

Beyond the Divide: A Century of Canadian Mosque Design

MONTREAL: MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2022, 304 PAGES.

TAMMY GABER

Muslim immigrants first pray in each other homes, and later in the basement of churches and rented premises. They progress to buying an existing building and repurpose it to serve as a mosque. Finally, the fledgling community raises the funds to buy land and build a mosque that reflects both their native nostalgia and aspirations as new Canadians. A century of mosque-building by Muslim immigrants to Canada is such an expatriate phenomenon. However, the “Divide” in the title refers not to crossing the oceans but to another telling subtitle from the author’s earlier paper with the same title: “Women’s Spaces in Canadian Mosques.” The two subtitles, one documentary (book) and the other didactic (paper), vie for the reader’s attention, crossing the genre divide.

An SSHRC funded research project resulted in Gaber spending two and a half years documenting half of the far-flung mosques in fifty-three cities across all the Canadian provinces and territories (save Yukon), photographing the exterior and interiors, drawing architectural floor plans and interviewing members of governance, users and architects. She leaves future researchers indebted to her for this pioneering fieldwork.

In the introductory chapter, she well situates the book among nine others such as Barbara Daly Metcalf's *Making Muslim Spaces in North America and Europe* and Akel Kahera's *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender and Aesthetics*. Given that gendering is such a prominent aspect of her research, one could add a tenth book: Jasser Auda's *Reclaiming the Mosque: The Role of Women in Islam's House of Worship*. The Prophet's original mosque of Medina is introduced as the "hub of the community" (p.3); a theme that is a strength throughout the book. Gaber eschews the term Islamic Architecture and prefers "architecture for Islam" (p.9) for mosques. However, as Islam does not worship (Muslims do), "architecture for Muslims" might be preferable. Exterior designs of the mosques are classified as anonymous, neo-historicist, abstracted historical, and contemporary. The latter category makes it to the cover of the book, and the reviewer fondly recalls its architect Charles Correa discussing its mihrab with him in one of their annual meetings in Bombay.

Gaber notes that while the exterior design "is universally privileged in surveys of mosque design," however, it is the interior design that is "not as celebrated in surveys, but fleshes out a more complete story of how the mosque is used" (p.11). That story is complete only if the architectural promenade is delineated, as the worshipper moves from the street (that may be askew from the Qibla direction of prayer), via verandah, entrance hall, ablutions (a transition that is as essential as it is sensuous) stairways etc. It is in such literal turnings of collateral architecture that the architect hopes the metaphorical "turn to God" takes place. However, the drawings in the book are colour coded with merely two shades denoting destinations (men and women's area of prayer), and not the journey. While this is welcome, the complete story of how the mosque is used by its worshippers, awaits telling with many more colours.

Chapter two, "Pioneering Communities and Mosques in the Prairies" includes Canada's first mosque, Al Rashid, built by the contribution of both Muslim and non-Muslim Canadians and open to both groups for their community activities. As in the Prophet's pioneering mosque, men and women prayed together in the same hall without barriers (but clearly

gendered, with men in front and women behind, in consideration of the Muslim postures for prayer). Among the other mosques included is the exemplary Edmonton Islamic Academy by Gulzar Haider, a pioneer architect of mosques in North America. The main hall includes prayer spaces for each gender and the façade is a large-scale epigraphy of the *shahada* (Islamic proclamation of faith).

Significantly, over a third of the mosques in the book are recycled buildings—former churches, houses, retail shops, banks, restaurants, a funeral hall and even a nightclub. The paramount province is Quebec, which is the subject of Chapter Three: “The Potential of Converted Spaces in Quebec Mosques.” The chief craftsman, Abdel Ali Benlamine, makes his mark with a dramatic before/after transformation in the repurposing of a mundane automobile repair garage with a large skylight with intricate woodwork and Moroccan decorative motifs. From serving the internal combustion engine to sequestering carbon and reducing GHG emissions in its present reincarnation, the repurposed mosque has much to offer to Canadian architecture.

In contrast to the traditional craftsman, is a contemporary one, the windsurfer, snowboarder and dedicated eco-activist and devout Muslim, Sharif Senbel with his repertoire of four mosques in Chapter Four: “The Promise of Purpose-Built Mosques in British Columbia.” Senbel’s mosque designs are “of the place, for the place and for the people” (Ulrike Al-Khamis). The architect works closely with the community. In the Masjid al Salaam, Burnaby, where women were a part of the participatory design process, they still preferred a separate prayer space albeit with a view of the *mihrab*. Their prayer space in the balcony does not impede their participation in the community as they are a part of the governance of the mosque. Indeed, it is the all-male, and all-adult governance that needs to be challenged before architect even comes into consideration.

In Chapter Five: “Mosques as Hubs of Community Space in the Maritimes” begins with the first mosque being built in 1971. Remarkably, all the maritime mosques are predated by a Muslim Cemetery established in Truro in 1935, the oldest in Canada. Typically, the mosques serve as educational centres, sites for celebrations and fundraisers in the gymnasium (the most coveted space for mosque management). The

Ummah Mosque in Halifax has regular open houses, ‘police luncheons’, food drives etc. The Cape Breton Muslim Society Mosque loans out its ample parking lot to the school and daycare as well as, for events, to the neighbouring church (that in turn reciprocates). These are moves typical across Canadian mosques, to a greater or lesser degree. All the maritime mosques played a role in welcoming and orientating new Syrian refugees settling in their new homeland.

