age.'[22] The tableux vivants of living Muslims in the architectural expositions were fanciful in nature and presented Muslims as opulently dressed—or scantily clad—exemplars of premodern man.

The Museum Display as a Tool of Establishing Cultural Hierarchies

The culture of display and intellectual framework of these orientalising exhibitions through the nineteenth and early twentieth century continue to have a deep resonance in British institutional culture today where Islamic art is collected and exhibited.[23] Exhibitions of Islamic arts today continue to present the essential otherness and exoticism of the arts, crafts, and architecture of Islam, conceptualised as a religion occupying a broad and diverse swathe of the world, encompassing many cultures all of which were fundamentally foreign to Britain. The arts and architecture of the Islamic world were and continue to be represented as fundamentally other and exotic, and therefore of a lesser civilisational and political value, within the context of Britain and Europe's museological cultures and universal expositions. Many of the London-based institutions that currently feature Islamic galleries maintain the colonialist construction of what constitutes 'Islamic art', and several of the exhibitions staged in recent years reify the tropes of the luxurious and decadent East; as an example, the recent 'The Great Mughals: Art, Architecture and Opulence' staged at the V&A between October 2024 and May 2025 is an excellent example of the persistence of orientalist framings of Islamic history and architecture through an orientalist lens until the present day.[24]

Like the world's fairs, the arrangement of the museum communicated a political message about hierarchical power relations between societies.[25] While the art and architecture of the Islamic world may have been displayed as ornate and sophisticated in the world's fairs and other exhibitions, it was nonetheless curated within a framework of distance and difference and organised within a civilisational hierarchy that placed the cultures of the Islamic world beneath those of Europe. As a result of this colonial history of display in the universal expositions, Islam and its arts and architecture, including mosque architecture, was viewed through a fabulous mist of distance and exoticism.

This representation of Muslims and their visual culture was presented as a culture that happens elsewhere, in a distant land, not on the territory of Britain or France

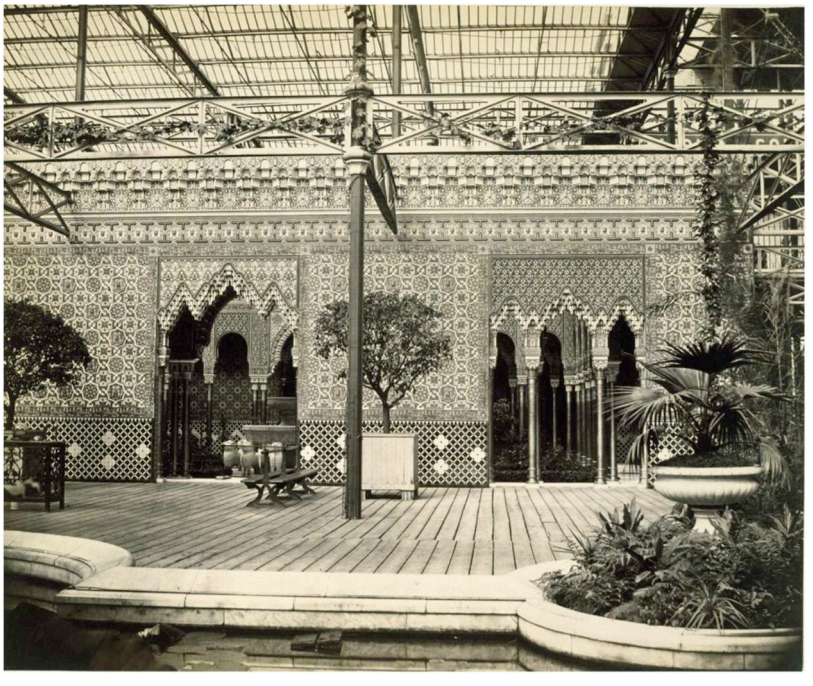

FIGURE 8 The Alhambra Court, Crystal Palace (1854). Photo by Philip Henry Delamotte, V&A Collection, accession no. 38315.

