
[Re]Construction of Women's Spaces in the American Mosques

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"No, sister, you can't go in that way! There's a back door around the corner." I can't tell you how many times those words were said to me over the years as I tried to enter through the front door of many mosques around the United States. There seems to be this unwritten, yet nationally recognized and practiced tradition of leaving the worst space in the mosque for the separate women's prayer hall. From collecting funds to replacing the soiled carpet and repainting the chipped walls, to silently walking in the front entrance and ignoring the disapproving glares as they make their way to the balcony rather than submit to the back prayer room turned childcare, through the years I've seen women protest against this dismissive treatment in a variety of ways.¹

The debate of gender equality surrounding the framework of the mosque has been a heated argument for over a century.ⁱⁱ Profoundly, the questioning of gender is ignited usually after Muslims visit the Ka'ba, in Mecca. As the worshippers circulate the "Cube" and fulfill one of the five obligatory pillars of Islam, they are visually connected with the notion of equality in this holy site: "a place of deeply meaningful ritual practice for Muslims and a powerful symbol of parity: gender, race, ethnicity, and class where women and men have historically gathered together for prayer in a shared space. It has been exemplar of the ideal and practices of Quranic fairness – at

the site of revelation" (Badron, 2009, p. 336). Nevertheless, the 1500 American mosques or Islamic centers built throughout the United States have been struggling with this particular issue of gender and space (Haddad, 2006, p. 64). Oftentimes these retrofit buildings raise specific questions about the Muslim-American identity which struggles with the interwoven issues of religion and culture that are brought over from Muslim countries, including: Where do the men stand? How much space is allocated for women, and how can a design be implemented to establish a standard that will exemplify the equality that is essential in the American mosque?

The American mosque is a new type of building that is being developed in the urban context of American society. This new building lacks any historical literature and often finds itself constantly in the absence of the discourse of originality and aesthetic development as it weaves itself into the American context. To understand this "new building type," the emergence of a new theological design vocabulary and programmatic space that is articulated in the architecture, is to first understand the human expression, cultural integration and Islamic jurisprudence that is derived from the users to erect a form. The American mosque is comprised of users that are from various backgrounds: immigrant Muslims, converts, and American-born. Thus, the integration of this syntactical hybrid design is a challenge, and to satisfy all demands more often than not results in a dispute amongst members of the American Muslim community.

The programming of the gender and design space of the American mosque has to formulate in a way that is equivocal to its users. Furthermore, the problem escalates when the elders of the community, who are more fervent and conventional, are pushing for a space that they are familiar with, from various parts of the Muslim world and want to transplant this model to the American context. Therefore, one will find that mosque spaces that are designed in the West are a direct reproduction of similar templates found in Muslim countries from the immigrants' homeland, creating a space that is not necessarily bounded by the religion, but rather is a creation of space that is culturally nostalgic. For example, the Islamic Cultural Center of Washington, DC designed by Mario Rossi plays on the notion of memory: "...Rossi's design for the mosque makes a statement about memory and image, in two principal ways. First, it ignores the American architectural context; it makes no effort to address the prevailing architectural language or the sense of place. Second, it reinforces memory by using traditional crafts and calligraphy that were imported from Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, along with the craftsmen whose skills were engaged in the decoration of the mosque" (Kahera, 2002, p. 69).

This direct emulation of mosques and implementation of designs from other Muslim cultures does not come without problems. After various investigations and research, it is clear that American Muslim women are limited in regards to the space allocated to them in the mosque. The architectural programmatic layout of the mosque creates a design that expresses a "patriarchal ethos: men are accorded the main or central space in the mosque, which they enter directly by a main door, and assume the role of the imam, leading the communal prayer and giving the sermon" (Badran, 2009, p. 336). Typically, a "women friendly" mosque has been designed in a way that forces the women's entrance through a separate door, usually on the opposite end or the furthest distance away from the main entrance. The women are then "regulated to upstairs, downstairs, or adjacent facilities that are often inferior, cramped and out of sight or hearing of the imam" (Badran, 2009, p. 336).

The gender separation that is executed in mosque designs reflects this inequality and limits the opportunities for women's access. Similarly, if the mosque does not completely exclude women's attendance, "the separation in congregational prayer usually relegates women to an inferior place, either behind the male prayer lines or invisible to them in congregational setting" (Wadud, 2006, p. 175). Reformist scholar Margot Badran indicates that "if allowed access to the main prayer space, [women] are typically positioned behind rather than alongside men" (Badran, 2009, 336). Nonetheless, they have yet to surmount the unrestricted separation barrier, in order to allow equal prayer lines of women and men side by side.

Since the historical context does not exist, many architects feel the need to transplant precedents from countries which with they are familiar. Furthermore, the countries that finance these American mosques encourage their own culture's architecture and do not allow for women to participate in the mosque. However, architects, particularly Muslim architects, have neglected their responsibilities in order to avoid any tensions that may arise with the Islamic community as a client. For example, architect Ahmed Mokhtar writes that "males and females pray in separate spaces or in separate zones in the same space. They have segregated access to the prayer spaces and consequently segregated access to the ablution spaces. Females will not pray during the menstrual period which results in relatively less space requirements for them and consequently smaller ablution space" (Mokhtar, 2006, p. 2).

