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Europe

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Aesthetics of **Islamic Spaces in Norway**

Take a stroll in the 'exotic' district of Grønland in 'east-end' Oslo, and read the signs at the entrances of anonymous apartment buildings or old warehouses. You are bound to discover that within their premises several of these places accommodate mosques. What makes these places mosques is not their actual shape, but their interior design and decoration.[1]

At present, there are sixty registered mosques in Norway; thirty-six of them are in the capital, Oslo. The number of mosques reflects the diversity of the Muslim population of the country, the majority of which came originally from Asia and Africa. The most common types of mosques are those situated in flats, lofts and basements, and sometimes in detached houses with gardens. Others are to be found in converted schools, warehouses and old factories, or as prayer rooms (*musalla*) in larger architectural units. So far, there is only one newly purpose-built mosque in Norway, that of the World Islamic Mission in Oslo.

PHOTO: ARTHUR SAND, 2000

Masjid Attaouba, a converted school.

The continuity of use of buildings in a city and the discontinuity of their original function is well illustrated by the mosques of Norway. Here, the various Muslim congregations draw upon their cultural and religious knowledge in order to create the kind of place, which, according to their mental maps, constitutes a sacred space. They transform domestic spaces like flats, houses, factories, or schools into mosques. To do this they select patterns and designs based on templates from their original home countries or other known sites and monuments of the Islamic world.

PHOTO: ARTHUR SAND, 2001

Central Jamaᶜat-i Ahl-i Sunnat, detail of the *qibla*.

The central room of all mosques is the prayer hall, and great care is put into its arrangement and in correctly marking the *qibla*. In some instances one has had to re-orient the room in such a way that the *qibla*, which is indicated by a prayer rug on the floor and a picture of the Kaᶜba on the wall, is situated in a corner. Consequently, the prayer lines are oblique with respect to the walls of the room. The walls in most prayer halls are either painted in white or in light green and are decorated with different religious artefacts. The floors are either covered with plain wall-to-wall carpets on which one places the individual prayer rugs or with multi-niched prayer rugs that are placed in rows. In addition, most mosques have kitchens and bathrooms with washing facilities for their members. Several have a library and offer religious instruction as well as mother-tongue and Arabic classes to the children of their communities. A number of mosques have a women's gallery situated either at the back, on a mezzanine of the main praying area, or in a separate side hall. Barriers, like curtains or screens, dividing the main prayer hall, may designate the allocated space for women. From the architectural and decorative point of view, one of the most striking features of spaces in mosques allotted to women is their austerity and the nakedness of the rooms. In most women's spaces the *qibla* is either marked by a prayer rug on the floor, a *kursi* holding a Qur'an, or a photograph of the Kaᶜba and other holy sites. Often, a TV-set permitting the female believers to follow the prayers through video monitors indicates the *qibla*.

Photographs and Islamic kitsch

Like other religious visual arts, Islamic visual arts are used as mediators of religious ideologies. As agents of non-verbal communication upon which societies rely to transmit religious knowledge, they contribute to making religion apparent. Religious art provides the artists and craftsmen with an established catalogue of forms, a sort of common fund of symbols from which they can pick and choose in order to illustrate a given subject. Conformity, however, does allow a certain flexibility and innovation in the organization of details. New technologies, new materials and even new designs and motifs are introduced while remaining in keeping with what is considered an accepted Islamic stamp. To convey the spirit of a coherent Islamic space, Muslim artists and craftsmen in Norway have to find the balance between the reproduction of different regional, traditional models and their incorporation into a novel, transcultural Islamic design. What makes a building Islamic is not so much its form as its intention and function which is expressed by the use of non-architectural means, namely ornamentation. Visualizing religion entails the use of visual topoi and codifying images in such ways that they acquire symbolic and allegorical attributes. The widespread use of photographs and posters in the decorative schemes of Norwegian mosques epitomizes these properties. Representations of the Kaᶜba, the Prophet's mosque in Medina, the Dome of the Rock, the mausoleum of Husayn in Kerbala, and other well-known sites worldwide adorn the walls of prayer halls. The pictures are mass produced at low cost, which makes their dissemination and acquisition quite inexpensive. Photographs and posters of holy Islamic sites may be considered timeless visual glosses where the religious message is condensed into one picture. The use of photographs and posters in mosques appears as a contradiction to the traditional avoidance of figurative art in Islamic visual arts. But today, the omnipresence and banalization of pictures in the Islamic world are well exemplified by the portraits of chiefs of states that are found in all public institutions including on the outer walls of mosques, in shops, as gigantic posters in the streets and, sometimes, even in private homes. Photographs and posters of sacred places indicate the religious importance of their subjects and contribute more to the transmission of religious memory than the unique chef-d'oeuvre, which is historically and culturally bound. The familiarity and monotony of photographic reproductions and of posters give them the faculty of inscribing and incorporating their message deeper and deeper, mechanically and in successive, regular waves. The framed pictures of Islam's holy sites hanging on the walls of a mosque aid in the creation of an Islamic sacred space. The photographic image or the poster encloses and freezes the object. Time seems to stand still, and space tends to disappear. Further, the picture's atmosphere provokes an emotional response in the beholder for whom the depicted monument appears to be within reach. The significance of pictures reproducing Islamic sacred places is often given by calligraphy captions especially on posters whose layout regularly combines photographs, drawings and writing. Moreover, these photographs or posters are usually subject to many forms of manipulation in order to influence the beholder's interpretation and feelings. They are retouched, embellished and glossed. The monuments shown are rendered in an illusive pristine state. Signs of age, rubble and dirt are conspicuously absent from the scene. People represented there are not recognizable persons but crowds, and crowds negate the individual. In the context of mosques in non-Islamic environments they bring forth in the Muslim viewer a sense of belonging to the larger *umma*.

