

**Design Criteria for Mosques and Islamic Centers:
Art, Architecture, and Worship**

*Akel Kahera, Latif Abdulmalik, and Craig Anz
Burlington, MA: Architectural Press, 2009. 112 pages.*

In an area where only a handful of books exist, *Design Criteria for Mosques* is a welcome addition. A follow up of sorts to Kahera's *Deconstructing the American Mosque* (2002), it was hoped that this text would present new

material and a fresh analysis in addition to serving as a guide for design. The five-chapter book covers mosques built in North America and Europe from the early 1920s onwards and incorporates many images and architectural drawings, including many from the author's design office. Several overall issues related to inconsistency, however, undermine its potential. The greatest one is that of voice, a common enough problem when a book is written by multiple authors – the text fluctuates between didactic and spare guide lists for planning and building a mosque to a philosophical discourse on the meaning of each issue related to designing contemporary mosques. The images and drawings could have mediated between the two polarized voices. The use of images, if explained in the text or even in subtitles, could have facilitated the discourse and related the ideas to the guideline lists.

Yet this is not the case, for the images and drawings (of inconsistent quality and often with illegible dimensions) are included in the text's body but seldom referenced in the text. The captions are also non-explanatory, thereby leaving the reader to guess at their relevance to the discourse and the lists.

Chapter 1, "The Synthesis of Form," analyzes the appropriate approach to design and the "occidental" model that could balance the functions, innovative esthetic features, and cultural precedent as "immigrants translate their memories" (p. 10). The authors, however, felt that there was an "Arab-centric" perspective in the design of culturally inspired mosques and that the design would be fragmented if the spatial order, materials, and treatment of space and symbols were not understood (p. 15). They then discuss the West African mosque (the only historical mosque analyzed) as a "more faithful" interpretation of the Prophet's mosque (p. 17). Several drawings (pp. 14-16), exactly reproduced (with a similar argument) from Kahera's *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, are featured. The chapter ends by stating the book's goals: to codify the convention of urban mosque design in Europe and North America, analyze case study examples beyond culture, and discuss the conceptual framework of "sacred" and "profane" in the city.

Chapter 2, "Orientation: Addressing the Urban Context and the Direction to Makka," covers the issue of "fitting" into the site. Despite this, however, the images featured do not facilitate the application or understanding of these ideas because they are unreferenced. This chapter includes many didactic lists of committee tasks (p. 24), site studies (p. 26), site planning (p. 28), site design (p. 29), site amenities (p. 32), lessons for sponsors and designers of mosques (p. 38), and architect selection (p. 39), and ends with the questions that the architect and the client should answer before initiat-

ing the design process. Although the authors give examples of mosques that satisfy the requirements, an analysis, explanation, and references to the images would have clarified the argument so that readers could understand the direction of design.

Chapter 3, “The Design of the Sanctuary (*Musalla*),” begins with the pioneering examples of the Paris and Washington mosques and relates how historical models may, through a profound understanding of space, form, and order, be translated to address the needs of contemporary mosque design in the West (p. 42). Many images are provided, but again the lack of any accompanying discussion or even reference in the text and their inconsistent quality leaves their relevance open to question. As with the other chapters, this one also shifts from discourse to lists, with a number given over to guidelines on how to plan the structure’s area (p. 49), estimate the size of a hall (p. 50) and the parking lot (p. 50), and lay out ablution facilities (p. 51). The chapter concludes with a checklist for various issues to be addressed by the design (p. 51).

Chapter 4, “The Concept of Spaces and Geometry,” delves into the relation to Islam in general and to mosque design specifically. With a grounded discussion in the sacred principles and ideas of geometry, as well as its overall importance to the understanding and expression of Islam, the chapter moves on to analyze those mosque designs that are geometric in nature. Moreover, this chapter has an exceptional inclusion of analytical tables, one for each of the ten mosques featured, each with images and many with geometric analysis of their elements. This compiled material is informative, interesting, and demonstrates the philosophical discourse of religious ideas’ relation to contemporary design. There are, however, no didactic lists from which these geometries could be learned, applied, or focused.

Chapter 5, “The Architecture of Women’s Space,” opens with a brief reading of historical sources and interpretation that, due to its extremely varied nature, produces no singular conclusion. The authors focus on the fact that poorly designed spaces for women are inadequate and unfair to their rights to prayer and breaking down the community that Islam is ideally cultivating via the mosque’s space. The authors’ aptly note that the many of the prejudices in mosque are were rooted in cultural ideas, as opposed to religious precedent, and that the “manufactured absence of women from mosques is an unnatural condition” (p. 74) that can be overcome by including them in the design process. This chapter includes some diagrams of women’s spaces, but without any explanation or comprehensive analysis of the types of spaces allocated (either suitable or unsuitable). It also omits the “to do” lists present

in other chapters. Overall, if there had been guidelines and specifications for chapters 4 and 5, truly ground-breaking material on guidelines for applying and deriving geometry in mosque design and embellishment and for the types and design of women's spaces in mosque would have been provided.

The book's audience will most likely be academics and designers, but either group will have a difficult time mitigating the material that, at times, seems so polarized between theory and practice. Ideally, this book would suit a student design studio centered on this theme. It is a pity that this book ends without a conclusion to tie the ideas and guidelines presented together and to set the trajectory for the much needed work and research to come in this emerging field.

Tammy Gaber (gaber@bue.edu.eg)

Assistant Professor of Architecture, Department of Architecture
Faculty of Engineering, British University in Egypt
Adjunct Professor, Department of Performing Visual Arts
American University in Cairo