

# Creating an Islamic sense of place: Building conversion and the American mosque

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**ABSTRACT:** As an anomaly within the religious and ethnic landscapes of the United States, the American mosque serves as an intriguing focus from which to understand the construction of sacred spaces and religious identities. In this study, buildings converted into mosques were hypothesized to have a “vernacular intuitiveness” of the essential place attributes of the faith of Islam. These converted places of worship are common in Muslim communities in the United States, yet understudied. This study investigated eight of these mosques in Kansas and Missouri, relying on primary data gathered through site observations and interviews. Comparing and contrasting data from each mosque lead to an understanding towards intuitive and necessary elements to the creation of an Islamic sense of place. This was in large part defined by the accommodation of Islamic ritual and the fundamentals of faith. Differences between the mosques revealed diverse communities arriving at varying answers to these fundamentals as well as to conceptions of gender and the role of ethnic identity. Designing mosques in the American context must include an understanding of Muslim-Americans’ collective soul-searching and the intuitive ways identities are asserted through architecture.

**KEYWORDS:** sacred space; building conversion; Muslim-American identity; Islam in America

## INTRODUCTION

This study sought to uncover the ways Muslims adapt existing buildings into religious spaces in the American context. The focus of this study was important for several reasons. Firstly, converted spaces are pervasive within Muslim-American communities. A study on American mosques found that only 26% of mosques were originally built as mosques (Bagby, et al. 2001, 26). Secondly, converted spaces in the United States have been largely ignored, even in Kahera’s deconstruction of the American mosque (Kahera, 2002), effectively painting an incomplete picture for understanding how belief, practice, and ethnicity determine the creation of places for spirituality and Muslim-American identity.

Lastly, converted mosques can be considered sacred vernacular spaces which are a “direct physical embodiment of a way of worship and of a community” (Rapoport 1995, 32). These mosques tend to lack references to high-style Islamic architecture suggesting that these elements of Islamic design are inconsequential to creating a sacred place. Therefore, understanding how Muslim-Americans negotiate with a preexisting building might shed light on the question of how we embody the sacred in the built environment and, specifically, what is essential for the creation of a place for the Islamic faith and practice of Muslim-Americans.

Having framed this study around stories of building conversion, sacred space creation, essential faith and religious practices, and Muslim-American identity, there were several guiding questions on the necessities of a mosque, the dictates of faith, and the place of practice: How does a building become sacred Islamic space? How did converted mosques address the needs of an anomalous religious community?

## 1.0. THE MOSQUE IN ISLAMIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

Prophet Muhammad, according to Islamic belief the last prophet of the Abrahamic tradition, described Islam as having five pillars (Al-Bukhari, Book 2, vol. 1:50), two of which have a bearing on the mosque as discussed below. These greatly inform a preliminary and necessary understanding of a mosque’s program to guide an analysis of the converted mosques in this study.

### 1.1. Islamic Beliefs and Practices that Define the Mosque

The first pillar is contained in the creedal formula: “there is no deity but God” (The Qur'an, Ch. 47:19). This relates directly to Islamic concepts of God as an un-bodied, immortal, and indescribable deity who is also omnipresent, omnipotent, and concerned with humanity. The core of a Muslim’s relation to this deity is the Qur’anic commandment to develop God-consciousness enacted through submission<sup>1</sup> and remembrance.<sup>2</sup> This requires the mosque to be iconoclastic, because all images come short in depicting God and falls into the category of idolatry.

The second pillar of Islam is the ritual prayers, or *ṣalāt*. It is performed five times daily and therefore has a particularly strong presence in the spiritual lives of practicing Muslims. It requires ritualized movements oriented in the direction of the *Ka’bah*, a cube-shaped shrine located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The principle purpose of the mosque is to establish a place for *ṣalāt* in congregation. It is narrated that the Prophet said: “prayer in congregation is superior to prayer by an individual by twenty-seven<sup>3</sup> degrees” (Al-Bukhari, Book 11, vol. 1: 618). Daily prayers are meritorious in congregation, however, as Katz (2013, 130) points out, “in the case of Friday prayer [congregational worship] is integral to the validity of the ritual.” Friday prayer is the Islamic equivalent to Sunday worship for Christians. The Qur’an, the seminal religious text for Muslims, calls this day “the day of gathering” which emphasizes the communal-aspect of ritual practice (Ch. 62:9).<sup>4</sup>

### 1.2. The Building Program of the Mosque

The programmatic needs of a mosque can be categorized as seen below, all of which can be found in the mosques in this study. This overview reveals some of the ways Islamic beliefs and practices factor into mosque design.