Pan-Islamic artefacts

The decoration of most mosques in Norway consists largely of portable objects. In fact, except in the one purpose-built mosque and a converted school, there are very few fixed features in Norwegian mosques. The use of movable objects in the decoration schemes of these mosques expresses better than anything the flexibility and – so far – the transient character of Islamic sacred spaces in Norway. In addition to photographs and posters there are plates in etched or embossed brass, copper or other metals, wood or ceramics engraved or painted with the names of Allah (normally placed between the *mihrab*, indicating the *qibla*, and the *minbar*, the pulpit), Muhammad (to the left of the *mihrab*), calligrams bearing the mirrored form of *huwa* (He) or a fuller Qur'anic quotation, and one of the four caliphs or sometimes with those of Husayn and Hasan as well. We see costly printed Qur'anic verses and pious invocations set in elaborate, normally gilded frames, richly decorated Muslim calendars, fancy clocks showing the different local hours of prayer and relating them to those in Mecca, prayer rugs and carpets in shiny, silky materials with representations of the Kaᶜba to hang on walls, and miniature gilded mosques. One often finds a Qur'an on a *kursi* beside the *mihrab*. Bunches of rosaries, hanging from pegs on the walls or on pillars, and Qur'ans placed on open shelves are made available to those who need them. *Mihrab*s are often constructed in light, movable material. *Minbar*s are either made of wood and put on wheels, or may simply consist of lecterns or easy chairs. Most of these objects are machine-made consumption goods that can be bought in any shop or street stall catering to such commodities around the world.[2] They are transnational; in fact many are labelled with 'Made in Pakistan', 'Made in China' or 'Made in Korea'. Although they imitate renowned objects and monuments belonging to a common fund of Islamic 'fine arts', these artefacts are neither exact copies nor forgeries. Actually, whether it be a gilded reconstruction of the Dome of the Rock, a heavily retouched representation of the Sultan Ahmad Mosque in Istanbul on a calendar, or a glossy Kaᶜba woven in a silky prayer rug, all show inventiveness and innovation, especially in the treatment of details. These qualities are not always matched with talent and accomplished craftsmanship. The repetitive and conventional character of these artefacts generates a sense of familiarity and nostalgia that remind us of kitsch. Like kitsch, they give a feeling of embeddedness that is tied to the upkeep of traditions and to authenticity. At the same time, like kitsch, they also have a pretence to universality – in this case, one of definite pan-Islamic quality.

Notes

1. Saphinaz-Amal Naguib, *Mosques in Norway. The Creation and Iconography of Sacred Space* (Oslo: Novus forlag, 2001); 'The Northern Way. Muslim Communities in Norway', in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith (eds), *Muslim Minorities in the West. Visible and Invisible* (Oxford: Altamira Press, 2002), 161–174.
2. Gregory Starrett, 'The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo', *American Anthropologist* 97/1 (1995): 51–68.

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