

THE DOME & THE GRID

WRITTEN BY JERRILYNN DODDS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ED GRAZDA

By 9:00 on this crisp morning the light-filled prayer hall of the mosque at New York's Islamic Cultural Center was already full, and the crowd had begun to form for prayer on the Center's grounds and sidewalks. When the muezzin's call came an hour later, neat lines of men and women stretched further still, filling the breadth of 96th Street and of Third Avenue. The familiar New York City traffic noise was, for a few minutes, distant and muffled. The skyscraper canyons went uncannily silent, and down them resounded the call to prayer. It was 'Id al-Fitr, the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast of Ramadan.

If a mosque can be any place where prayer is performed, then much of New York City became a mosque that February morning. In Flushing Meadow in Queens, more than 6000 Muslims prayed shoulder to shoulder. At the same moment, outside mosques that could no longer contain their numbers, lines of worshipers sat diagonally across Atlantic Avenue and Fulton Street, facing Makkah, the holiest city of Islam. Throughout the city's five boroughs, this 'Id offered a rare sight: the ordered, hushed spectacle of New York's enormous Muslim communities united in public.



As the principal port at which Muslims from nearly every Islamic country enter the United States, New York City is home to somewhere between 250,000 and 400,000 Muslims, the world's most diverse concentration. Immigrants and different groups of American-born Muslims bring to the city such a variety of languages, cultures, professions and political and social concerns that it is only during a celebration like the 'Id that the diversity of the community becomes clear.

In the five boroughs of New York there are more than 70 mosques. A few break the commercial skyline with domes and minarets that declare their difference from the relentlessly Cartesian cityscape. But many are inconspicuous, architecturally demure, almost hidden; many are only interior spaces, entered through storefronts, garages or modest homes whose visual vocabulary blends with the neighborhood.

Whether they present themselves saliently or discreetly, these mosques are always more than mere places to pray: They are the loci of the identities of New York Muslims as members of the *ummah*, the community of the faithful. They are the places where the sense of Islamic community is shaped and nurtured. Architecturally, these mosques foster an image of Islam in an urban landscape otherwise fashioned almost entirely by non-Muslim imaginations.

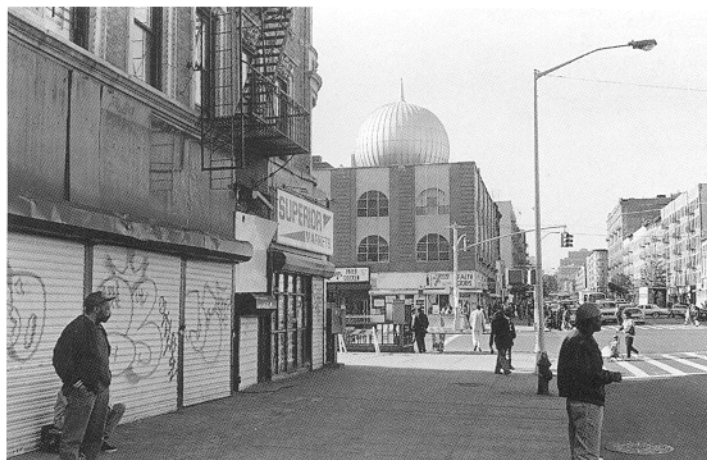
But how can any one architectural space create an identity for Muslims who represent such diverse cultures and languages? And how can any building represent Islam as a distinct way of

life at the same time that it marks a community that is integrated—often well integrated—into New York's secular urban society? Photographer Ed Grazda and I visited more than a dozen of the city's mosques to explore these questions.

The mosque named Fatih Camii (*faht-EE JAHM-ee*, "The Conqueror's Mosque" in Turkish) is hard to spot even as you drive by it on Eighth Avenue in Brooklyn's Sunset Park. Its low, broad, arched facade hints at the building's previous days as a theater. Now, stripped of its projecting marquee, it takes its place quietly in a line of shops. The modest exterior is in keeping with the low-key signage of this commercial neighborhood, and provides very little suggestion of what lies within.

From the lobby, doors open into a voluminous space beneath a shallow stucco dome, lit by an intricate chandelier. This was once the theater's auditorium, and those entering find themselves facing the former stage, now a gallery for women: Separated from the men's section by movable screens, it is now the back of the prayer hall, for in changing the theater into a mosque, the orientation of its principal space was refocused—in this case reversed—toward the *qibla* wall, which faces Makkah.

This wall is the great artistic achievement of Fatih Camii. Lustrous painted tiles imported from Iznik, Turkey, cover most of the wall with intricate, traditional floral patterns and bold inscriptions in Arabic and Turkish. At the center of the wall is the *mihrab*, the prayer niche that identifies the direction of Makkah.