1. Large carpeted space for prayer<sup>5</sup> or *muṣallah* oriented in the direction of the *qiblah*, that is, towards the *Ka’bah* in Mecca. In the Midwest region of the United States, this direction is approximately towards the northeast. The space is gendered and has no fixed furniture to provide room for the required movements of prayer (standing, bowing, and prostrating) and the formation of worshippers in rows. A *miḥrāb* or prayer niche indicates the *qiblah*. The *minbar*, or pulpit from which the *imām*, or faith leader, gives a sermon prior to Friday prayer, is off to the side of the *miḥrāb*.
2. Auxiliary spaces for prayer such as gendered areas for the ablution ritual,<sup>6</sup> bathroom, and interstitial/transition spaces.
3. A *minaret* from which a call to prayer is chanted. In America, the call to prayer is not practiced so the *minaret*, if present, serves as a symbolic design gesture.
4. Gathering spaces for education and fellowship such as classrooms for children, youth, and adults, and occasionally dining spaces and kitchens.
5. Auxiliary spaces for management of the faith community, such as administrative spaces, mechanical rooms, and parking.

## 2.0. RESEARCH METHOD

Eight buildings converted into mosques in Kansas and Missouri (Fig. 1, Fig. 2) were chosen for their respective ease of accessibility from where I am based, the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. Expanding from personal contacts in the Lawrence Muslim community I was able to make contact with other Muslim communities.



**Fig.1.a.** Islamic Center of Topeka, KS

**Fig.1.b.** Islamic Center of Lawrence,

**Fig.1.c.** Islamic Center of Kansas, Olathe, KS

**Fig.1.d.** Islamic Center of Johnson County, KS



**Fig. 1.e.** Bosnian Islamic Center, St. Louis, MO

**Fig. 1.f.** Madina Mosque, St. Louis, MO

**Fig. 1.g.** Masjid Umar, St. Louis, MO

**Fig. 1.h.** Masjid Dar Al-Jalal, Hazelwood, MO

Site visits were documented with photographs and observations of space use and design changes carried out. There were eight primary male interviewees. Three of the male interviewees are *imāms* in their respective communities. Two had served as directors, one had served on an administrative board, and another is a prominent layperson. The eighth interviewee is a contractor and freelance artist who worked on three of the mosques in this study. After preliminary observations and interviews, new questions surfaced and follow-up interviews were done. Many questions surrounding the place of women in the mosque lead to interviewing a ninth person, a woman from the Lawrence community. Questions during the interviews could be divided into two types: the first addressed the building conversion itself and the second inquired about the community.



**Fig. 2.a.** Islamic Center of Topeka

**Fig. 2.b.** Islamic Center of Lawrence

**Fig. 2.c.** Islamic Center of Kansas

**Fig. 2.d.** Islamic Center of Johnson County



**Fig. 2.e.** Bosnian Islamic Center

**Fig. 2.f.** Madina Mosque

**Fig. 2.g.** Masjid Umar

**Fig. 2.h.** Masjid Dar Al-Jalal

### 3.0. FINDINGS

The information gathered through interviews and observations was summarized in Table 1. The information was found to be most easily divided and further analyzed into six different design imperatives relating to the essentials of faith and the differing cultural and interpretive characteristics of each community.

#### 3.1. Adhering to Ideals of the First Pillar of Islam

Spatially, Islamic theology is expressed through the lack of images of the divine. The Islamic Center of Lawrence, a former church, renovated its stained glass window which once displayed a cross. Entrances and prayer spaces in the Bosnian Islamic Center, Masjid Umar, Madina Mosque, and the Islamic Center of Topeka were adorned with calligraphy rather than images to maintain the monotheistic purity of the building. Calligraphy was principally quotes from the Qur'an such as excerpts from Chapter 55 at Masjid Umar and Chapter 103 at the Islamic Center of Topeka.