itself. The art historian Saloni Mathur has focused on the depiction of India in London in the latter half of the nineteenth century, including displays of 'picturesque' landscapes of professional artists who travelled to India at the beginning of the century to create paintings of exotic landscapes for London viewers, under the patronage of the British governor-general of Bengal, Warren Hastings, later to be displayed at the Royal Academy. In particular, the popular book of aquatint engravings entitled 'Oriental Scenery' (1795–1807), included depictions of 'temples, mosques, tombs, and palaces', and set the scene for the British imagination of its colony as a distant and exotic land.[26] Mathur describes these practices not merely as a harmless exoticism but as a process of identity and subjectivity formation that shaped British views of themselves and the world. Similarly, the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Figure 8), held in the Crystal Palace structure in Hyde Park, put the exoticism and fundamental otherness of South Asian material and visual culture on display, and by bringing traditional crafts and artisanship into conversation with a range of other cultures in the same space, 'rearranged the modern ground for ideas about civilisation, savagery, progress, [and] primitivism', with Indian civilisation and culture situated in the hierarchy below Britain, demonstrating how practices of display can generate and reinforce the contemporary structures of knowledge and politics.[27]

To build their collection of Orientalised architectural interiors, the architectural reconstructions of the Paris universal exhibition of 1878 were collected by the curators of the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A), who purchased

much of the exoticising Islamic architectural material on display. This not only 'fundamentally transformed the Middle Eastern holdings at South Kensington, but pertinently also the manner in which the collections were exhibited: from 1880, South Kensington began to turn towards reconstructions of intimate domestic interiors, such as "Damascus Rooms"', the Orientalising period rooms reconstructing the elaborate interiors of usually Ottoman-era homes from Damascus and Aleppo.[28]

Challenging the Orientalising vision

Returning to the question of the display of 'Three British Mosques' at the Venice Architectural Biennale, it becomes clear how the reconstruction of these mosques' architectural interiors does not obey the aesthetic conventions of the 'Damascus Room' or 'Oriental Interior' with its historicising and orientalising aesthetic. Instead, 'Three British Mosques' serves as a disruption and commentary on the colonial construction of Islamic 'interior' space. With the fluorescent lighting, DIY decorations, unadorned carpets, and the pure architectural and visual utilitarianism described in the publication *British Mosques* that accompanied the exhibition, the reconstruction of these interiors flies in the face of the conventions of the historical genre of creating Islamic architectural interiors for European museum- and exhibition-going audiences.[29] That the V&A, with its history of collecting and displaying the Orientalising Islamic architectural reconstructions from the 1878 Paris Universal Exposition, should choose to display the interiors of 'Three British Mosques' at the Venice Architectural Biennale (itself a kind of re-formulated world's fair), serves as an ironic commentary—perhaps conscious, perhaps not—on its own traditions of the display of Islamic art and architecture. The visual eclecticism of the utilitarian architectural features of the British Mosques exhibition, using terms such as 'piecemeal', 'ad hoc', and 'assemblage' to describe these features echoes and also comments upon the long history of visual eclecticism and assemblage of varied architectural and decorative elements used to re-create Islamic interiors.[30] The difference is in the framing. While the colonial history of the display of Islamic interiors frames them as exotic pastiches of Muslims who are fundamentally other, the 'Three British Mosques' display uses the assemblage of architectural elements to emphasise the mundane nature of the 'Islamic interior': it is in London, and whether it takes the form of a terraced house, a re-purposed church or synagogue, or even cinema, or a purpose-built utilitarian space, the mosque is very much situated close by, in London—not in a distant exotic landscape. Furthermore, the Muslims who build and populate the British mosque are not distant colonial subjects with unfathomable customs that serve as a tableaux vivants for the titillation of European audiences, but rather, as Saleem describes: 'Most of these mosques are highly localised, grass-roots community endeavours', very much situated in the urban landscape and social fabric of London.[31]

The layers of historical commentary and inversion of cultures of displaying Islamic art that the 'Three British Mosques' presents to the viewer was, however, not immediately apparent in the exhibition. Drawing on the Orientalising history

of architectural assemblage and reconstruction in European museums, writer and art critic Hassan Vawda problematised 'Three British Mosques' by commenting that the V&A exhibited 'a faux "British mosque" to be put on display for the 2021 Venice Architectural Biennale, with institutional pride in the fact that it is including British Islam in its category of "Islamic art and culture."'[32]

