

FANTASY, FAITH, AND FRATERNITY :AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE OF MOORISH INSPIRATION

OMAR KHALIDI

INTRODUCTION

Searching for aesthetic stimulation outside their own tradition, time, and place, European, and later, American architects turned to past civilizations and cultures for inspiration. Prominent among these borrowed forms were those of China, India, and the Islamic world, collectively known as the “Orient.” To the European public, swayed by travelers’ tales, popular writings and illustrations in books and magazines, the “Orient” represented an idealized world expressing a multitude of fantasies—the desire for the unusual, the forbidden, and the exotic. While Europe had been in contact with the Islamic East almost since the birth of Islam in the 7th century, intensified cultural interaction occurred during the Crusades and later in the course of European colonization in the 18th century. The Royal Pavilion at Brighton, England, designed by John Nash in 1815-22, best exemplifies eclectic architecture of this era. Nash’s Pavilion inspired numerous imitations on both sides of the Atlantic. The American writer Washington Irving’s romantic literary celebrations of Islamic Spain, *Conquest of Granada* (1829) and *The Alhambra* (1832) whetted the American public’s appetite for oriental objects. The great international expositions of the second half of the 19th century in London (1851), New York (1853-54), Paris (1855), Philadelphia (1876), Chicago (1893) and the like brought the East to the West in a more concrete form: “typical” Arabic, Saracenic, Indian, North African, or Persian buildings and entire “oriental” streetscapes were erected on the fairgrounds further fuelling interest in the East and giving tangible shapes to the Western mind’s fantasies.

Unlike Europe, whose geographical proximity to the East and colonies in Africa and Asia necessitated continuous interaction with the Orient, America remained removed from the land mass of the old world. “Oriental” architecture reached America by longer routes, via Europe (in particular through Britain), rather than by direct contact across the Pacific. While some American architects did travel to the Orient, the majority had to rely on imaginative interpretations of certain contemporary renderings through paintings and literary accounts. Later, in the 19th century, two other sources of information on Islamic architecture emerged: pattern books, which illustrated characteristic Islamic motifs and offered suggestions for their adaptation to contemporary use, and professional trade journals published primarily for practicing architects. The trade journals offered professional and scientific analysis; for instance, of Islamic brick-laying techniques, accompanied by carefully numbered diagrams explaining exactly how to duplicate an Alhambra stalactite vault, unlike the travelogues, which merely evoked a picturesque, romantic quality of oriental decoration.

In America, the Islamic style was popularly understood as incomplete without a large spherical dome, arches of different kinds (particularly the horseshoe variety), minarets, towers of varying sizes, especially of the Turkish origin, horizontal bands of colored bricks, decorative terra cotta—all the devices to invoke an Islamic mode. Although the Islamic style in America was derived from sources as diverse as India, Persia, and Turkey, one style that gained most popularity was Moorish design. Besides the literary works of Washington Irving, three factors are responsible for the appeal of the Moorish mode. One was the American public’s familiarity with this style in Latin America, while a second was the cultural influence of Spain in the US

South West and Florida. The Moorish style had an added justification in terms of utility, given the dry and arid climate of Southern California and the Southwest.

Patronized by wealthy individuals or upscale companies, or adopted by American religious or fraternal organization, the Islamic style, interchangeably known as being Arabic or Moorish, was utilized in the design of a range of building types: domestic, civic, commercial, theatrical, sacred, and fraternal.

DOMESTIC



(Fig. 1) Iranistan, Bridgeport, CT

In domestic architecture, buildings in Islamic style ranged from country estates to city residences. Sometimes the client's association with the Orient dictated the architect's choice of Islamic forms, while at other times fantasy or sheer fancy was the source of inspiration. In addition to this, the architect occasionally employed other unusual forms to express his client's individuality, a hallmark of American culture. Three outstanding examples of such fantasy-based, Islamic-inspired architecture are villas in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Natchez, Mississippi, and St. Augustine, Florida. On his large estate near Bridgeport, Connecticut, showman P.T. Barnum constructed an elaborate three-story mansion with two-story wings in 1848, called Iranistan. It was designed by the architect Leopold Eidlitz (Fig. 1). The central element was crowned with a large onion-shaped dome; smaller, somewhat narrower bulbous domes topped the flanking elements, more reminiscent of Damascene, rather than Iranian, homes, despite the villa's name. The entire façade was overlaid with a screen of wooden horseshoe arches rising in three tiers from the ground level. In addition to the residence, the stables, conservatories, and other dependencies were all built in the Islamic mode. Barnum stated that the inspiration for his villa, Iranistan, came directly from the "general plans of the Brighton Pavilion," with the plans supplied to him through English agents. Before it was burnt down in 1857, Iranistan inspired Connecticut architect Henry Austin to design Wallis Bristol House and Dana House, in New Haven; the Moses Beach House, in Wallingford; and Larned House, in New London, all of which he designated as "Mohammedan Style."

Despite its origin in the New England area, the Islamic mode in America was not a regional style. Examples could be found elsewhere in the United States. Samuel Sloan, the Philadelphia architect, provided the design for Longwood, a villa in Natchez, Mississippi, built in 1861.