### 3.2. Defining the *Qiblah*, the Orientation of Prayer

Masjid Dar Al-Jalal and the Islamic Center of Johnson County clearly express that a *mihṛāb* is unnecessary. A prayer rug for the *imām* and microphones for the congregation to hear his voice stood in contrast with more expressive indications of the *qiblah*. Among those mosques which chose to design a *mihṛāb*, the most austere ones were found in the more multicultural communities of the Islamic Centers of Lawrence, Topeka, Kansas, and Masjid Umar. The Lawrence mosque's arched *mihṛāb* stands over the original entrance to the former church and as a result, an entire reorientation of how one enters the building was introduced. The Bosnian Islamic Center and Madina Mosque both referenced traditional designs from Bosnia, appropriately representing the two communities' principle ethnic make-up. In the Madina Mosque, part of the north wall was further modified to run perpendicular to the axis of the *qiblah*.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the carpets in all but the Topeka mosque, whether decorative or not, had patterns which lined up perpendicular to the axis of the *qiblah*.

### 3.3. Creating the *Muṣallah* and the Gendering of Space

The former director of the mosque in Lawrence specifically mentioned *ṣalāt* as the principle purpose of the mosque. This led to the removal of the church pews in the Islamic Center of Lawrence and the Islamic Center of Kansas. The *imām* of the Topeka mosque spoke about the linguistic meaning of the Arabic word often used to refer to a mosque in American-Muslim communities: *masjid*, which means "place of prostration." The *muṣallah* of the Bosnian Islamic Center was originally the theatre room and had an inclined floor which had to be leveled—it was important that *ṣalāt* be performed on level ground, presumably for the practical reality of the ritual movements.

Accommodations for women were important in all the mosques in this study by means of a) a curtain dividing up a shared *muṣallah* or b) a separately-enclosed room especially for women (see Table 2). Following the Prophet's instruction (Muslim, Book of Prayer: No. 881), the original mosque in Madina<sup>8</sup> lined up men for prayer along the *qiblah* wall closest to the *imām* and the women behind them (Kahera, 2002). Only the Islamic Center of Topeka and the Madina Mosque continually utilize this method of gender segregation. The *imām* of the Islamic Center of Topeka spoke about a partial curtain as a compromise for different methods of gender segregation, offering women the choice to pray behind the curtain. In the Madina Mosque, women usually pray in the back of the main *muṣallah*. However, the former safe for the bank was converted into a women's prayer room for the Arab and Somali women in the community who preferred more defined separation.

Women of the Islamic Center of Lawrence community, through a petition, asked for the addition of a separate prayer space. The recent transformation of the former baptism area into a balcony serves as a convenient in-between space for women who wish to pray in the same space as the men but retain a level of privacy. A recent renovation at Masjid Umar replaced a curtained off space in the main *muṣallah* with a women's *muṣallah*. When the women's *muṣallah* becomes overcrowded at the Islamic Center of Kansas moveable screens are installed on one side of the main *muṣallah*, effectively maintaining clear gender segregation.

### 3.4. Creating Communal Spaces

Every mosque in this study utilized the building as a place for community. There were classrooms in every mosque focused principally on teaching the next generation about their faith. Every mosque's main prayer hall was also a flexible space, being used as a classroom and hosting community lectures. The Islamic Center of Johnson County and the Islamic Center of Kansas both lack interior community gathering spaces and regularly transform their *musallahs* into lecture halls and children's classrooms, often utilizing moveable furniture and screens. The Islamic Centers of Lawrence, Topeka, Madina Mosque, and Masjid Dar Al-Jalal all have community gathering spaces which serve as lecture halls and dining areas with adjacent kitchens.

**3.5. Adding Islamic Ornamentation (Table 2)**

Most mosques were ornamented interiorly and exteriorly. They also tended to be less identifiable in definitions of style, mixing architectural traditions and thus come off as *ad hoc*, undefined, and ambiguous (Kahera, 2002).