To its right, the narrow stairway of an elegant tile-covered *minbar*, or pulpit, reaches into the room. The elaborate, repeating pattern of the tilework creates a contemplative world divorced from the noise and energy of New York's streets.

"Prayer in New York, as in any other place, is about submitting oneself completely to the will of God," says Imam Hilmi Akdağ, one of the three religious scholars at Fatih Camii. "It helps, here in particular, to have a place where it is possible to shut out concerns with the everyday world."

The United American Muslim Association, which runs Fatih Camii, faced several challenges common to communities seeking to create centers for Muslim worship in New York. The first was to find a space large enough to hold the worshipers, whose numbers range from 400 during normal Friday prayers to more than 1000 during the holy month of Ramadan. Once the space was found and the old theater purchased in 1981, there were other basic requirements to be met. A mosque must be turned toward Makkah, but the theater wasn't. A mosque requires open space, unencumbered by furniture. And a mosque must provide separate spaces for men and women during prayer.

With much effort, the auditorium was reoriented, the theater seats were removed, and a passageway to the former stage was built for female worshipers. Lace-covered screens visually separate men and women. "It isn't a big deal," says a teenaged girl wearing Doc Martens, a headscarf and an oversized Oxford shirt. "It keeps our minds on God."

The tiled *qibla* wall, with its pattern that extends outward—at least in potential—to infinity, exemplifies the central distinction between Islamic traditions of architectural ornamentation and those that dominate in New York. Islamic ornamentation excludes representations of animate beings, which Muslims believe can only be conceived and created by God. New York City, on the other hand, fairly bristles with images of faces and bodies, bold advertising narratives that stare out from

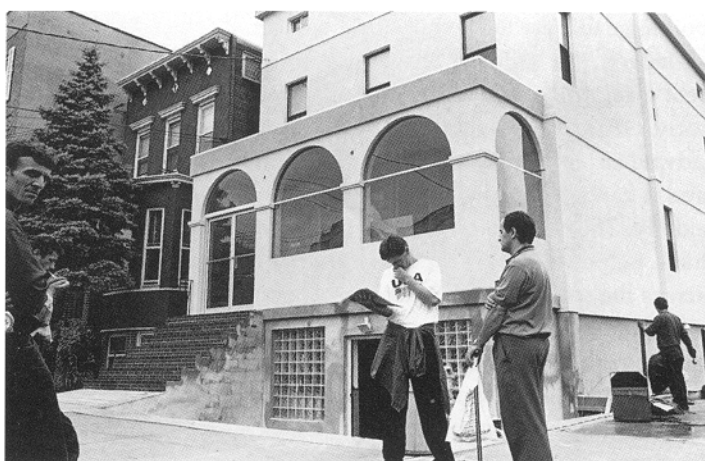
buses, billboards, walls and subways, admonishing and enticing, all seeming to radiate from that enormous outdoor temple to the image, Times Square. Now consider how much power is required to resist such a juggernaut of secular and commercial culture.

At Fatih Camii, the visual challenge of New York is met with a gesture to the potent past of Islam in Turkey. In evoking the traditional arts of Ottoman Turkey, the tiles provide a focus of common identity for this primarily Turkish Muslim community.

But Fatih Camii has touched not only the faithful. Once the mosque was established, other empty buildings in the surrounding blocks also found new occupants, which increased both commercial activity and community pride. "Since the congregation renovated the building and began to function, the entire neighborhood has profited," says Lt. Vincent Fragapane, community affairs officer of the New York Police Department's 66th Precinct in Sunset Park. "The whole strip is safer and more alive."

Today Fatih Camii includes a weekend school for children, a dormitory for visiting students from Turkey, rooms for ceremonies and celebrations, a night school for adults and an office that publishes a magazine that, like the Iznik tiles in the prayer hall, provides a link to the culture that unifies the diverse congregation. Although the mosque association's members are primarily Turkish Muslims, its leaders and members are proud of its international membership. On most Fridays, the *khutbah*, or sermon, is in Arabic, Turkish and English. "There were two weddings here this weekend," Akdağ remarks, "a Pakistani couple, and a Turkish bride and groom. Of course we are all Americans really, but this is a very international congregation in its cultures."

At an *iftar*, or fast-breaking dinner, at Fatih Camii last Ramadan, the men ate in the building's spacious lobby while the women celebrated in a separate area upstairs. "It is good to have a place in Brooklyn where our children can be with other Muslims and know it is not strange to keep such traditions," one mother says. "A building, a real place to be, where they can see and feel our culture, understand our beliefs, and not feel 'different.'"



