Creating an Islamic Place: Building Conversion and Sacred Space

Garrett N. Fugate
Boston University

Abstract

As an anomaly within the religious landscapes of the United States, the American mosque serves as an intriguing focus from which to understand the construction of sacredness through the medium of physical space. 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 sixteen of these mosques, relying on primary data gathered through site observations and interviews. The findings revealed several place-attributes that defined a converted space as a mosque such as a worship space's orientation to the direction of prayer. Findings also challenged preconceived notions of sacredness, many converted buildings exhibiting flexibility of both sacred and profane uses. Iconographic elements to the design helped in a building's transformation into a mosque, referencing high-style elements such as minarets. Overall, what was uncovered in this project presented an emergent understanding of Islamic place-making in an American context. It is hoped that studies such as these will lead to mosque design in the United States which is more intuitive of sacred space as understood by Muslim-Americans themselves.

Keywords: sacred space; mosques; American mosques; converted space; Muslim-Americans[1]

Introduction and Background

Sacred spaces are intimately tied with the world views, beliefs, and religious practices of people. This research paper explores the question of how Islam and Muslim perceptions of sacredness interrelate with one another and are co-embodied in American mosques. A focus on spaces converted into mosques served as an intriguing orientation to the question. As opposed to the reified high-style traditions expressed in many American mosques built as mosques, converted mosques can be considered sacred vernacular spaces because they are a "direct physical embodiment of a way of worship and of a community" (Rapoport, 1995, 32). These mosques lack a cohesive Islamic architectural tradition. Muslim-Americans are left to negotiate with a preexisting building rather than rely solely on the precedence of reified styles. Driven by vernacular intuitiveness, this focus on converted buildings 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.

A focus on buildings converted into mosques is also important for understanding Islamic spaces in the United States because they are both pervasive within Muslim-American communities as well as understudied. A study on American mosques found that only 26% of mosques were originally built as mosques (Bagby, Perle, & Froele, 2001, 26). 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 the intersectional discourse on religious authenticity, Islamic practice, and Muslim perceptions of sacredness determine the creation of places for spirituality and Muslim-American communities. This research seeks to be a humble addition to a better understanding of mosques in the United States.

This research resulted in the present paper which is divided into four sections: the first covers background information on mosques and how they relate to Islam; the second shortly discusses research method and the mosques studied; the third section focuses on key findings; and the fourth section consists of a discussion on this research's central concepts of sacredness and themes of ornamentation and Islamic belief as uncovered in this study.

A Brief Background to the Mosque in Islamic Belief and Practice

Mosques have a rich and diverse heritage being greatly influenced by the cultural and historic contexts in which they were constructed, renovated, expanded, remodeled, and not rarely, created out of pre-existing buildings and repurposed for Muslim use. On this latter note, it is worth mentioning that certain well-known elements of mosque design such as the *minaret* have pre-Islamic histories. While Muslim artists and designers throughout history certainly developed original ideas, part of their creativity is reflected in the way they adopted pre-existing design elements, incorporated them into worship spaces, and imbued them with Islamic meanings (Grabar, 1987).

Mosques facilitate Islamic practice and tradition. Muslims in the United States repurpose pre-existing buildings and interior spaces for these practices in creative ways. The most obvious Islamic practices that a mosque ought to serve are the five pillars of Islam. Prophet Muhammad, according to Islamic belief the last prophet of the Abrahamic tradition, described Islam as having five pillars (Al-Bukhari, 885). While all five have material expressions in Islamic architecture, I will discuss only the first two which inform a preliminary and necessary understanding of a mosque's program thereby guiding an analysis of the converted mosques in this study.

The first pillar is contained in the creedal formula: "there is no god but God" (*The Qur'an*, 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[1] and remembrance.[2] Notwithstanding the history of figurative art in Islamic art and architecture, the vast majority of mosques do not contain images of human beings, much less images of the divine.

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 *Kaʿbah*, a cube-shaped shrine located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The principle purpose of the mosque is to establish a place for

[1] Submission is the literal translation of *Islam*.
[2] "Remembrance" is a translation of the Qur'anic term "*dhikr*."