**Table 2: Ritual Elements and Ornamentation**

	<i>miḥrāb</i>	<i>minbar</i>	foot sinks	<i>minaret</i>	calligraphy	other ornamentation
<b>Islamic Center of Topeka</b>	yes	steps	no	yes	yes	arched entry
<b>Islamic Center of Lawrence</b>	yes	yes	Only women	no	no	n/
<b>Islamic Center of Kansas</b>	yes	ye	yes	no	no	n/
<b>ICJC</b>	no	no	yes	no	no	n/a
<b>Bosnian Islamic</b>	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	carpet, artwork
<b>Madina Mosque</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	carpet, artwork
<b>Masjid Umar</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	carpet
<b>Masjid Dar Al-Jalal</b>	no	yes	no	no	no	carpet, arched entry

The arched elements over the entrances of the Islamic Center of Topeka and the men's entrance at Masjid Dar Al-Jalal appear to be paraphrases of Islamic architecture. The Islamic Center of Topeka has two *minaret* elements ambiguous in style and the recent renovation of Masjid Umar included a short *minaret* on the roof. The *minaret* at the Madina Mosque directly referenced the high-style *minarets* of Bosnia.

Interior spaces varied more in their expression of Islamic design or lack thereof. The Islamic Centers of Lawrence, Johnson County, and Kansas had the least design references to high-style mosques in their *muṣallaḥs*, having simply designed *miḥrābs* and *minbars* (or in the case of Johnson County mosque, lacking them altogether) with plain carpet whose stripes had the utilitarian purpose of indicating where to line up for congregational prayer. The carpets of the two Bosnian mosques were more decorative. The *miḥrāb* in Masjid Umar is decorated with calligraphy and a symbolic lamp. Madina Mosque and the Bosnian Islamic Center both inserted semi-circular *miḥrābs* with ornamentation referencing traditional mosques from Bosnia.

The *minbars* at Masjid Umar, Masjid Dar Al-Jalal, and the Madina Mosque were woodwork ornamented by calligraphic inscriptions from the Qur'an. These *minbars* and the ones designed for the Islamic Centers of Kansas and Lawrence all have the same basic design: a series of steps with railings and a place to sit at the top. The *minbar* in the Islamic Center of Lawrence is not ornamented at all and the mosque in Topeka essentially has no *minbar*, however, several steps were recently added and invoke the memory of the simplistic platform from which Prophet Muhammad gave his sermons.<sup>9</sup> The *minbar* in the Bosnian Islamic Center as well as its indulgent calligraphy was typical of Ottoman Islamic architecture.

## 4.0. DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Sacredness and an Islamic Sense of Place

Through this study it became clear that the sacredness of a mosque is not created by the presence of liturgical objects such as *minarets*, *mihrābs*, and *minbars* as it was not rare for conversions to disregard traditional Islamic architectural elements. These sacred objects reflect historic developments of Islamic architecture rather than essentials of faith and practice (Kahera, 2002; Kuban, 1974). The purpose behind these elements can be fulfilled without them, for example, whereas the *mihrāb* is not required, orienting oneself or the congregation towards the *qiblah* is obligatory.

A Muslim can perform their prayer anywhere provided that it is a clean place. A saying of the Prophet reads: “the [whole] earth is a mosque [*masjid*] for you, so wherever you are at the time of prayer [*ṣalāt*], make your prostration there” (Al-Bukhari, 855, Book 7, vol. 1: 331). The Arabic word translated as “mosque” is *masjid*, which linguistically recalls the act of prostration due to its tri-consonant root *s-j-d*. The addition of the *m-* in this case denotes place. As Kahera (2002) points out, this saying of the Prophet precludes the idea that a mosque is essential to the daily practices of the faith. In the place of a built mosque, the *masjid*, or place of prostration is in effect wherever one prays, an Islamic understanding referenced above by the *imām* of the Islamic Center of Topeka. Before offering *ṣalāt*, one must be ritually cleansed with water which may or may not be facilitated by adaptations to an existing bathroom such as foot sinks. When offering *ṣalāt*, the worshipper must also be oriented towards the *qiblah* which may or may not be indicated in the form of a *mihrāb* in a room which may have just served as a classroom moments earlier.

Converted mosques cannot be considered sacred in and of themselves. They are merely endowed with *opportunities for sacredness* which inevitably challenge us to redefine what “sacred space” means. Ingrid Mattson, an Islamic studies professor and former president of the Islamic Society of North America, comments on the above saying of the Prophet:

sacred space is created by the individual. It's not so much about a particular location, but the action that you do.... I think this is a kind of existential definition of Islam.... What you do creates the sacred time and space. Whether it is prayer, that ritual prayer, or having our encounters with people, giving them, imbuing them with this sense of meaning (Mattson 2008).