Sloan's interest in the Islamic style can be traced to his first pattern book, *The Model Architect*, which included designs for two villas strongly influenced by Oriental architecture. In his book, Sloan wrote that the ideal location for an oriental villa would be "on the banks of some [of] our noble streams, the Mississippi or the Hudson." In 1861, Sloan found the opportunity to build what he once merely drew in the Islamic mode. Longwood was constructed near the Mississippi for the Southern planter Haller Nutt of Natchez, who chose an octagonal design, two stories in height, surmounted by a bulbous dome. On the first level are projecting wings that are one story high, attached to alternate fences of the octagon. Verandas, elaborately decorated with Islamic motifs, connect these wings. The onion-shaped dome appears on a large drum with pierced windows in coupled arches. Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of the Civil War, the villa was left incomplete, with the exception of the nine-room first floor. It is now a National Historic Landmark, owned by the Pilgrimage Garden Club.



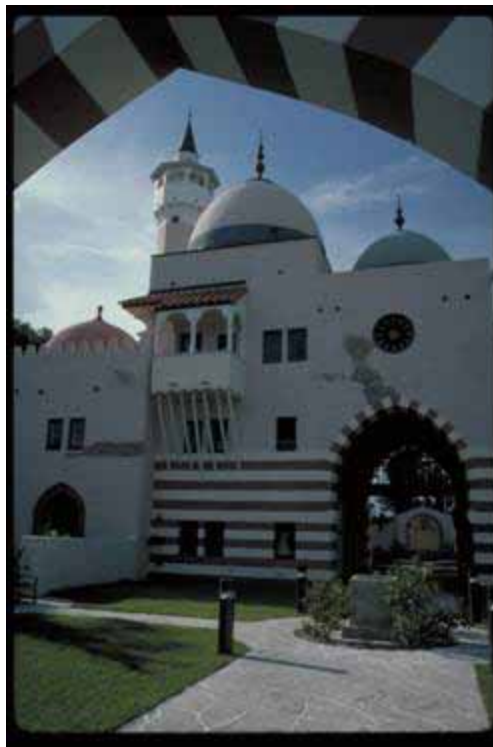
(Fig. 2) Zorayda Castle, St. Augustine, FL
(Florida Souvenir, St. Augustine, FL)

The third spectacular example of Islamic domestic architecture is Zorayda Castle in St. Augustine, Florida. It was designed by architect Franklin W. Smith in 1882 as his own winter home, and built out of concrete covered with Islamic stucco decoration. (Fig 2) By using concrete construction in conjunction with "Moorish" stucco motifs, Smith felt he could create a popular and inexpensive style for domestic architecture. Given its explicit "Moorish" inspiration, it is not surprising that a prominent position was accorded in the interior to a "Moorish Court" that recalls the splendor of the Alhambra in Spain, centered with a planter that was once a fountain surrounded by lions, after the original Courts of Lions. In California, Moorish-influenced domestic architecture can be seen in the Andalusia Apartments in West Hollywood, a series of housing complexes developed by Arthur and Nina Zwebell in the 1920s. Built in 1929, the Andalusia was the Zwebells' most ambitious and fanciful project. It was designed in a Moorish revival style and featured duplex apartments, with a forecourt for cars, and a central court decorated with hand painted tiles and lushly landscaped for residents.

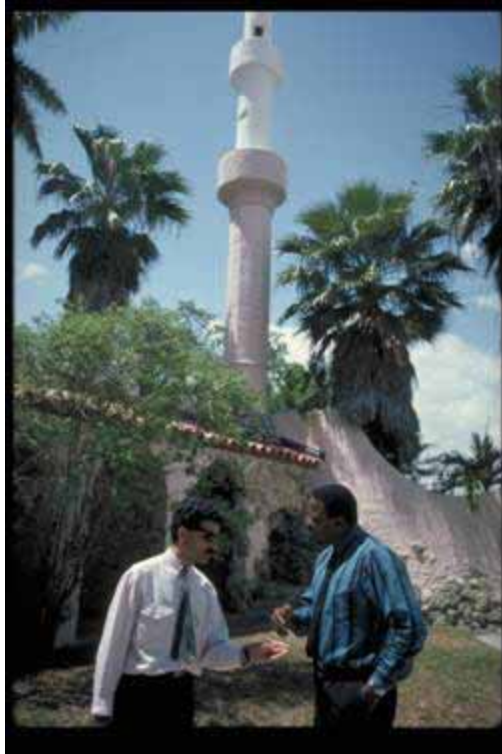
CIVIC



(Fig. 3) Opa Locka Complex, Opa Locka, FL
(*Saudi Aramco World Magazine*)



(Fig. 4) Opa Locka Complex
(*Saudi Aramco World Magazine*)



(Fig. 5) Opa Locka Complex
(*Saudi Aramco World Magazine*)



(Fig. 6) Opa Locka Complex
(*Saudi Aramco World Magazine*)