“And they ask you about menstruation. Say: it is an illness or hurtful [adan]; therefore keep aloof from the women during menstrual discharge and do not go near them until they have become clean; then when they have cleansed themselves, go into them as God has commended you; surely God loves those who turn much, and he loves those who purify themselves” (Quran 2:222).

Eliminating women from the prayer space because they are menstruating is a rather weak argument. Modern scholars who interpret the Quran in a gender-egalitarian way such as Asma Barlas argue that there is a misconception about menstruation and the notion of purification in prayer spaces. She states that the “root meaning of ‘adan’ is ‘damage, harm, injury, trouble, annoyance, and grievance.’” Menstruation, therefore, is defined as hurt, an injury and so on, not pollution, contamination or religious ostracization. There are hadiths, or religious traditions, to the effect that “menstruating women may go to the mosque, participate in Hajj, in prayers, and even have the Quran read on their laps, following the Prophet’s example” (Barlas, 2002, p. 161).

Nevertheless, there are a growing number of women who are now demanding their place in the mosque and want equal access to the main prayer space. American Muslim women, and particularly converts, are often well educated in Islam. These women often find themselves at odds with the idea of “various zones in the mosque space. Consequently, the American-born [woman], demands for new accommodations and integration of traditions with modernity within the boundaries of Islam and the American context” (Kahera, 2002, p. 15). For example, women in North America have paved the way for other Muslim women to embrace the “Occupy the Masjid” movement.

One of the leading contributors is Aisha al-Adawiya, an advocate for integration after her own experience of being refused entry into a New York mosque. al-Adawiya is the founder and executive director of Women in Islam Inc., a non-profit organization in New York for Muslim women which focuses on human rights and social justice. Ms. al-Adawiya also represents Muslim women’s non-governmental organizations at United Nations forums. Through the initiative of Women in Islam Inc., many women activists have made an attempt to claim their equal spaces in the mosque during the Muslim congregational prayers. Few moderate scholars such as the Grand Ayatollah Saanaei, an Islamic Cleric whose expertise is Islamic Jurisprudence and issuing religious decrees, applauded the action taken by al-Adawiya and Muslim in Islam Inc.; he encouraged this

notion of equality a decade earlier. In a recently issued fatwa, he states: “There is no problem for the man and woman to stand next to and behind each other, and hermaphrodites/transvestites who are difficult to be recognized as male or female should observe two sexes of male and female while fulfilling the religious rulings” (personal communication, October 2010).

The action for creating a space for women, hermaphrodites, and all genders in the mosques is a bold move. The current generation of Muslim women has been so accustomed to attending the mosque that the participation in the mosque community is part of their daily lives. However, many immigrant women come from cultures in which women seldom, if ever, attend the mosque. This “common” practices, or lack thereof, has been carried over through cultural interpretation and does not confine with modern day religious rituals. For example, the 11th century theologian Ibn Hazm narrated from Abu Hanifa and Malik to discourage Muslim women from attending the mosque, because one might look and be distracted from prayers. Still, religious scholars often refer back to the prophet of Islam, pointing out that the “Prophet Muhammad not only allowed but even encouraged the participation of both women and men in communal worship, [which] had not been the general practice in Islamic societies” (Haddad 2006, p. 62). Rather than implementing the programmatic functions of the Prophet’s mosque that has now been destroyed and does not provide access for women, these zealous attitudes have carried over to modern practices, even in the West, and are being implemented in American Muslim communities.

Many hadith, examples of the Prophet Muhammad, encouraged women to attend the mosque. The mosque of the Prophet was historically used as a public gathering for both men and women. He decided to build his house and mosque at the place where his “she-camel stopped.” The initial phase of the house only consisted of two apartments, but later seven more were added to meet his familial needs. “Each apartment was given to one of his wives, and the rest of the mosque was dedicated to communal use” (Kahera, 2002, p. 122). When the Prophet constructed his youngest wife’s apartment, “he opened the door into the inside wall of the mosque that faced Ayesha’s apartment. The mosque and her room were so close that the Prophet had only to lean his head from the mosque to Ayesha’s doorstep” (Kahera, 2002, p. 122). Thus, the tradition of allowing women and men free public access to the mosque was established by explicit approval of Prophet Muhammad.

Since the Quran never mentions the specific spatial allocation of a mosque, many Muslims rely on hadith. However the Quran points to three explicit examples that are to be articulated regarding the mosque. First, the Quran mentions the prayer niche, mihrab, or sanctuary (Quran 3:37), second, the direction that Muslims are to pray in (Quran 2:142) and lastly, we see that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was able to pray alongside men; God commands her to “bow down [in prayer] with those [males] who bow down” (Quran 3:43). Thus, Mary participates in the congregational prayer with the male members of the community. God accepted her service at the temple despite her gender. “Oh! Mary! God has chosen you and purified you and chosen you over the women of all nations” (Quran 3:42).