Similarly, as Michael Benedikt has it, “God” is what “we bring to life when and as we do good” (Benedikt 2007, xv). On this note of a spirituality in which one’s prayerful attitude and encounters with people could define a sacred space, we return to the common refrain of my interviewees: the mosque as community center. Whether viewed as a spiritual imperative or one of social unity, the “Islamic center” emphasizes the mosque as a *jāmi‘* and not just as a *masjid*. Because prayer can be performed anywhere, there is only one designated place where the community can gather to identify itself as a unified Muslim-American communities. This brings to the surface the necessity for a discussion on ornamentation and expressions of Muslim identities.

### 4.2. Ornamentation and the Essentials of Faith

Mosques can be adapted from a wide range of building types partly because conversions do not require the inclusion of high-style design elements. However, Islamic communities in this study engaged in some form of conversation on inessential aspects of mosque interior and exterior design. These design decisions involved paraphrasing (and occasionally direct quotations) of Islamic high-style elements, designs which would not be completely recognizable to the first Muslims, not to mention the Prophet who figure-headed the religion. Likewise, interviewees never referenced interior and exterior Islamic designs as inherently part of the building as a religious space. The former director of the Islamic Center of Kansas compared the usage of unnecessary ornamentation to the unwanted influence of immigrant culture on religious practice. More relaxed attitudes towards decoration in the Islamic Center of Topeka, Masjid Dar Al-Jalal, Masjid Umar, and the two Bosnian mosques were to create a sense of Islamic and cultural identity. Without being prompted on the matter, the *imām* in

Topeka, indicating the pointed arches and the *minaret*-like elements of his mosque, explained that it was for the purpose of making the building appear more "Islamic;" however, when speaking about the mosque itself, he explained it in other terms, discussing the word "*masjid*" and the importance of establishing a place for prayer and community.

## CONCLUSION

These findings begin to shed light on sacred space creation, essential faith and religious practices, and Muslim-American identities. Concepts of *masjid*, *jāmi'*, and thinking of the mosque as endowed with opportunities for sacredness rather than inherently sacred in itself, are ways of challenging our underlying notion of "sacred space." It reminds us that a sense of spirituality is tied to a ritual, community, and how we inhabit a space rather than the presence of liturgical objects. In addition, the creation of places of worship is not purely a spiritual endeavor. Ethnic identities and identifying with specific doctrines are formative factors.

This study's discourse of essential versus inessential aspects of mosque-creation could lead to questions of how future mosques could more directly address the spiritual needs of Muslim-Americans, especially providing a sacredness that is deeper than mere additive ornamentation. One wonders, as Kahera does in his book, about the possibility of an American Islamic style of architecture which addresses the question of sacredness for Muslim-Americans.

The discussion on essentials, ornamentation, and the inclusion of inessentials point to the way mosques serve as reference points from which to construct, maintain, and assert Muslim identities. It therefore has profound meaning in the United States which is itself a country defined by the complex negotiations of immigrant experience and cultural compromise. Communities tend to reference fundamental Islamic concepts that the whole community can agree on or reach realistic compromises, such as the Topeka mosque's partial curtain. However, conversations between the mosque and the ongoing soul-searching of American-born Muslims presents a layer to this complexity that is far less resolved as changing ideas about spirituality, religion, and gender in American life clash with traditional orthodox dogma and practice.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Submission is the literal translation of *Islam*.

<sup>2</sup> "Remembrance" is a translation of the Qur'anic term "*dhikr*."

<sup>3</sup> In another narration it is twenty-five.

<sup>4</sup> Another Arabic term for mosque, specifically for large congregational mosques in predominantly Muslim countries, is *jāmi'* which means "place of gathering."

<sup>5</sup> This space is often referred to as the *muṣallah* ("place for ritual prayer") to differentiate it from the rest of the mosque.

<sup>6</sup> Ablution, ritualized washing (of mouth, nose, face, hair, ears, arms, and feet) must be done to gain a state of ritual purity to perform *ṣalāt*.

<sup>7</sup> It also created a closet behind the *miḥrāb*. Also, the original building had a similarly angled wall, probably to facilitate the original drive-thru for the bank.

<sup>8</sup> In modern day Saudi Arabia, north of Mecca.

<sup>9</sup> The steps can be seen in the lower right corner behind the lectern.