

In 2009, President Barack Obama publicly observed that “The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the continued efforts of these extremists to engage in violence against civilians had led some in my country [the United States of America] to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and Western countries, but also to human rights. This has bred more fear and mistrust.” According to Ali Alraouf, Professor of Architecture and Urbanism at Qatar University, the term for this hostility felt by Muslims is “Islamophobia,” an ideology which is contrary to the Islamic tradition of tolerance. One of its offspring is “Mosque-phobia,” in which non-Muslims express hostility towards the physical manifestation of Islam: the mosque (Arabic: *masjid*). To American citizens who fear Muslim organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, the mosque is the womb in which terrorism is born. To Muslim American citizens, the mosque is a positive environment in which the Quran is read aloud and community members feel at peace. However, it is when the followers of Islam open the doors of the mosque to the outside world that the peace felt within those walls is threatened by the “War on Terror.”

The case study of Park51 Community Center (45-51 Park Place, Manhattan) raises awareness of a casualty of the “War on Terror.” In an author’s interview with the current Project Director of Park51, Hanadi Doleh gave an account of the event that brought about Park51: the 2008 financial crisis. Property developer Sharif El-Gamal was one of 200 congregants that attended a mosque on Warren Street – two blocks away from Park Place. As a result of the crisis, the closure of Warren Street mosque pushed congregants to the East Side of Manhattan and pushed El-Gamal to take action. On 5 March 2010, Muslim religious leader (Arabic: *imam*) Feisal Abdul Rauf proposed The Cordoba House Project to the New York Community Board One (CB1) with the intent of fostering better relations between Muslim and non-Muslim

Americans.<sup>1</sup> With a vote of 29-1, the community board endorsed Park51 Community Center (Dana 507).

The endorsement made public sparked a debate between proponents and opponents of the “Monster Ground Zero Mosque.” Pamela Geller, a New York City political activist and blogger, expressed her opinion that “building a shrine to the very ideology that inspired the terrorist attacks is an insult to the victims of 9/11” and that “based on research, four out of five mosques preach hate and incitement to violence” (Dana 507).<sup>2</sup> Ironically, one study concludes that “Among [Muslim Americans], there is no statistically significant relationship between support for political messages emanating from mosques and views of PMV [politically motivated violence]” (Acevedo 248). Geller’s reference to Park51 as the “Monster Ground Zero Mosque” “... implies a dislocation of Park51 from its origins as community center, transforming its identity, connecting it permanently with the terrorist attack, and robbing it of any other meaning” (Duer 113).

Muslim Americans are being robbed, too; specifically, of their constitutionally protected rights. Although their loyalties and their places of worship have come under scrutiny in the aftermath of the terrorist attack of 9/11 and the Park51 controversy, there is no systematic data that supports the claim that Muslim Americans that attend mosques exhibit anti-American attitudes or behaviors (Dana 516). Karam Dana, Matt Barreto and Kassra Oskoi point out the establishment of a positive correlation between mosque attendance and American behavior in New York City (Dana 510). It is the architecture of Islamic places of worship that plays a critical role in the groundbreaking recognition of the physical manifestation of the constitutionally protected right of religious freedom. The literal groundbreaking of mosques ought to take place

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<sup>1</sup> The Cordoba House Project is the former name of Park51 Community Center.

<sup>2</sup> The quote is taken from an interview on CNN’s Sunday Morning with Suzanne Malveaux.

in New York City, in which “Muslims are not a recent, foreign intrusion that should generate fear, but are an ever-present feature of the American – and specifically New York – fabric” (Dunlap).