ṣalāt in congregation.[3] It is narrated that the Prophet said: "prayer in congregation is superior to prayer by an individual by twenty-seven[4] degrees" (Al-Bukhari, 885, Book 11, vol. 1: 618). While daily prayers are meritorious in congregation, as Katz points out, "in the case of Friday prayer [congregational worship] is integral to the validity of the ritual" (Katz, 2013, 130). Friday prayer can be thought of as the Islamic equivalent to Sunday worship for Christians. The Qur'ān, the seminal religious text for Muslims, calls this day "the day of congregation" which emphasizes the communal-aspect of ritual practice (*The Qur'an*, 2004 62:9).[5]

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

1. Large carpeted space for prayer[6] or *muṣallah* oriented in the direction of the *qiblah,* that is, towards the *Kaʿbah* 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 in order to provide space for the required movements of prayer (standing, bowing, and prostrating) and the formation of worshippers into rows. A *miḥrāb* or prayer niche often 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,[7] bathroom, and interstitial/transition spaces.
3. A *minaret* from which a call to prayer is chanted. In the United States, the call to prayer is generally 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.

Research Method

This project was largely qualitative, relying principally on interviews and site visits to sixteen buildings converted into mosques (Fig. 1-31). Site visits to each mosque were recorded by photo-documentation, sketches of floor plans, and field notes. This study consisted of interviews with faith leaders and longtime members from each community.

Each mosque, except for one, was chosen for its respective ease of accessibility from where I was previously based when research was conducted, the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. The outlier among the case studies was an Islamic center in Honolulu which was visited on a conference trip. Choices for case study were limited by responses to attempted contacts with Islamic centers and partly dependent on personal contacts within the larger Kansas City, Lawrence, and St. Louis communities. Therefore, these case studies are not necessarily

[3] Masjid is one word in Arabic which refers to a mosque, meaning literally "place of prostration," which relates directly to the mosque as a place for prayer.
[4] In another narration it is twenty-five.
[5] Another Arabic term for mosque, specifically for large congregational mosques in predominantly Muslim countries, is *jāmiʿ* which means "place of gathering."
[6] This space is often referred to as the *muṣallah* ("place for ritual prayer") to differentiate it from the rest of the mosque.
[7] 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*.

meant to be representative of Midwestern Muslim communities but rather an exploratory approach to understanding the American mosque and Muslim-American communities.

Fig. 1: Islamic Center of Topeka, KS
source: author

Fig. 2: Islamic Center of Lawrence, KS
source: author

Fig. 3: Islamic Center of Kansas, Olathe, KS
source: ickansas.org

Fig. 4: Islamic Center of Johnson Co., KS
source: author

Fig. 5: Bosnian Islamic Center, St. Louis, MO
source: author

Fig. 6: Madina Mosque, St. Louis, MO
source: author

Fig. 7: Masjid Umar, St. Louis, MO
source: author

Fig. 8: Masjid Dar Al-Jalal Hazelwood, MO
source: author

Fig. 9: Islamic Center of Des Moines, IA
source: author

Fig. 10: Bošnjak Islamic Center, Des Moines, IA
source: author

Fig. 11: Islamic Center of Iowa City, IA
source: author

Fig. 12: Masjid Abu Khudra, Minneapolis, MN
source: author

Fig. 13: Masjid Al-Huda, Minneapolis, MN
source: author

Fig. 14: Masjid Al-Rahmah, Owatonna, MN
source: author

Fig. 15: Muslim Association of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI
source: author

Fig. 16: Millard Islamic Center, Omaha, NE
source: author

There were two primary stages of research. The first consisted of eight mosques in Kansas and Missouri. There were eight male interviewees, three of whom were *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 was 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.

The goal of the second stage of research was to check and increase the validity of my findings by doubling the number of case stages. There were eight interviews for each respective additional Islamic center, two of whom were male laypersons, one was a female layperson, two were imams, and three were board members of their respective Islamic centers. Interview

questions can be divided into two types: the first addressed the building conversion itself and the second inquired about the community.