Welcome to Bosnia's newest mosque!" was the proud, almost playful greeting we received on entering the boxy four-story house in a residential neighborhood in Astoria, Queens. Like Fatih Camii, the Ali Pasha Mosque—one of New York's newest mosques—also reflects the desire to preserve traditional culture in New York, a matter particularly urgent for this founding community of immigrants and refugees.

There is special pride in this mosque: Under Islamic law, mortgaging is not permitted, and thus this house had to be a cash purchase. "We started in 1990, and little by little we raised enough money in the community," says Hasan Delj'aaanin, the mosque's treasurer. "A lot of people were surprised. We did it the proper way, without a mortgage. In New York that is an accomplishment."

Led by a board that includes businessmen, computer specialists and construction workers, the house was converted into a mosque and cultural center, with meeting rooms and lodging for the imam and students. With no sign and no exterior changes, this mosque signals to the street its congregation's desire to blend into its Queens community.

Inside, however, the main entry leads into the principal prayer hall, a full floor clear of room divisions and furniture, ornamented only with small chandeliers and a large photo of Makkah on the *qibla* wall. Upstairs, on the second floor, is the women's prayer hall, where closed-circuit television allows worshippers to see and hear the prayers.

In the main hall, exposed wooden columns support the building's beams, all the wood scrupulously stripped and finished by community members. Carpenter Hamo Huria made a lacquered *minbar* and Qur'an stand, working from his memories of those he had seen in Bosnia, and he is planning to build a wooden *mihrab* in the same fashion.

"This is the style of many traditional buildings in Bosnia and Herzegovina," says the mosque's muezzin as he nails a piece of paneling to the wall of the mosque's unfinished basement. "Many older, hip-roofed mosques look like this on the inside. We

are lucky here. Many of us come from the same village, and a number of us worked as carpenters in Bosnia."

But not all design stems from Bosnia: "We have had help from Muslims from all countries," says Bayram Mulić, imam of the mosque. The wall-to-wall carpet that covers both floors of the prayer hall in a deep red Turkish design was donated by an Egyptian businessman, he points out. "All the ideas for the mosque's design were determined in consultation with the community. Somebody said, 'I will do the stairs.' Somebody else said, 'I will do the painting.' Nobody knew exactly how it would look until the end. So you see, in the end, God did this."

The Ali Pasha Mosque thus reflects the goals of its community: first, to fit gracefully and unobtrusively into its neighborhood; second, to fit into the community of New York City Muslims, and finally to nurture a deeply rooted Islamic Bosnian culture that is still threatened in its homeland.

Mulić believes the design of the mosque's interior may attract Bosnian immigrants and help them find their way back to Islam. "First you need only a place to pray for everyone, not just for Bosnians, but then, if you can, it is important to make the mosque nice, maybe even traditional." He especially wants to reach Bosnians who grew up in secular Yugoslavia. "They believed they could have Bosnian tradition without Islam. But there is no artistic or architectural tradition, no cultural Bosnian tradition without religion. There is no secular tradition that you can separate from Islam."

Sometimes a real down-and-out type will walk down our street," says Assistant Imam Karim Shakur of the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz. "He'll be dragging his feet, his shoulders hunched, but then he'll catch sight of our mosque, and he'll remember how much pride the Muslims have in this neighborhood, and he'll walk tall as he passes our block."

Shakur is not exaggerating the impact of Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque, on the corner of Lenox

Avenue and 116th Street in Manhattan. This traditional mosque with an international congregation is a point of pride for the Muslims of Harlem. Its broad, silver dome interrupts the conventional rectilinear skyline and suggests the existence of options in a neighborhood scarred with the empty lots and abandoned buildings that are the architectural witness of urban despair.

Indeed, the Malcolm Shabazz mosque, constructed in its present form in 1965 and adopted by the Muslim community in the early 1970's, is the center of a lively community that supports the private Sister Clara Muhammad School, a bookstore, restaurants and a range of social services for children, the sick and the elderly. The mosque's leaders, including Imam Izak-el M. Pasha, have helped develop an international market in a vacant lot across the street, a contribution to economic revitalization. Now, they plan to initiate construction of public housing and housing for the elderly on another corner of the mosque's intersection.

Masjid Malcolm Shabazz occupies a three-story brick building faced with panels that frame two floors of large, arched windows. Its plump, onion-shaped dome, though architecturally anomalous, sits on its roof with authority. The dome and the arches are potent visual reminders of the presence of Muslims in the neighborhood, Imam Shakur explains, but they "reflect what people used to think Islam was about. They have more to do with an old-fashioned American interpretation of Islamic architecture than with Islam in general. [That architecture] has served us well, but we are thinking that, in our next mosque, we might turn to West African Islamic forms [See *Aramco World*, January/February 1996], to an architecture that better reflects the background of many in our community."