Evidence of Islam in New York City dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century African slave trade. The first reference to a mosque in the United States of America is credited to Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916): the first recorded American convert to Islam (Bagby 2). Webb established the American Moslem Brotherhood in 1893 and the American Mohammedan Society established a mosque on Powers Street in 1907. The Islamic Mission of America established the subsequent mosque, *Masjid* Daoud, in 1939, which serves as the precedent of 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City mosques (Grazda 24). At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number of mosques in the five boroughs of New York City added up to 103 – 28 in Queens, 27 in Brooklyn, 20 in Manhattan, 20 in the Bronx, and 8 in Staten Island (Grazda 24). The number of mosques designed as such totaled to less than a dozen. Most are converted storefront buildings, lofts, stores, warehouses and private homes (Grazda 29).<sup>3</sup> Despite the presence of over 600,000 Muslims at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Grazda 24), there is an absence of architecture whose exterior indicates one’s submission to Allah’s will in New York City. In an article published by *The Sun* on 25 February 1912, the headline – “While the voice of the muezzin, calling the faithful to prayer, *is never heard in New York*, nevertheless the Mohammedan form of worship is carried on here” (Dunlap) – accurately details the past and present nature of mosques.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to the U.S. Mosque Survey (2011), 56% of mosques were converted structures (i.e. houses, storefronts, former churches, commercial properties). There were 632 purpose-built mosques, which is a 101% increase in number compared to 2000 (314 purpose-built mosques) (Bagby 10).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the article, the author is referring to the Oriental (17 Rector Street, Lower Manhattan): “There is nothing about the building to indicate that here is a temple where gather those who believe in Allah and Mohammed” (Dunlap).

Mara Duer, former Media and Cultural Programmer of Park51, identified spatial securitization as the root cause for the literal and figurative silenced nature of mosques. As blatant discrimination in the form of resistance to mosque development and promotion of police surveillance (Duer 108), a Muslim American may deem it necessary to change “his appearance [body] and movements [public space] to avoid being targeted” (Duer 108). As the property developer of Park51, Sharif El-Gamal served as the target of the court hearings of CB1 and the City Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC).<sup>5</sup> The CB1 and LPC court hearings successfully argued that 45-51 Park Place ought to remain a memorial of 9/11 due to the offensive choice of location, questions over the project’s financial backing and judgment on the morality of the Park51 project team (Dana 116-7). Ironically, none of the arguments appealed to technical aspects (e.g. building measurements, aesthetic issues), which is the norm in mosque-building contentions in Western countries (Duer 116). Ihsan Bagby, Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Kentucky, deems the irony to be illogical: “It’s one thing to oppose a mosque because traffic might increase, but it’s different when you say these mosques are going to be nurturing terrorist bombers, that Islam is invading, that civilization is being undermined by Muslims” (Goodstein).

Professor Bagby’s statement did not deter Representative Peter King (R-NY) in making a public statement on mosques being “where terrorists are being homegrown” (Dana 505). Rep. King’s Islamic congressional hearings in March 2011 – in which he claimed that “80% of mosques in this country are controlled by radical *imams*” – and the controversy surrounding

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<sup>5</sup> On 25 May 2010, over 50 supporters and opponents of the project articulated their arguments during the CB1 arranged public hearings. The core argument was that the cloud of dust generated by the collapse of the Twin Towers serves as a spatial reference to mark the area in which it is inappropriate to establish a community center. The LPC seconded the motion on 12 July 2010 by arguing the presence of a “sacred zone” due to uncovering a part of one of the hijacked planes in 45-51 Park Place. Hence, Park51 is an immoral place of worship that has the potential to desecrate the aforementioned space. (Dana 116-7).

Park51 single-handedly put the issue of Mosque-phobia on the national agenda (Dana 506). In fact, Park51 is considered to be the first nationally-recognized manufactured product of the “Islamophobia Network”, which “manufacture[s], produce[s], distribute[s], and mainstream[s] an irrational fear of Islam and Muslims” (Duer 112-3). One topic on which the Islamophobia Network tends to focus is “Establishing the idea that most mosques in the United States are radical” (Muer 113). The American Freedom Defense Initiative sponsored New York City bus advertisements (see figure 1). The caption “Why There?” aims to sway public opinion towards finding a link between the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Park51. The National Republican Trust Political Action Committee sponsored “The audacity of Jihad,” an online video advertisement. Amidst images of masked militants and of the aftermath of 11 September 2001, the narrator makes contentious claims such as supporters of Park51 rejoice in the 9/11 terrorist attacks.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1 (American Freedom Defense Initiative)

The American Freedom Defense Initiative and the National Republican Trust Political Action Committee purposely draw a fine line between whether radical American Islamic organizations are or are not sponsoring the building of Park51. According to Charles Kurzman, Ebrahim Moosa and David Schanzer of University of North Carolina and Duke University, respectively, the fine line between radical Islam and mosque-building is unfounded in reality. Kurzman, Moosa and Schanzer authored “Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans.” The

<sup>6</sup> The offline and online advertisements speak to the observation of John Esposito, the Director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University: “The World Trade Center thing has shown that what has been up to now seen as a local issue has gone global and provided an umbrella so that suddenly people feel freer to go public with their objections to Muslims” (McGreal).

project identifies self-policing practices that aim to counteract the rise of radical ideology in Muslim American communities. Two such practices are by “preventing extremist ideologues from preaching in mosques ... and purging radical extremists from membership in local mosques” (Schanzer 1). According to a young Muslim American, “The community is prepared to deal with [potential radicalization] ... They would try to take this person aside, talk to them, try to incorporate them into the community atmosphere” (Schanzer 30).