Fig. 17: Islamic Center of Topeka

Fig. 18: Islamic Center of Lawrence

Fig. 19: Islamic Center of Kansas

Fig. 20: Islamic Center of Johnson County

Fig. 21: Bosnian Islamic Center

Fig. 22: Madina Mosque

Fig. 23: Masjid Umar

Fig. 24: Masjid Dar Al-Jalal

Fig. 25: Islamic Center of Des Moines

Fig. 26: Bošnjak Islamic Center

Fig. 27: Islamic Center of Iowa City

Fig. 28: Masjid Abu Khudra

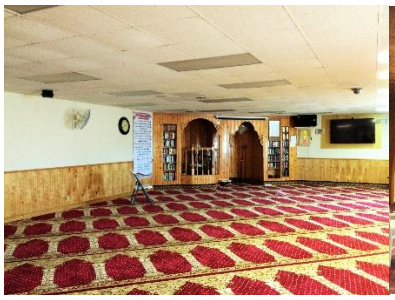

Fig. 29: Masjid Al-Huda

Fig. 30: Masjid Al-Rahmah

Fig. 31: Muslims Association of Hawaii

Findings

Information relevant to my focus on converted spaces and the creation of an Islamic sense of place are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2 below. This information was gleaned from interviews and observations. The findings are discussed below and organized under the headings of six design imperatives or themes found to be common among the sixteen converted mosques in this study.

Adhering to Ideals of the First Pillar of Islam

Mosques adhere to the first pillar of Islam, i.e. the declaration that "there is no god but God,[8]" by avoiding figurative and iconographic representations of the divine. In general, depictions, images, icons, and statues of the divine, prophets, and saints are considered to be compromises to Islamic monotheism. Images of the divine and holy are thought to orient worship away from a God who is by nature beyond imageability.

This concept of monotheism was evident in the design choices of several Islamic centers. Five of the mosques in this study were once churches in which Muslim communities would remove more pictorial images of God to create a more Islamic space. The Islamic Center of Lawrence, a former Baptist church, renovated its stained glass window which once displayed a cross.

While mosques are characteristically iconoclastic in the usual sense of the term, they can often become iconographic in the broader sense of the term. 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. The primacy of the written word as a way to sanctify a space was evident in other mosques. The interiors of Masjid Abu Khudra and Masjid Al-Huda were heavily decorated with verses from the Qur'ān. Chapter 103 of the Qur'ān above the main entrance of the Islamic Center of Topeka highlights the importance of time greets mosque-attendees. On the interior walls of the men's *musallah*, verses from Chapter 55 of the Qur'ān which celebrate the many mercies of God encircle worshippers. Above the entry into the men's *muṣallah* in the mosque in Hawaii reads in Arabic: "Places of worship [*masājid*] are for God alone—so do not pray to anyone other than God"(*The Qur'an*, 72:18). Adorning the *miḥrāb* at the Bošnjak Islamic Center is the Qur'ānic imperative: "wherever you may have started out, turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque [the shrine of the *Kaʿbah* in Mecca] (*The Qur'an*, 2:150)."

[8] Instead of using Allah, the Arabic word for God, I simply use the English "God" as M.A.S. Abdel Haleem does in his translation of the Qur'an.

Defining the Qiblah*, the Orientation of Prayer*

The *miḥrāb* is not an architectural element necessary for the creation of a mosque. It was a common point made by interviewees that a prayer space ought to indicate the *qiblah* but that the *miḥrāb* was not required. This vernacular understanding of mosque making was observed in many of the Islamic centers in this study. The traditional, high-style *miḥrāb*s were a rare occurrence, appearing only in the three Bosnian mosques in which high-style design seemed important for cultural and not solely religious identity.