Though Shakur sees the dome of the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz as a bit Orientalist—that is, as reflecting a Western idea of an imaginary East—the objection dissolves in the streams of light that pour through the mosque's large, arched windows.

Luminous and austere, the open prayer hall's only adornment is the tiny pastel mosaic patterns that cover the slender columns that support its ceiling. These are humbly functional versions of the complex, abstract mosaics that grace mosques in North Africa, Spain and the Fertile Crescent.

"In New York, there are too many distractions," Shakur says. "Distractions from the street, distractions in the subway, the newspapers and billboards. The room in which we pray must be restrained. It can only have light and love. There can be nothing here to distract our minds from God."

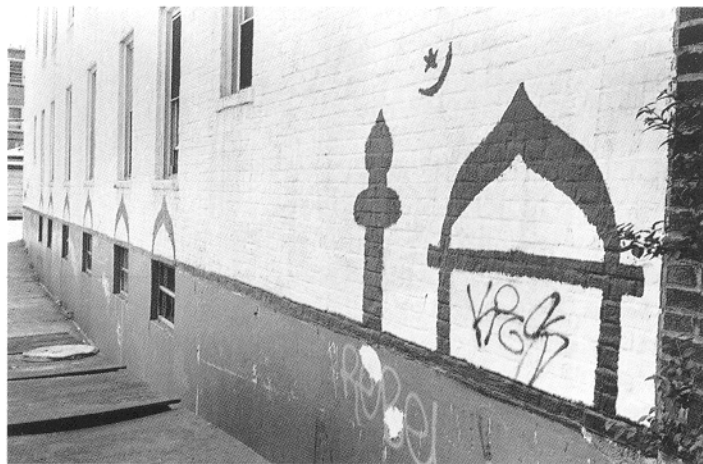
At Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, the dome has come to represent the separate identity of this community of faith within the neighborhood. Unlike the congregations of Fatih Camii and the Ali Pasha Mosque, this mosque does not allow the larger community to assimilate it. Rather, its architecture, dominated by its dome, declares the mosque's difference, and announces the congregation's mission to heal the urban fabric.

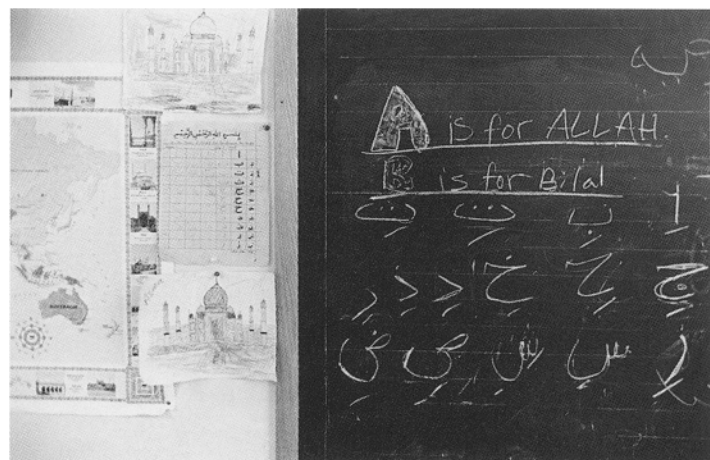
In other New York neighborhoods, the dome is developing other meanings. There are primarily immigrant congregations—many from cultures that do not habitually use the dome in their home countries—for whom it has begun to represent a common identity linking New York's multicultural Islamic communities. Though the dome in America may have been part of a fantasy image of Islam, fostered by theaters and Shriner's halls, it is nonetheless a genuine, abstract architectural form that requires no pictures, signs or narrative to create an association with Muslims of all nationalities. It is there at Masjid al-Falah in Queens, New York City's first building planned and designed as a mosque, built in 1982 by Muslims from Pakistan and Bangladesh. The two-story brick structure has been rotated to face Makkah, and a dome and minaret have been added.

Masjid Al-Bir 30TH STREET, ASTORIA, QUEENS



Masjid Baitul Mukarrum 33RD STREET, ASTORIA, QUEENS





The dome has become a potent symbol even for those congregations lacking the means to construct one. At Gawsiah Jame Masjid in Astoria, a silhouetted dome shape cut out of plywood marks the door of a mosque housed in a small commercial building. The Masjid Baitul Mukarram in Queens is signaled only by a dome and minaret painted on the wall of the alley that leads to its entrance.