The community atmosphere of Muslim Americans in New York City is not confined to mosques; in fact, it is the ability of the worldwide Muslim community (Arabic: *ummah*) to achieve unity without a definite location, city, or country that instills fear in non-Muslim Americans and opponents of Park51 (Duer 111). In regards to the “War on Terror”, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek explains how “the only way to actively mobilize people, is through fear: the fear of immigrants, the fear of crime ...” (Duer 107). Mosques serve as obstacles in the mission to achieve homogeneity within the bounds of the United States of America. Hence, spatial securitization is the precursor of “the erosion of the city heterogeneity” (Duer 121).<sup>7</sup> In order to preserve the identity of New York City as a melting pot, “Any attempt to understand ... religion must begin by recognizing that it is fundamentally spatial” (Dana 112). To counteract spatial securitization, Professor Alraouf proposes creating a connection between the mosque and the surrounding public and open spaces. The intent is to focus on the notion of transparency by redefining religious bounds; to focus on the manifestation of mosque architecture within a secular context; and to encourage Muslims and non-Muslim Americans to come together and exchange ideas on programs within the same space (Alraouf 8-9).

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<sup>7</sup> In *Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction* (2009), Martin Coward concludes that “In destroying the city, such a substrate is lost and identity can no longer take root” (36).

The program that *Imam* Rauf had in mind for Park51 consisted of a memorial for the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and a prayer room (Dana 507). During the half-decade that the PrayerSpace was open to the public, 400-600 Muslims attended Friday noon prayer (Doleh). Providing a space for prayer – the main pillar of Islam performed five times a day (Alraouf 4) – is one of two primary functions of the mosque (Grazda 29).<sup>8</sup> Since Muslim Americans in New York City are dispersed geographically and socially, contemporary Islam mimics traditional 17<sup>th</sup>-century Islam, in which the mosque served as the means by which Muslims could identify themselves with an Islam-practicing community in a non-Muslim context (Grazda 30). It is due to the dispersion of Muslim Americans around New York City that communal prayer plays a critical role in forming and upholding a sense of community – whether it is in a sacred or secular context.

Figuratively, the community atmosphere extends beyond a national origin-based identity. The Muslim American Public Opinion Survey (MAPOS) indicates that through mosque involvement, Muslim Americans tend to prefer to identify as “Muslim,” as opposed to a national origin-based identity. This is indicative of the second primary function of the mosque – community building – which promotes the acceptance of an inclusive and common identity through the adoption of a common minority group label in the United States of America (Dana 510, 513). In the mid-1990s, the Bosnian Cultural Center (Queens) changed its name to Ali Pasha Mosque to prove the point that “We are a place for all Muslims” (Grazda 80). The *imam* of Fatih Cami (5911 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Brooklyn) actually requested that Jerrilynn D. Dodds, author of *New York Masjid : The Mosques of New York City*, “not call this a Turkish mosque. Many of us

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<sup>8</sup> According to *Aljumuah*, a monthly journal published by the Islamic Revival Association U.S.A., the role of mosques breaks down into 13 functions. These include the teaching of religious and worldly affairs; the acquisition of knowledge and education of community members; the housing of poor Muslims; the collection and distribution of charity; and the holding of consultative meetings (Shura councils).

are from Turkey, but this is not a Turkish mosque. It belongs to the whole neighborhood; there are Americans and Pakistanis and Africans. It is for all Muslims” (Grazda 77).

Even non-Muslim Lieutenant Vincent Fragapane, Community Affairs Officer of the New York Police Department’s 66<sup>th</sup> Precinct, holds Fatih Cami in high esteem: “Since the congregation renovated the building and began to function, the entire neighborhood has profited. New businesses have appeared, and the whole strip is safer and more alive” (Grazda 30). The systematic data of MAPOS speaks to the fact that mosques aid Muslims in the process of integration into American society and play a role in bridging the differences between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans (Dana 516).<sup>9</sup> Prior to the interview, Hanadi Doleh personally notified the author of an Interfaith Thanksgiving Meal between Park51, Trinity Church and Tamid Synagogue. The act of giving thanks is one way in which Doleh fulfills her role “to build countless relationships across the board” (Doleh).