Following the scripts of the Quran, we can indicate that women, including Mary, were allowed to pray amongst men. However, a number of zealous theologians and men, argue that the various positions of the Muslim prayer require certain arrangements of the bodies, and that if one does not control the “gaze” during prayer and if others are not appropriately dressed, they can hinder the connection with the Divine and could be a distraction invoking them to “sin”. However, many Islamic scholars have argued that if the standards of the mosque are to emulate Mecca, then architectural space created through the various shapes upon wearing the outer garments, should also adhere to prevention from the “gaze.” Nevertheless, in the Quran it first states that men are to “cast down their look and guard their private parts” (Quran 24:30), then indicating women to “cast down their look and guard their private parts” (Quran 24:31).

I personally believe that it is the architect’s responsibility to create a space that is intriguing, psychologically effective to the users and within the boundaries of Islam, through understanding and researching the Islamic law, history, and traditions; yet push the boundaries to create a “new” and pluralistic architectural vocabulary. American Muslim women, particularly the younger generation, are demanding equality and equal participation in the religion. Hence, in our research while diagramming the various positions taken place during the Muslim prayer, we discovered the line of vision for “sharp macular” indicates versus the “peripheral vision.” Additionally, the position that is the most controversial for both men and women during their prayers is when the body is at a 90 degree angle prostrating and touching the knee, thus then does the “gaze” fall upon the “private parts.” However if the architects were to design the mosque, and were to clearly separate

the space equally amongst the gender per floor, with a circulation space of 20 feet in the middle, similar to that of a church nave, then there is no need for a continuous barrier in the middle.

In the research and investigation that we conducted visiting various mosques throughout the United States and documenting the various architectural elements, we developed a rating system for the community needs that are met in the building. One of the highly vital subjects that were studied was the issue of the “gender neutralization” in which immediate solutions of equalizing the space to meet the demands for the women are to be implemented. Nevertheless, in our research we also concluded that out of the 1500 American Mosques, only 570 of them allowed for women to be in the same space as them men; however, most often they were positioned in the back of the sanctuary, having limited or no access to the imam, leader of the mosque. While 990 mosques in the United States had continuous barriers defined to a cramped dark space that was either upstairs, downstairs, or adjacent facilities and out of sight or hearing of the imam.

Through our survey and with the help of Muslim Women Inc. we were able to develop four criteria’s that all American Mosques are to implement in order to meet the needs and demands of the American Muslim Women. First, the prayer space needs to be equally specified for both genders, regardless of the attendance or lack thereof from the women. Women need to have visual and physical access to the imam and the mihrab, the niche in which indicates the direction towards Mecca. Lastly, there should be no continuous barrier dividing the spaces indicating two separate rooms, rather a “division” that is intact with an “open floor” plan yet meets the desires of concealing the body during the physical movements that happen in Muslim prayers. Besides the church nave emulation, if each row were to have a three foot wall, emulating the church and temple chairs, then each section would be able to “guard their private parts” and the construction of these spaces would be easily regulated through the architectural precedents of the other Abrahamic faiths.

American Muslim women, particularly the younger generation, are demanding equality and equal participation in the religion. These well-educated, professional Muslim women are affirming their faith to the Divine and distilling the Quran and the traditions to a susceptible interpretation that is fitting to the American context. The American Muslim community needs to redirect its precedence to the Ka’ba and the Prophet’s mosque in Medina to engage in the fundamental founda-

tion of Islam, where culture and religion are not mixed. Nevertheless, the religion of Islam is on the forefront of our time. It is a religion which is constantly changing and trying to adapt to the American culture of its time. Mosques in America are an expression and should be a symbol of the reformation of a modern Islamic practice of which should be initiated here in this country.

As the future Muslim American generation grows, we must celebrate that achievement through architecture. American Muslim women have the responsibility of ensuring that the next generations of the Muslim community are familiar with the basis of Islam that is based on a pluralistic and inclusive foundation. They are ambassadors to the inter-faith dialogues that happen in the community and are responsible for future generations. The first step of Islamic reformation is designing an architecture that demonstrates equality through all aspects and is compliant to the American culture.

i "Women in Mosques" last modified November 21, 2010, <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/print/3587/>

ii In 1911, in a conference that was taking place in Egypt, the tradition of the "she-camel" was narrated to campaign for the rights of women in public worship spaces. The woman who was at the forefront of the "legal rights of women who has been denied the right to perform public worship" was Bahithat al-Badiyyah.

iii Imam Muslim reported that Jabir ibn Abdullah said that the Messenger of Allah said: "The best lines for men are the front ones and the worst are the back ones. The worst lines for females are the front ones and the best are the back ones. O ye Muslim women, if the male prostrate themselves, lower your gaze so as not to see their private parts" (http://www.tamilislam.com/english/human_rights/Islamdiscouragewomen.htm).

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