Vawda correctly describes the Islamic visual culture generally presented to the western museum-going public as 'anti-modern romanticism' and asks the pertinent question: 'What difference is it in the display of the faux British mosque in Venice to the "Muhammadan" pavilions at the 1851 exhibition?'[33] One response is that the difference lies in the co-option and inversion of the norms of displaying Islamic architectural interiors: using the same methods of assemblage of diverse architectural and decorative elements that were used in the nineteenth-century colonial exhibitions, the 'Three British Mosques' display instead gives the visitor the everyday, piecemeal, utilitarian, ad hoc, and un-romantic interiors of the mosques of London that fly in the face of the orientalist romanticism that, based on previous experience, the museum-goer might anticipate from a re-creation of Islamic architecture for a museum display. The appropriation and inversion of the history of methods of display, and disruption of the expectations of the western museum-going audience who anticipate the exoticism of the 'Damascus room', draw a subtle critique and commentary on the othering of Muslims through colonial methods of the display of Islamic art and architecture and reverses these norms through the display of entirely unanticipated, unromantic interiors meant to serve the spiritual and practical needs of Muslims firmly situated in the landscape of London.

It is not possible to know how many Londoners, and indeed Muslim Londoners, visited the exhibition, but secondary media sources offer some indication of how it was experienced by the latter. One second-generation London Muslim of Pakistani heritage wrote of the exhibition on her social media account:

> So crazy that these beautiful moments would've just been forgotten as old mosques get replaced by shiny modern new ones. This exhibition has made me grow a deep appreciation for the peeled paint and dusty bookshelves in the mosques we grew up in and how important it is for our communities to remember the struggle of Muslims before us in London.[34]

And one London visitor to the exhibition, when seeing the 'Ladies Only Prayer Hall' sign on the Harrow Mosque house door, with its scuffed wood, discoloured brass letterbox, and broken 'push' sign, found herself quite moved as it brought back vivid memories of the struggles of finding women's prayer space carved out of already carved up spaces.[35]

The exhibition castigates the exotica of its predecessors, those displays of Islamic spaces in Western museums that Hassan Vawda references in his pertinent question, and its attempt to honestly represent Muslim experience was recognised in *The Guardian*'s review of the Biennale, where architectural critic Oliver Wainwright wrote: 'Recreated with forensic precision, the stage sets tell a beautiful story of ad-hoc adaptation, documenting a particular moment of grassroots, self-built

places of worship, reflecting the humble majority of the 1,800 mosques in Britain, carved out of old shops, cinemas and pubs.'[36]

While the majority of the 'Three British Mosques' exhibition was stage sets only for the duration of the Biennale in Venice, two of the pieces made their way to London museums for permanent display. The Brick Lane minaret pieces are now installed in the Architecture gallery of the V&A at South Kensington, and the Harrow mihrab is due to be installed in the new London Museum when it opens in 2026. Thus, there is an ongoing legacy from the Biennale display whereby London's mosque history can be experienced by Londoners.

Conclusion

This act of documenting and archiving the vernacular architecture of British mosques on an international and local stage represents an important moment of placing value on an under-represented Islamic architectural heritage that is now indigenous to Britain. By recording and displaying in accurate detail the everyday architectural spaces of London's migrant communities, the exhibition recognises the long and determined process of self-organisation and institution building that these communities undertake. Through this they not only build their own resilience, but also create the webs of cultural and aesthetic lives that make London what it is today.

The mundanity and lack of exoticism in the interiors of the 'Three British Mosques' also provide a commentary on the history of displaying oriental interiors for European viewers. By displaying these interiors in this way in Venice, the implication for London is that all forms of architectural expression are worthy of being archived and displayed as part of the fabric and memory of the city. Where the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century museum displays of Islamic architecture served as an ideological tool to reduce and trap Muslim culture into idealised tropes of premodern aestheticisation, 'Three British Mosques' instead presented evidence and products of Muslim life as it is actually lived in London. This process of documentation and display offers strategies for how aspects of London's past that may be more hidden, or intangible, can be recognised, preserved, or memorialised to more fully represent and record the city's people and histories.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1 Mohammed Abdullah Qureshi, *History of Harry Central Mosque* (London: Qureshi Publishers, 2023), 24.

