Tolerance and Peaceful Fusion of Cultures
Ashraf Salama

As other faiths have done, wherever Muslims went they established communities and designed and built religious facilities for congregational prayers. Muslim communities in Western cultures constitute a clientele for mosque architecture that did not exist before the 1950s. During the early 1960s significant numbers of Muslims immigrated to Europe and North America. In the mid-’60s they felt the need to express their presence by erecting mosques. The mosque in a non-Muslim setting became a symbol, a point of reference that provides an umbrella under which people of a common belief can unite and interact. It is a catalyst for developing community spirit, promotes collective strength, and imbibes values that pertain to human behavior and code of conduct.

In Europe and North American, Muslim communities are minorities in predominately Christian and non-Muslim cultures whose great churches, temples, and synagogues date back to several centuries. Mosques are perceived as non-verbal statements that convey environmental messages of presence. They differ dramatically from mosques built by communities in Muslim countries for everyday use. This is evident in early mosques built in London, Paris, Hamburg, and Washington, and later in New Mexico, Indiana, and Toronto.

The design of mosques in Western cultures is constrained by several variables that include the physical and socio-cultural contexts, pressures from the local community, building bylaws and regulations, and references to regional traditions. Therefore, the ultimate objective of designing a mosque in a non-Muslim context is to strike a balance between these aspects while satisfying functional, visual, and symbolic requirements. The Mosque and Islamic Cultural Center in Rome is no exception. It is a synthesis of elements, derived from Roman, Baroque, and Islamic architecture, forming a unique landmark that speaks to the Eastern and Western worlds. The complex was designed by Sami Mousawi, a Iraqi architect based in Manchester, England; Paolo Porteghesi, Italian architect and historian; and Vittorio Gigliotti, Italian structural engineer.

Tolerance at all Levels

Conditions around the establishment of the center emphasize that tolerance existed, from all sides and at all levels. Programmatic requirements foster active involvement of the Italian community in the activities of the center. The design team international mix reflects that architecture is a borderless language capable of resisting tensions between cultures and regions.

Recognizing the high demand to provide a mosque for the benefit of several thousand Muslims living in Rome, the Vatican issued a decree mid-’60s that it would not oppose the construction of a mosque in Rome on the conditions that it be located out of sight of St. Peter’s Basilica, and that its minaret not to be taller than St Peter’s dome. While the basic intention of the Islamic Cultural Center was to serve the Muslim community, the foundation charter also included that it should become an international forum to encourage dialogue between religions.

The project is located approximately 5 km. north of the historic core of the city, situated in the Parioli district, which is characterized by the upper middle class residential apartment buildings built in the period between 1950s and 1970s and a large Jewish community. The site is at the edge of the vast Villa Ada Park (a residence of the Italian royal family), which contains Monte Antenne, believed to be the location of the Sabian city of the Antennates, who were conquered by the founder of Rome, Romulus.

With a clear vision and in collaboration with the community, the Islamic Cultural Center developed an architectural program for a mosque and a cultural center that encompass religious, social, cultural, and educational activities. An international competition was launched in 1976, and the first and second winners were requested to form a team to re-design the project. The program objectives were to provide an architectural setting to accommodate periods of prayer, a spectrum of educational and cultural activities, and socio-religious services to the Muslim community. Intercultural activities provide the Italian community with a clearer understanding of the Islamic faith while providing language classes for those seeking to learn Arabic.

Among the program requirements were a main prayer hall for 2,500 worshippers (20 percent of
whom would be females) served by ablution areas. There would also be a smaller prayer hall suitable for 150 worshippers, an educational section containing library and classrooms, a conference auditorium for 400, meeting rooms and offices, an exhibition area, and two residential sections, one for the Imam (religious leader) of the Mosque and the other for visitors.

**Design Concept**

The complex of 13,800 square meters consists of two masses. The first is a rectangular prayer hall whose longer side faces southeast—the qibla wall. The second is H-shaped and accommodates the remaining functions of the complex. The ablution facilities are beneath the prayer hall. A water channel runs along the longitudinal axis of the H-shaped mass and connects two pools, one located in the center of the mass and another to the northeast. The minaret is located southwest of the prayer hall, close to where the H-shaped mass and the prayer hall meet.