Fig. 32: *miḥrāb* in the Bosnian Islamic Center
source: author

Fig. 33: *miḥrāb* in the Madina Mosque
source: author

Fig. 34: *miḥrāb* in the Bošnjak Islamic Center
source: author

Other mosques in this study had simple arched designs or small niches while five of them lacked any semblance of a *miḥrāb* element in the main prayer spaces: Masjid Dar Al-Jalal, the Islamic Center of Johnson County, the Islamic Center of Des Moines, the Millard Islamic Center, and the Islamic Center of Iowa City. Regardless of this lack, the latter four Islamic centers were just as active as prayer spaces as any other, holding the five daily prayers and holding special prayers and fast-breaking meals during Ramadan, a sacred month of fasting. At the Islamic Center of Johnson County, for example, 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.*

Table 1.

	Original Building	**Year**	**Building Choice**	**Major Changes**	**women's entry and musallah**	**Renovations/ New Additions**
Islamic Center of Topeka	storage warehouse	1992	appropriate size for small community; potential for expansion	largest space becomes *muṣallah*	same entry no curtain + curtain	new *muṣallah*; new entry

Islamic Center of Lawrence	church (Baptist)	1998	overgrew smaller building, affordable, near university, space for Islamic school	pews removed; church entry removed for *miḥrāb*; baptismal platform becomes women's balcony	same entry separate room	original church office upstairs converted into women's muṣallah; renovation of basement
Islamic Center of Kansas	church (Jehovah's Witness)	2004	near local Muslims, affordable	pews removed; bathrooms adapted for ablution; cry room becomes women's *muṣallah*	separete entry separate room	renovation of *miḥrāb* and removal of raised platform for original church pulpit
Islamic Center of Johnson County	house	2000	near local Muslims and Muslim businesses, meets immediate needs, land for expansion	living room becomes women's muṣallah; basement becomes men's *muṣallah*	separate entry separate room	deck removed so space below better utilized for overflow space for men's *muṣallah*
Bosnian Islamic Center	Lemay Theatre (1925-80's); carpet warehouse	2004	needed larger building, near local Bosnians	theatre becomes main *muṣallah*; projector room into women's *muṣallah*	separate entry separate room	calligraphy and artwork added (2009/ 2010)
Madina Mosque	bank	2001	near local Bosnians, parking and no inconvenience for neighbors	Main space into main *muṣallah*; bank safe into women's *muṣallah*	same entry no curtain + separate room	new *miḥrāb;* basement renovated for kitchen and fellowship hall; minaret (2007/ 2008); *muṣallah* extended
Masjid Umar	Four-family flat	1982	needed mosque to serve local urban community	1st floor flats become muṣallah; 2nd floor into classrooms	separate entry separate room	renovations of ablution areas, kitchen; addition of women's entry and *muṣallah*

Masjid Dar Al-Jalal	office building	2012	needed larger building for growing Muslim population in north St. Louis county	office partitions removed; storage and garage converted to dining hall	separate entry separate room	n/a
Millard Islamic Center	offices	?	near local businesses	offices into *muṣallah*s	separate entry curtain	renovation of men and women's entries
Islamic Center of Des Moines	school	?	near local community	classrooms into women's and men's *muṣallah*	separate entry separate room	new building for Friday prayers
Bošnjak Islamic and Cultural Center	preschool	2005	near local Bosnian	classrooms into *muṣallah* and fellowship hall	same entry no curtain	n/a
Islamic Center of Iowa City	church (Jehovah's)	2005	centrally located in town, near college campus	leveling of theatre seating and removal of pews; back of worship hall becomes front (direction of *qiblah*)	same entry separate room	house next door used for meetings, fellowship, and rental space
Masjid Abu Khudra	church (Lutheran)	1969	mosque for local Muslim community	pews removed, worship space becomes *muṣallah*; offices become storage	separate entry curtain	new building for community offices and school; curtain added
Masjid Al-Huda	offices	1999 / 2000	near local Muslim communit, needed larger building	office spaces into muṣallahs, classrooms; bathrooms adapted for ablution	same entry separate room	conversion of second and third floors; new carpets for men's and women's *muṣallah*
Masjid Al-Rahmah	church	?	mosque for local Somali community	raised area for pulpit into	separate entry	n/a

				women's *muṣallah*	curtain	
Muslim Association of Hawaii	house	1979	mosque for local Muslim community	Walls dividing rooms removed for men's *muṣallah;* garage into men's bath and ablution	separate entry separate room	*lanai* (porch) enclosed and becomes library and overflow space; niche punched out of wall to create *miḥrāb* and *minbar*