Nevertheless, relationships tend to sever as the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks nears. According to Doleh, “there will be one or two individuals who will send a nasty email” and “Around four years ago, someone sent a burnt Quran to the space,” complete with footage of the desecration being committed. According to Professor Alraouf, it is the absence of cultural exchanges between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans that instills “the natural and normal underlying fear of one’s native culture and religion being supplanted by something alien, strange and unusual” (Alraouf 7). In particular, the Arabian or Middle Eastern character of mosques acts as a visual link to the violence taking place in the regions (Alraouf 7). The Project Description of Park51 describes the interconnected webbing on its façade as taking “root in the historical fundamentals of Islamic pattern making” (“PARK51”) (see figure 2). The geometrical patterns of

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<sup>9</sup> Ironically, *imams* acknowledge 9/11 as the catalyst for reaching out to non-Muslim community members. In 2011, over 79% of mosques were involved in an interfaith activity (compared to 66% in the year 2000) and 63% had hosted an open house for non-Muslim community members in the preceding twelve months (Bagby 10).



arabesque symbolize the five core values of the Quran: to be complete, infinite, clear, multi-centered, and awe-inspiring (Alraouf 9).

Sheikh Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi believes that architecture serves as an effective mean to humanize Muslim Americans by physically manifesting the humanistic aspects of the Arabian or Middle Eastern regions (Alraouf 5).<sup>10</sup> As the “ideological manifestation in space, *time* and matter” of Islam (Alraouf 1), contemporary architects turn to traditional forms to emphasize Islamic identity. Over the course of time, the appearance of mosques has undergone changes due to sociocultural factors and developments in design, building techniques, and the availability of materials



Figure 2 (SOMA)

(Alraouf 5). In the case of New York City, the dome is an element in extensive use. Despite the lack of a universal architectural form to represent Islamic tradition, *ad hoc* versions of domes serve as markers for mosques in the five boroughs of New York City (Grazda 81-2).

The Islamic Cultural Center is New York City’s first monumental mosque and literally stands as a symbolic presence of Islamic principles. Zias Monavir shared with Dodds one of the building committee’s stipulations: “We just thought there ought to be a dome; that here the dome was the form by which Islam might immediately be recognized in New York, (Grazda 81). The *imam* concurs that, “Since this is America, the mosque should be made in an architectural

<sup>10</sup> On another note, Islamic philosopher Sayyed Hossein Nasr recognizes the pivotal role that art (e.g. architecture) plays *as sacred acts* in the life of individual Muslims and in the *ummah* (Nasr 3-4).

language that Americans understand. *But that has nothing to do with Islam*” (Grazda 81). Even Mustafa Abadan, Project Architect of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, speaks to “The dome [of the Islamic Cultural Center] isn’t Mughal, or Safavid, or from any specific culture of Islam. We made it half a sphere, which is not the most felicitous form, but it was pure geometry, so it could not be associated with any national or cultural group” (Grazda 82) (see figure 3). In fact, it is rare to see the use of visual forms that evoke a particular ethnic or national group among the mosques of New York City (Grazda 77).

Extensive interactions between the Islamic empires of Safavid Iran, Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey and the United States of America formed the association between domes and Islam. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Americans perceived the curvilinear skyline of Istanbul as incompatible with the rectilinear skyline of New York City (Grazda 81). Not surprisingly, the mosques of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century New York City were architecturally non-descript