The prayer hall contains two symmetrically arranged gallery floors that run perpendicular to the qibla wall. The galleries provide a space for female worshippers about a fourth of the size of the main prayer hall located below them. The H-shaped mass includes three floors with riwaqs occupying the roof. The riwaqs are colonnades, generally in the shape of an H, that form a sahn (courtyard) at the center. The stories below the riwaqs are divided into four wings that include classrooms, offices, the small prayer hall, an exhibition hall, dorms and library, storage, and accommodations for the Imam. Below the sahn are the multipurpose and conference halls. The center also has health care facilities to meet the high demand for medical services. Volunteer physicians and doctors serve in these clinics.

The form of the complex follows traditional mosque architecture. The prayer hall is articulated by a large central dome, surrounded by 16 smaller domes. The columns forming the colonnade/riwaq areas are symbolic. Each one consists of four small columns that curve outwards at the top, suggesting a four-branched tree. The columns are used as a unifying element throughout the mosque. The four branches of prayer hall’s main columns extend to form an intricate web of arches and ribs that articulate the area just beneath the domes. Natural light enters through ornamented fenestration and a series of small windows in the stepped structure of the dome.

The water channel steps down to form a chute as it moves from the upper pool to the lower one. The lower pool has a central waterspout surrounded by sixteen smaller ones, all arranged in a manner that reflects the arrangement of the domes above the prayer hall.

Figurative art and the depiction of human form are forbidden in the Muslim faith. Consequently, geometric ornament and calligraphy are used as devices that modulate the space of the main prayer hall. Traditional Moroccan decoration is applied to the interior of the prayer hall. Geometrical patterns of mosaic cover the lower part of the prayer hall’s walls and columns, and the mihrab. A band of painted calligraphic inscriptions is found at the top of the geometric patterns, while calligraphic inscriptions are carved in stucco. Design features are based on symbolic interpretations and are derived from historic references. For example, the image of the tree expresses the diversity inherent in the unity of Islamic faith. Another symbolic reference appears in the central dome. It rests on seven stepped concentric circles that represent the seven sacred heavens. Throughout the exterior, roundels pierce the walls with dynamic patterning.

**Multiple Roles for Multiple User Groups**

The center plays multiple roles in terms of uniting the Muslims living in Italy and establishing constructive dialogues between Islam and Christianity. As a result of the wide spectrum of social and cultural activities and the services provided to the Muslims and the surrounding community, this has become one of the important religious buildings in Italy today.

The complex serves multiple user groups. The first group is small but very important and visible in the Italian community. It includes members of diplomatic missions from Muslim countries to Italy and the Vatican. The second group that the center serves consists of students from Muslim countries studying in Rome. The third and largest group is made up of immigrants working in the city and engaged in relatively
low-paying jobs. On Fridays and important religious holidays, the complex becomes a vibrant container. For Friday prayers about 1,200 worshippers gather, while on religious holidays over 15,000 visit the center and perform the prayers in shifts. On these days food vendors set up shops outside the center creating a mobile souk (market). During the holy month of Ramadan about 500 Muslims visit the center daily, take their Iftar (break their fast), and perform the prayers.

The fourth group served by the center is the Italian community. The complex has become a venue through which people of Rome are better acquainted with Islam as a faith and as a civilization. These services are provided through seminars, public lectures, and conferences, and classes in Arabic language and Islamic culture. Weekly cultural and art programs are devised especially for students of public schools and Italian universities. Visitors can visit the center on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Records indicate that more than 3,000 persons other than the worshippers visit the center every month.

The building and its premises are utilized as a teaching tool for understanding the development of contemporary architecture, where a number of, American, Canadian, French, and German schools of architecture organize annual visits to the center as part of their study tours and field trips to Rome. The center became a tourist attraction since it is listed in Rome’s tourist maps and is featured in important Rome guidebooks, and in major books about the architecture of Rome. The inhabitants of Parioli district together with the Muslim community have developed a sense of pride in the center where many of the residents participate in the socio-cultural and educational activities.

Originality and Contextual Compatibility

Originality in the architecture of mosques stems from the fact that design ideas are based on the sensitivity to history and the traditional elements that acquired meaning over time, while satisfying contextual constraints. In the Cultural Center, this is reflected in the open interior spaces with large roof spans, especially in the prayer hall, to evoke the historical model of the mosque of Cordoba in Spain in terms of horizontality and the organic image of the forest of columns. The designers felt that this captured an atmosphere of spirituality. The Moorish influence, combined with Turkish, Persian, and Roman imagery, reflects the varied backgrounds of the client as a group, the users, as well as the members of the design team. Concomitantly, one can argue that originality in this project lies in the synthesis of these historic references in a contemporary visual statement.