The dominant pattern in *miḥrāb* design was that communities that were made up of a dominant ethnic group tended to have more decorative designs whereas the more multicultural communities tended to have more austere designs. The former type could be found in the three Bosnian mosques in this study which referenced traditional high-style design in Bosnia. The *miḥrāb* in Masjid Umar contained a decorative lantern which also has historic (and Qur'anic) precedence not referenced in the other *miḥrāb*s in this study. In addition, Masjid Al-Huda and Masjid Al-Rahmah, both mosques with a dominant Somali population, had unique *miḥrāb*s which were sizeable prayer niches through which the *imām* had access to the *minbar*. The latter austere types of *miḥrāb*s were found in mosques such as the Islamic Centers of Lawrence, Topeka, Kansas, Masjid Umar, and Masjid Abu Khudra which were simple arches or small niches.

The direction of prayer was also indicated by the patterns on the carpet. With the exception of the Islamic Center of Topeka, all main prayer rooms of the mosques in this study had carpets, decorative or not, which were patterned with lines running perpendicular to the axis of the *qiblah*. Indeed, lines or patterns on the carpets indicating the *qiblah* and facilitating the creation of prayer lines appeared more standard than the inclusion of a *miḥrāb* element. Patterned carpets seemed the rule while the *miḥrāb* seemed the exception. One might hypothesize that this possibly relates directly to a vernacular understanding of space which is more directly linked to the bodies of worshippers, i.e. the lines on a carpet may be more intimate indications for the orientation of prayer than a *miḥrāb* at one end of the room from where the *imām* leads prayer, relating directly to the positioning of one's body for the ritual prayer.

Creating the Muṣallah *and the Gendering of Space*

Among all the mosques in this study there were common design choices made in creating the ritual space of the *muṣallah*. Spaces designated for the ritual prayer were the largest spaces in a building. If fixed-furniture existed in the original building, such as was the case for the buildings that were once churches, they were removed and replaced with carpet. It was also important that the *muṣallah* was a single, congruous floor. For example, the *muṣallah* of the Bosnian Islamic Center was originally the theatre and had an inclined floor which had to be leveled. Likewise, the *muṣallah* at the Islamic Center of Iowa City was once a theatre-like space with multiple tiers for seating around the original pulpit. This room had to likewise be leveled, presumably for the practical reality of the ritual prayer movements, especially as performed in a congregation.

Besides the fundamental importance of orienting the room towards the *qiblah*, *muṣallah*s were gendered spaces. There were three ways the gender division between men and women was

executed in the mosques in this study: a) a separately enclosed room designated especially for women, b) a curtain dividing up a shared *muṣallah* or c) no design element dividing men and women, though in practice it was understood that men prayer in the front of the space and women prayed in the back of the space.

The latter method of spatial division, which is not indicated architecturally, could be said to be closely related to the Prophet's instructions on gendering ritual space (Muslim, Book of Prayer: No. 881). The original mosque in Madina[9] lined up men for prayer along the *qiblah* wall closest to the *imām* and the women would line up behind them (Kahera, 2002). It is worth noting that the Islamic Center of Lawrence, Masjid Al-Huda, and Masjid Abu Khudra had originally followed this method of gendering space but later renovations responded to a vernacular sense of more delineated divisions. For the mosque in Lawrence and Masjid Al-Huda, a separate room was renovated especially for the usage by women and Masjid Abu Khudra added a curtain. At Masjid Umar, the recent renovations replaced a curtained off are for women with a separate room. When the opportunity arose, mosques tended to add partitions, and if they originally had curtains dividing a common *muṣallah*, would eventually renovate a separately enclosed space. It was not uncommon for mosques to adopt multiple methods for gender segregation, offering women whatever spaces in which they were most comfortable. For example, the Islamic Center of Topeka has a partial curtain so that women who desire to see the *imām* have the choice to. Both the Islamic Center of Lawrence and the Bosnian Islamic Center allow women to pray in the main musallah though they also have separate rooms designated for women. The Madina Mosque also offers both the back of the main *muṣallah* and a separate room for women's usage. For this mosque, women's choice for prayer location was often cultural, Arab and Somali women in the community preferring more defined separation. This is possibly the case in other communities.