2 Qureshi, *History of Harry Central Mosque*, 9–10.

3 Qureshi, *History of Harry Central Mosque*, 44.

4 Geof Rossiter, 'The Duke of Kent, 365 Old Kent Rd, SE1', *Layers of London* (2020), https://layersoflondon.humap.site/map/records/the-duke-of-kent-365-old-kent-rd-se1.
5 Conversation with Sideequah Salawu at the 'Art and Christianity Film and Faith' event, 14 October 2021.
6 Rebecca Coffman, '59 Brick Lane: A History of Adaptive Reuse', *Architecture and Culture*, 10.4 (2022), 729.
7 Coffman, '59 Brick Lane', 730.
8 Philip Wilkinson, *A History of England in 100 Places* (London: Historic England Publishing, 2018), 143.
9 Coffman, '59 Brick Lane', 734.
10 Coffman, '59 Brick Lane', 736.
11 Coffman, '59 Brick Lane', 742.
12 Shahed Saleem, *The British Mosque: An Architectural and Social History* (London: Historic England, 2018); 'Everyday Muslim', https://www.everydaymuslim.org/; 'Muslim History Tours', https://www.halaltourismbritain.com/.
13 See: Whitechapel Art Gallery, *Muhammadan Art and Life in Turkey, Persia, Egypt, Morocco, and India* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1908); and Hassan Vawda, 'Museum Islam', *Critical Muslim*, 44.2 (Autumn 2022), 139.
14 Moya Carey and Mercedes Volait, 'Framing "Islamic Art" for Aesthetic Interiors: Revisiting the 1878 Paris Exhibition', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 9.1 (2020), 32.
15 *Muhammadan Art and Life*, 9.
16 See: *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition 'Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst' Reconsidered*, ed. Andrea Lermer and Avinoam Shalem (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
17 Lorenz Korn, 'From the "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" to the Survey of Persian Art: The Munich Exhibition and Its Aftermath', in *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition 'Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst' Reconsidered*, ed. Andrea Lermer and Avinoam Shalem (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 322.
18 Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 5.
19 Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, 22.
20 Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, 23.
21 Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, 24.
22 Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, 22.
23 Nur Sobers-Khan, 'The *Islam in Europe* Exhibition and the World of Islam Festival: Curatorial Aporia and Failure as Methodology', in *Deconstructing the Myths of Islamic Art*, ed. Onur Öztürk, Xenia Gazi, and Sam Bowker (London: Routledge, 2022), 57–76; Nur Sobers-Khan, 'Framing Islamic Art: Explorations in Speculative Museology', *Critical Muslim*, 29 (2019), 227–241.
24 See: https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/great-mughals-art-architecture-opulence.
25 Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, 189.
26 Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 13.
27 Mathur, *India by Design*, 14.
28 Carey and Volait, 'Framing "Islamic Art"', 33.
29 *British Mosques*, ed. Shahed Saleem, Christopher Turner, and Ella Kilgallon (London: Foolscap Editions, 2021).
30 Shahed Saleem, 'Exhibiting Self-Built British Mosques: Between the Digital and the Physical', *Journal of Contemporary Architecture*, 6 (2020), 45–57.
31 Saleem, 'Exhibiting Self-Built British Mosques', 45.
32 Vawda, 'Museum Islam', 137.
33 Vawda, 'Museum Islam', 138.
34 Nabiha Qadir, Instagram story, 15 June 2021.
35 Personal conversation with author.
36 Oliver Wainwright, 'Venice Architecture Biennale 2021 Review – A Pick'n'mix of Conceptual Posturing', *The Guardian* (21 May 2021), https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/may/21/venice-architecture-biennale-2021-review-how-will-we-live-together.

Notes on Contributors

Nur Sobers-Khan is a researcher and curator of Islamic manuscripts, art, and archival collections. She was director of the Aga Khan Documentation Center,

MIT (2021–2022), Lead Curator for South Asian Collections at the British Library, London (2015–2021), and curator at the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (2014–2015).

Shahed Saleem is an architect, author, and academic at the University of Westminster. His writing, installations, and architectural practice explore the architecture of migrants and diasporas. Saleem co-curated the V&A Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2021 and his book *The British Mosque* was published in 2018 by Historic England.