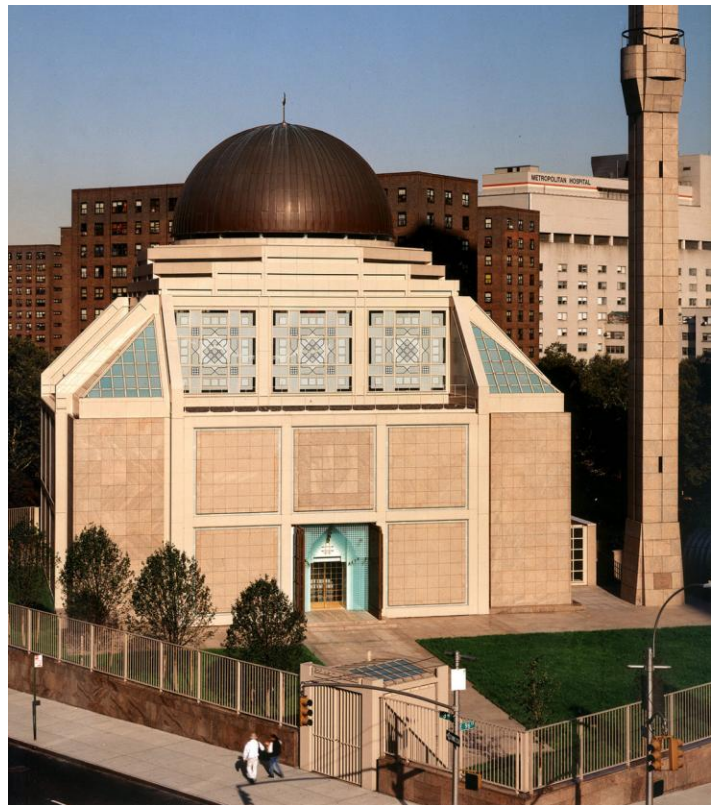


Figure 3 (Hoyt)

(Haddad 27) prior to the Islamic Cultural Center. The incompatibility of mosques and New York City is evident at the street-level due to the conflict between the Cartesian grid and the cardinal direction of Mecca. The *qibla* literally and figuratively reorients worshippers. The Islamic Cultural Center is rotated on its axis and the remaining pre-existing mosques make use of lines of

masking tape to indicate the proper alignment of worshippers at the moment of prayer. By being “loosed from the normal bonds of urban routine” (Grazda 39), Muslim Americans are better equipped to concentrate on prayer in peace rather than on the chaos of New York City.

Muslim American congregants feel at peace among the chaos of New York City knowing that “We do not pray to Atlantic Avenue. We pray to Mecca” and “At the *masjid*, Third Avenue comes to its knees before God” (Grazda 42). It is the sense of peace and community that is of utmost importance to Muslim Americans and goes beyond the walls of the place of worship. The walls of the place of worship (i.e. architecture) may play a role in reducing the fear instilled in non-Muslim Americans. However, the architecture does not play a critical role in the lives of Muslim Americans. Muhammed Said of *Masjid Al Ber* (3607 30<sup>th</sup> Street, Queens) remembers how, “We all worked incredibly hard to make this mosque happen. We worked extra jobs; everyone in the community sacrificed. But it was not really a sacrifice, because the mosque brings everything to us. Not the place, but the mosque. *Everyone knows that the mosque is not a building*” (Grazda 29). In fact, the *imam* of the Islamic Cultural Center validates Said’s statement: “Of course, the architecture of this mosque has no meaning. In prayer all external concerns must vanish (Grazda 65).<sup>11</sup> To further solidify the line between architecture and the spiritual and community functions of a mosque, a second *imam* makes a request to Dodds: “Professor please stop asking about architecture. Architecture means nothing. It is the deeds of the mosque, the deeds which make a mosque” (Grazda 67).

In 2009, President Barack Obama publicly preached that, “The Holy [Quran] tells us, ‘O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes

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<sup>11</sup> Specifically, “external concerns” address the commercial world. *Imam* Muhibbur Rahman further explains how, “The mosque shuts out the commercial world, the world that tempts you to buy, to be wasteful, to be too proud of possessions, to forget the Muslim education of your children in this world of advertisement which are *Haram*, which tempt you to spend too much. All of these things turn your mind away from God” (Grazda 66-7).

so that you may know one another. The Talmud tells us: ‘The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace.’ The Holy Bible tells us, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.’ The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God’s vision. Now, that must be our work here on Earth.”<sup>12</sup> There is still hope for the Muslim American community to preach their beliefs in a safe haven without being silenced by the non-Muslim American community. It is the physical expression of the belief in Allah that raises the voice of Muslim Americans in order to be heard by the non-Muslims of the United States of America. The figurative ground zero for the change yet to come is New York City’s literal ground zero: the site in which faith has overcome fear once before – and shall do so once more.

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<sup>12</sup> Mosque administrators have had to hire security since 11 September 2011 to ensure the safety of congregants from protestors. Meanwhile, church officials have argued that “Hiring security will only give the appearance that we [Christians] have done something wrong, and we have not. We have nothing to do with terrorists” (Ewing 124).

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