Creating Communal Spaces

The American mosque is not only a place for prayer. It is also an *Islamic center*, a place for fellowship, community, and education. Many of the mosques in this study had classrooms. Others utilized the main prayer hall for classroom space which was observed in the Islamic Centers of Lawrence, Johnson County, Kansas, and Masjid Abu Khudra, some utilizing moveable furniture and screens to transform the *muṣallah*. Besides the main *musallah*, Islamic centers often had large community gathering spaces that were used as lecture halls and dining areas with adjacent kitchens.

Adding Islamic Ornamentation (Table 2)

Buildings converted into mosques are not readily identifiable as mosques; however, the addition of ornamentations and certain ritual elements added interiorly and exteriorly created a stronger sense of Islamic identity. Converted mosques 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).

The most common additions of ritual elements and ornamentations were *miḥrāb*s (see section: Defining the *Qiblah*), *minbar*s, decorative carpets, and calligraphy. In addition, while not necessarily ornamentation but sometimes creatively designed, foot sinks were commonly added to bathrooms to facilitate the ablution ritual required before prayer. As for the addition of *minibars*, these usually consisted of a short series of steps with railings and a place to sit at the top. Some mosques merely had a simple lectern from where the Friday sermon was given. This is

[9] In modern day Saudi Arabia, north of Mecca.

the case in the mosque in Topeka, however, several steps were recently added to invoke the memory of the simplistic platform from which Prophet Muhammad gave his sermons.[10] The minbar is also likewise a point of remembrance of the Prophet, as was specifically referred to by the artist who explained his design of the *minbar* at Masjid Dar Al-Jalal.[11]

The *minbar*s at Masjid Umar and Masjid Dar Al-Jalal were woodwork created by the same artist ornamented by calligraphic inscriptions from the Qur'ān. The three Bosnian mosques paraphrased the Islamic architecture of their communities' native Bosnia with decorative *minbar*s which are essentially a flight of steps leading up to a platform. These *minbar*s were hardly utilitarian for two of the mosques whose low ceilings make it impractical for the *imām* to stand at the top nor were they necessary for spaces relatively small compared to congregational mosques in Muslim countries so that a congregant could hear the sermon.

Table 2.

	miḥrāb	***minbar***	**foot sinks**	***minaret***	**calligraphy**	**other ornamentation**
Islamic Center of Topeka	✓	steps only	-	✓	✓	arched entry
Islamic Center of Lawrence	✓	✓	only women	-	-	n/a
Islamic Center of Kansas	✓	✓	✓	-	-	n/a
Islamic Center of Johnson County	-	-	✓	-	-	n/a
Bosnian Islamic Center	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	carpet, artwork
Madina Mosque	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	carpet, artwork
Masjid Umar	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	carpet
Masjid Dar Al-Jalal	-	✓	-	-	-	carpet, arched entry
Millard Islamic Center	-	-	-	-	-	carpet
Islamic Center of Des Moines	-	✓	✓	-	-	carpet
Bošnjak Islamic Center	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	n/a

[10] The steps can be seen in the lower right corner behind the lectern.
[11] The *minbar* also includes the presence of a staff, symbolic of the one the Prophet used to lean on during his sermons.