At Masjid Al Abidin, the initial purchase of a house led to successive expansions until the present five-domed building resulted. The form of the domes is similar to those found in Guyana, the home country of many members of the congregation, and they therefore play a familiar architectural role: assisting in the retention of a traditional identity.

"But that is not what the dome means," says Imam Sattur of Masjid Al Abidin. "Perhaps these domes remind us of the Dome of the Rock [See *Aramco World*, September/October 1996], or of the dome of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah." So in New York, it seems, the dome has come to evoke not only the histories of individual ethnic groups, but also a collective history marked by the buildings that are at the center of every Muslim's experience. Like the Dome of the Rock, such buildings unite, rather than differentiate, Muslims of diverse cultures and linguistic groups. In fact, the dome is the motif chosen to represent all New York Muslims at the annual Muslim Day Parade, where models of the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of the Prophet appear on floats. Here, architecture becomes a symbol of Islamic presence in the secular world by defining the space in which Muslims come together for prayer.

This notion of the dome as a pan-Islamic form for a heterogeneous Muslim community appears to be behind the coolly geometric dome of the modernist Islamic Cultural Center, one of the largest New York mosques and the one that most emphatically employs architecture to project a strong public identity.

"This mosque was made, in some ways, to receive visitors," says Imam Abdel Rahman Osman, director of the Islamic Cultural Center (ICC)—and during our interview he made a half-dozen appointments for tours of the mosque by groups from churches and synagogues. The mosque was created for an international community, he explains, with the government of Kuwait taking a leading role in its conception and funding. Far from the community mosques that express assimilation, the ICC boldly proclaims the presence of Islam in upper Manhattan, where its elegant domed mass, set on a wide lot, steers a diagonal course toward Makkah. It's in sharp contrast to the boxed, orthogonal grid of the city's streets and buildings.

Designed by the distinguished New York firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the ICC combines traditional Islamic features with Western modernist ones. The building links European and Islamic traditions: The hemispherical dome, the prayer hall's cubical volumes and the etched-glass clerestory panels balance an interest in simple geometry that Westerners associate with the Italian Renaissance with the sophisticated play of complex interlocking geometrical forms common in Islamic traditions. Qur'anic inscriptions in austere Kufic script create labyrinthine and infinite patterns that harmonize with the building's forceful grids to create an intricate meditative decoration.

"At the same time," says an architect associated with the project, "we wanted to work from a rational design philosophy, one which revealed the building's structure. The upper level is almost entirely glass, so that you can understand where the weight falls. The weight-bearing members are solid, but the rest is open and translucent."

That kind of thinking, very much in the European and American tradition, is a builder's viewpoint. For those who pray in it, however, a mosque's design, or the implications of its forms, must not intervene in the relationship between worshipers and God. "The architecture has no meaning, of course," Osman says deliberately. "In prayer, all external concerns must vanish."



As a building, the mosque of the Islamic Cultural Center was thus intended to meet the gaze of non-Muslims. "We are in America now, where people are interested in understanding people through their architecture," says Osman. "This is not really our way. But I think that this can be seen as a new era for the mosque. Since this is America, the mosque should be made in an architectural language that Americans understand. Still, that has nothing to do with Islam."

As a Western-trained architectural historian, I had spent months looking for a unifying meaning that might link each mosque and its architectural forms to various aspects of Islam in New York. Some mosques, like Fatih Camii and the Ali Pasha Mosque, blended into their neighborhoods while others, like Malcolm Shabazz and the ICC, announced themselves. Many had adopted the dome as a pan-Islamic form. But no tectonic form seemed as significant as the words of Imam Osman. They expressed an attitude toward architecture shared by many of New York's Muslims, and they were echoed by every imam with whom we spoke.

The idea was that architecture ought not to be over-emphasized or over-intellectualized, as it sometimes is by those of us

trained in the Western tradition—especially in New York, where the environment is almost entirely architectural. "Please stop asking about architecture," a member of the Masjid al-Falah had pleaded one day. "It is only the deeds of the mosque that count." Whatever image projected by the mosque, he explained, whatever identity its forms seemed to proclaim, the material forms of the building must melt away before the abdication from the world that takes place during prayer.

"When we pray, wherever we pray," Osman reminded me, "we simply do not take architecture into consideration." ●



Filmmaker and architectural historian Jerrilynn Dodds teaches Islamic architecture at the School of Architecture of the City College of New York.



Ed Grazda has taught photography at Harvard University and is the author and photographer of *Afghanistan: 1980-1989*, published by Der Alltag/Parkett.