Chapter Six: “Orienting Mosques to Mecca in Canada and the Extreme North” gives the history of orienting mosques in Canada from the Mercator southeast to the Geodesic northeast as immigrants on a vast land attempted to face Mecca. The chapter is aptly illustrated with two mosques in the extreme north. The Inuvik Mosque was constructed in Winnipeg and transported across a 4500 km distance via trailer and barge. It has a food bank supported by Muslims across Canada that supports many people in the larger community. The Iqaluit Masjid had its materials brought in by Sealift and constructed on site. The evocative view from the mosque, facing Frobisher Bay, is “seemingly infinite.” (p.161).

The shortest chapter in the book is followed by Chapter Seven, which is the longest and necessitated by the fact that it covers a province with half the mosques of Canada, and also deals with the theme that is the focus of the book, “Women and the Gendering of Mosques in Ontario.” The author classifies gendered mosque spaces as having a full view of the main prayer area, a partial view, or no view while contending that having a direct “visual and auditory access to the main space is arguably the most important architectural aspect of any worship space” (p. 169). This categorization is puzzling. Auditory access is indeed paramount, but not so the visual aspect for an aniconic religion that eschews visual icons. The mosque is devoted to listening (al-Qur’an, after all, comes from *qara’a* meaning to recite). In the realm of invocation, not depiction, vision detracts and hearing engages. God in the Qur’an is always referred to as “the All Hearing and the All Seeing” and “the All Hearing and the All Knowing”. In each instance, hearing precedes seeing and knowing. The single instance in the Qur’an of seeing preceding hearing is in the negative instance of viewing doomsday! (Q32:12). Little wonder then that, while the majority of worshippers in the 1,144 mosques in Mumbai,

for instance, do *not* have a view to the main floor, that has never been an issue as the mosque is regarded as an acoustic receptacle for God's word.

Among the Ontario mosques is one with a dramatic change in usage: a nightclub in Ottawa was turned into Assalam Mosque by the local Somali community. The complex includes educational classes and also halal shops (providing revenue for maintenance). While the women's prayer space has a lattice screen, the women themselves are among the most active members of the Assalam community, in charge of various committees including the one that organises the Friday Prayers that attract 1500 to 2000 worshippers each Friday. They also hold weekly classes and have their own get-togethers at the mosque. Ontario also has several Ismaili *jamatkhanas* (and their derivatives like the Noor Cultural Centre) with their own version of gendered spaces: Muslim men on one side, women on the other, and the imam facing the gap between them. They are exemplars of a sect that worldwide ranges from 0.002 to 0.007 percent of the Muslim population, and consequently has little or no bearing on the trajectory of gendered spaces for the majority of other mosques of Ontario, and indeed the rest of Canada. But the followers of the Aga Khan certainly lead the way in their sensitivity to landscaping, which has traditionally been an *ayat* (a sign of God), and indeed is the term for verses of the Qur'an. A pioneer of such sensitivity was architect Bruno Freschi's *jamatkhana* in Burnaby.

While Gaber's analytical criteria is problematic, she provides insights that need to be taken seriously viz. the more physically cut off the women are from the main hall, the more cut off they are from community interactions; ironic in the Canadian context where genders freely intermingle outside the mosque. The simplest solution remains the gendered space without visual barriers, exemplified by the Prophet's pioneering Mosque in Medina that Gaber too hearkens back to with men in the front and women behind. After all, gender equality in Islam is more of essence than appearance. While theologically asserting gender equality, in practice Islam maintains a distinction. The solution lies as much with mosque governance as it does with the involvement of women at the design stage (regardless of the degree to which the resulting architecture consents to separate spaces). As the author rightly states in the concluding chapter,

“the design of mosques has depended *on the people who gather there*, their needs and their aspirations for their mosque” (p. 223).

The book is copiously illustrated with 306 photos of the exteriors and interiors of mosques along with 135 drawings (including 4 exquisite collages by the author) and 23 pages of endnotes. A map of Canada denoting the mosques would convey at a glance the immense range of Gaber’s architectural journey both as an architect and as a Canadian, and the next edition could include the Whitehorse Mosque in Yukon to complete the Gaber ‘Grand Slam.’ Minor errors could be then corrected, by noting that the oldest Muslim cemetery in Canada is not the oldest in the continent (p. 129), but rather is preceded by the 1928 Assyrian Muslim Cemetery in North Dakota; the restoration of a missing sentence(s) between pages 122 and 123; reversing A4.5 to A5.4 (p. 137) and correcting the leaning on the knees posture in Fig 1.5 so that a “drop of water on the back does not slide” (Muslim: Bk.4, No.1005). Finally, the women worshippers that chose to initiate separate, or curtained spaces, remain nameless in the book, and are not quoted from directly (e.g., Prince George Islamic Centre; IAOS Regina). By contrast, the views of those women that presumably coincide with the author’s views, who object to the separate spaces, are named and have their views elaborated upon (e.g., at the Pioneer Mosque, Winnipeg; IAOS Regina). The unexpressed views of those women in the former group remains a lacunae that could be filled in a future edition.

Given its coverage of Canada-wide mosques and the stories of the communities that built them along with drawing attention to gender issues, Gaber’s offering needs to be in every university and college library, as well in the offices of architects. This is a seminal text of Canadian Mosques and the mosaic of Canadian architecture.

H MASUD TAJ
ADJUNCT PROFESSOR
AZRIELI SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE & URBANISM
CARLETON UNIVERSITY
ONTARIO, CANADA