Islamic Center of Iowa City	-	✓	✓	-	-	carpet
Masjid Abu Khudra	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	carpet, various design details
Masjid Al-Huda	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	carpet
Masjid Al-Rahmah	✓	✓	-	-	-	carpet
Muslim Association of Hawaii	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	carpet, various design details

Several mosques had more subtle Islamic ornamentation such as the crescent moon over the entrance of Masjid Abu Khudra and the stylized roof elements at the Muslim Association of Hawaii. Less common were design elements more typical of high-style mosques such as minarets, domes, arches, and decorative *miḥrāb*s. Variations on the theme of pointed arches common in many styles of Islamic architecture were present over the entrance of the Islamic Center of Topeka, the men's entrance at Masjid Dar Al-Jalal, and the veranda around the mosque in Hawaii. Only three mosques had minarets: the Islamic Center of Topeka, Masjid Umar, and the Madina Mosque. Minarets have the practical use of extending the range for the call to prayer. However, in the United States the call to prayer is not performed outside on minarets as it is in predominantly Muslim countries. For American-Muslims, the minaret, as with other decorative and non-essential elements, seems important for the purpose of projecting an Islamic identity onto a building.

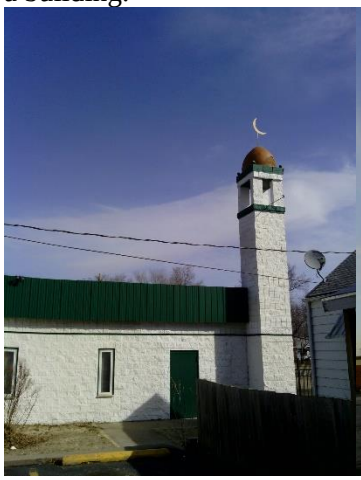

Fig. 35: minaret at the Islamic Center of Topeka
source: author

Fig. 36: minaret at the Madina Mosque
source: author

Fig. 37: minaret at Masjid Umar
source: author

Fig. 38: arches over men's entry of Masjid Dar Al-Jalal
source: author

Discussion

Sacredness and an Islamic Sense of Place

This study reveals how an Islamic sense of place is not created by the presence of liturgical objects such as *minaret*s, domes, *miḥrāb*s, and *minbar*s, especially in the ways they would be expressed through the language of high-style Islamic architecture. These sacred objects and symbols of Islamic buildings reflect historic developments of Islamic architecture rather than essentials of faith and practice (Grabar, 1987; Kahera, 2002; Kuban, 1974). For example, American mosques are rarely afforded the opportunity to perform the call to prayer and so the minaret becomes quite useless except as a symbolic design gesture. However, the minaret as a symbol of Muslim presence is not without historic precedence (Grabar, 1987). In any case, as this study reveals, the lack of design elements historically associated with mosques clearly does not make an Islamic center any less appropriate or sacred as a place of worship. The call to prayer is still ritually performed inside the mosque. Likewise, the purpose behind other design elements can be fulfilled without them: even if a mosque lacks a *miḥrāb*, orienting oneself or the congregation towards the *qiblah* is obligatory and made clear through other means such as by the design of the carpet. As places of worship and community, this disregard for traditional Islamic architectural elements uncovers a vernacular intuitiveness in the making of sacred space.

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 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 adaptions 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 *miḥrāb* 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 *jāmiʿ* 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 unified Muslim-American communities. The above begins to help one understand how mosques can be quite simple and utilitarian, even allowing pre-existing buildings to easily be converted into Islamic places of worship and community. Nonetheless, this study also revealed that Muslim-Americans still felt ornamentation to be important, even in converted spaces, as ways to identifying with their faith and cultures.

Ornamentation and the Essentials of Faith

While one recognizes that liturgical elements such as *minaret*s and *miḥrāb*s are inessential and often times not included or expressed in non-traditional but vernacular ways, it is conversely important to understand that such elements can enhance the Islamic identity of a place. Indeed, the same *imām* mentioned above speaking about his mosque in Topeka as simply a place where one performs prostration indicated that the minaret and other exterior designs were means to make the building look more "Islamic." These seemingly contradictory ideas about what is important for a mosque appeared in my other interviews as well. It is also worthy to note that occasionally this read into reformist ideas on Islamic practice. The former director of the Islamic Center of Kansas went so far as to compare the usage of unnecessary ornamentation to certain unwanted aspects of culture in order to create a more pure, clean, and authentic Islamic place. In some ways, a mosque void of minarets and stylized *miḥrāb*s might seem more authentically Islamic among some Muslims as these are designs which would not be completely recognizable to the first Muslims, not to mention the Prophet who figure-headed the religion. Indeed, one of the only design elements found commonly in mosques today that was present during Prophet Muhammad's time was the *minbar*. Some interviewees referenced the simplicity of the original mosque of the Prophet when describing their own mosques.