The project emphasizes the introduction of several design features that pertain to Roman and Baroque architecture. Monumentality and axiality appear to be the most dominant of those features. The relation of the project to the cultural context is strong and manifested in the types of services provided and in the visual expression of the facades and the overall massing. The center is a community mosque that fulfils key religious, cultural, and social integrative functions. Since the project is serving the Muslims and the surrounding community, its design takes the form of a complex that satisfies socio-religious needs and incorporate them into other cultural, educational and service activities.

The final realization of the project in terms of design concept, construction, material technology, and detailing make it highly responsive to the overall environmental context of Rome. The establishment of visual links to Roman and Baroque architecture has been emphasized by three major features: the use of typical roman stone and brick work in the facades; the marble finishes in the main prayer hall; and the brick pavement of the sahn and the riwaq. Positive impact on the local environment is noticeable. The quiet residential area became very vibrant, especially on Fridays. The main road that was constructed and paved in conjunction with the construction of the project made the site easily accessible. The new route of the international marathon of Rome passes through this road and this event was one of the reasons that made the project internationally renowned, since it is covered extensively in the media.

The project has a tremendous impact on the area. Before construction of the Cultural Center, the parcel was a dumpsite in the foothills of the Monte Antenne. On Fridays, commercial activities take place around the fences of the center, where traders sell products and home made food. Other cultural impacts are evident in the educational programs designed for students of Italian public schools and can be seen in the classes offered to Italians at their request. Medical services provided to the Muslim community are indicative of the social impact on the community.
Critique and Analytical Reflections

In functional terms, the Cultural Center’s components relate very well to each other and reflect a sensitivity to the functional requirements of the mosque and the center. However, one can argue that the existence of the wide staircases at both sides of the entrance of the main prayer hall that lead to the galleries for female worshippers indicate that access to these designated spaces was not carefully considered. According to traditions, it is not appropriate for females to enter the prayer hall via the main space of male worshippers. Accessibility, circulation, and wayfinding aspects seem to have been studied very well. Nonetheless, a designed signage system would help visitors to find their way.

In socio-cultural terms, the project is very successful in providing educational, cultural, social, and socio-religious services. The multiple and interdisciplinary role that the center plays makes it a significant piece of architecture that is responsive to the needs and demands of the Muslim community. In essence, its significance lies in the cultural activities conducted in and by the center that integrate it with the Italian community and provide insights into a better and deeper understanding of the Islamic culture.

In symbolic terms, this mosque is a courageous building that reflects the spirit of the time. In fact, it is a statement by architects of different backgrounds who have dug deep into their own history, and have united two cultures. The project draws upon past legacies of Islamic and Christian architecture that share common Byzantine roots. It has an eclectic nature, in which elements of different historic eras of different regions are re-interpreted and translated to fit together and respond to the overall environmental and cultural contexts, while satisfying norms and requirements placed in the architecture of mosques by tradition. The fact that the traditional elements of mosque architecture—the sahn, the riwaq, and the dome—were not compromised or simplified asserts the success of the project in symbolic and functional respects.

Visually, the cultural center establishes an array of analogies and metaphors that unite the community it serves. Re-interpreting historic references, it provides an atmosphere that combines sacredness, solemnity, and dignity. The use of a tree as a theme that integrates the inside of the prayer hall with the rest of the complex successfully enhances this atmosphere. In this context, visual interaction with nature is fostered, especially in the areas of the sahn and riwaqs. In turn, it dramatically provides an atmosphere of peace and security.

Indeed, the design of the mosque and cultural center is a conscious endeavor toward creating positive dialogues between Islam and Christianity, east and west, technology-based and human made, and traditions and modernity. Rather than adopting specific historic references derived from precise regional styles, several interpretations of a range of historic references are adapted to create a neutral visual expression in a non-Muslim setting, which speaks to the west and to Muslims regardless of their geographical origin or cultural background.

Ashraf Salama, Ph.D., is Director of Research and Consulting, for Adams Group Consultants, LLC in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is indebted to the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Switzerland for providing the essential material toward the development of this article.

A Mosque Glossary

Qibla: Direction of Mecca which determines the direction of the prayer. It is the prime factor in the orientation of mosques. It is believed that the idea of qibla orientation is derived from the Jewish practice of indicating the direction of Jerusalem in synagogues.
Mihrab: A niche set into the middle of the qibla wall.
Minbar: A pulpit (podium) from which religious guidance is delivered.
Riwaq: Arcade or portico, open on at least one side.
Sahn: The courtyard of the mosque.