However, Muslims-Americans continually paraphrased Islamic high-style elements in their Islamic centers, spending time and effort on symbolic design elements. When funds are available, Muslim communities will decorate their existing mosques and if needed and able, construct mosques from the ground up. The Islamic Center of Johnson County is one such community that is, at the time of this publication, finishing erecting a new mosque. The building addresses the spatial needs of a fast growing community. In a follow-up with a board member, the new mosque was also designed "to be architecturally like a mosque" with two domes, *miḥrāb,* and a crescent moon against the sky. Using elements of design historically associated with many mosques elsewhere in the world is clearly important to many if not all Muslim-American communities. In order to reconcile the vernacular understandings of sacred space essentials and

the vernacular bricolage of Islamic architectural elements, it is my opinion that the sacredness of the space is essentially immaterial while the ritual elements and ornamentations are important for expressing a sense of Islamic identity. Both seem essential in creating an Islamic sense of place.

Conclusion

These findings begin to shed light on sacred space creation and essential faith and religious practices for Muslim-Americans. 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 one inhabits a space rather than the presence of liturgical objects. This was particularly true in a vernacular sense as was revealed through this study, the most common conversions of a space being the practical adaptation of a room for prayer with carpet and a means of indicating the *qiblah* as well as attention to gender divisions. At the same time, the creation of places of worship was not divorced from liturgical objects and ornamentation. The inclusion of *miḥrāb*s and *minbar*s were common, although not often as ornamented as high-style mosques outside of the United States. A mosque's seemingly austere appearance could be said to be symbolic of a specific way of understanding authentic Islamic practice. At the same time, ornamentation and the construction of *minaret*s made a building look more like a mosque for Muslims in this study. The usage of high-style design elements curiously seemed to correlate with communities with a predominantly immigrant ethnic identity such as was found at the Bosnian mosques. This raises the question of what role cultural, ethnic, and immigrant identities have in the adaption of these converted spaces and warrants further study. In light of more ethnically diverse communities that utilized high-style designs, one might reframe this observation as expressions of Islamic identity that overlap with architectural histories familiar to the users, designers, and artists within the respective communities. Calligraphy was also a common means of ornamentation across cultural boundaries. It would be worth studying inscriptions in American mosques on their own terms as a possible means of uncovering the ways Muslim-Americans think of their Islamic places of worship, community, and identity.

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 various 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.

References:

Al-Bukhari, Imam. 855. *Sahih Al-Bukhari*. Translated by 1997 M. Muhsin Khan. 9 vols, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar-us-Salam Publications. Original edition, 855.

Bagby, I., Perle, P. M., & Froele, B. T. (2001) The Mosque in America: A National Portrait. *Council on American-Islamic Relations, Washington, D.C.*

Benedikt, M. (2007) *God Is the Good We Do: Theology of Theopraxy*. New York: Bottino Books, LLC.

Grabar, Oleg. (1987) *The Formation of Islamic Art*. Yale University Press, rev. ed.

Kahera, A. I. (2002). *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Katz, M. H. (2013) *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kuban, D. (1974). *Muslim Religious Architecture: The Mosque and its Early Development*. State University Groningen, The Netherlands: Institute of Religious Iconography.

Mattson, Ingrid. 2008 A New Voice for Islam. In On Being, edited by Krista Tippett. http://www.onbeing.org/program/new-voice-islam/54: American Public Media. (accessed: 24 February 2013).

The Qur'an. (2004) (M. A. S. A. Haleem, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rapoport, A. (1995) Sacred Space in Primitive and Vernacular Architecture *Thirty-three Papers in Environmental Behavior Research* (pp. 23-32). Newcastle: Urban International Press.