While these architects and builders were content with only a few villas as examples of oriental architecture, young multimillionaire-aviator turned developer Glenn Curtiss built a whole city, Opa Locka, in this style. Originally constructed in a wedge of suburban Miami, Florida, it is now a community of some 75 buildings. Conceived as the “Baghdad of southern Florida,” the buildings have the horseshoe shaped windows, minarets, domes and crenellations prominent in the domestic Islamic style. The most important building is the city hall, built as a fortified citadel with thick crenellated enclosure walls. The building is covered with large domes and framed by four minarets, three small cylindrical towers and one huge octagonal tower. Other Islamic-style buildings in the city include the railroad station, the archery club, the archaeological museum and the Opa Locka hotel. (Fig. 3 - 6) According to architectural consultant Michael Maxwell, the multimillionaire’s fascination with Arabesque design was sparked by the 1924 silent film *The Thief of Baghdad*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and Julianne Johnston. Thus the advent of the films heralded a new medium for architectural inspiration, hitherto restricted to the influence of pattern books and trade magazines. Donald Trump’s Casino, the Taj Mahal (built 1990) in Atlantic City, New Jersey is perhaps the latest example of this appropriation of the exotic.

COMMERCIAL

In America, examples of Islamic-inspired commercial architecture prior to the Civil War were largely confined to bazaars, markets, and exhibition halls. Although the use of the Islamic style in the construction of these buildings suggested that exotic wares were being sold or displayed inside, Western goods were more frequently found in stock rather than products from the Orient. These structures were often decorated in a combination of historical styles, featuring both Moorish arches and medieval tracery. One such building, designed with a “mixture of Saracenic, Gothic, and Egyptian details,” was the Cincinnati Bazaar in 1826. Seneca Palmer designed it for Frances Trollope, an Englishwoman who had moved to the area the previous year. A 19th century woodcut of the two-story, onion-domed structure shows the façade divided into a three-bay Islamic “arabesque” arcade, separated by Egyptian lotus-form columns. The main entrance, at the head of a curving, divided staircase, opened into a large area devoted to the display and sale of commercial objects. The upper story, which served as a ballroom, was reached by a circular stairway at the center of the building. The interior was described as in “the style of the Alhambra, the celebrated palace of the Moorish kings of Spain.” Trollope hoped to elevate the level of American awareness and appreciation for Islamic architecture while at the same time obtaining financial success through her bazaar sale profits. Unfortunately she failed due to Cincinnati’s location at the time as a frontier city. After Trollope, the bazaar changed hands many times and also underwent corresponding changes in the building’s functions.

Unlike Trollope’s project, architect Richard M. Hunt found more success in the employment of Islamic forms within cast iron commercial construction. Rejecting the concept that iron façades should imitate masonry construction, Hunt searched for another, more fitting style to be used for the iron storefront. Hunt found his answer in Islamic decoration for two basic reasons. First, the clear, crisp, linear patterns of Islamic detail were well suited to cast-iron metallic properties; second, since iron must be painted to preserve it from rusting, the “Moorish” style, with its bright, decorative colors, was both utilitarian and aesthetically appropriate. Hunt designed a cast-iron store using Islamic motifs in 1871-72. The store, which was built in lower Broadway, in Manhattan, received high aesthetic acclaim both in America and abroad. A 20th century example of an Islamic-influenced commercial structure found in the same area is the McGraw Hill building, called the “jolly green giant” due to its bluish-green terra cotta bricks, unprecedented at

the time it was built. Located at 330 West 42nd Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, Manhattan, Midtown, New York, N.Y., the McGraw Hill skyscraper was designed by Raymond Hood and was completed in 1931. A dome, tower and windows in the Alhambresque mode top the last story.



(Fig. 7) Giralda Tower, Country Club Plaza, Kansas City, MO
(Highwood Properties, Inc.)



(Fig. 8) Country Club Plaza (Highwood Properties, Inc.)

Emblematic of Seville, Spain is the Giralda, which was once the minaret of a huge congregational mosque, and now serves as the bell tower of Europe's third largest cathedral. In the US, the Giralda is duplicated in at least two cities: in the Midwest in Kansas City, Kansas and in Irvine, California, a Los Angeles suburb. Built in 1922, the Kansas City's Country Club Plaza's 130-foot Giralda Tower is a city landmark (Fig. 7, 8); the Irvine Spectrum Center's Giralda, built in 1980, serves a similar function in its respective city. The popularity of Moorish

style, even in as recent as the 1980s, indicates that Americans' fascination with Islamic Spain is not just a period fad.

THEATERS AND HOTELS

The association of the tales from the Arabian Nights with exotic fantasy also made the Moorish style ideally suited to buildings for entertainment. A number of theaters and music halls were built in the Moorish mode, continuing well into the 20th century, as evident from the plethora of "Moorish Movie Palaces" still found in America. Additionally, the concept of "oriental pleasure palaces" led to the construction of resort and urban hotels decorated with lavishly detailed façades that reflected the influence of Moorish motifs.

Architects Kimball and Wisedell designed the Casino Theater on 39th Street and Broadway (1880-82, demolished in 1930), which had Alhambresque capitals and horseshoe arches and windows in its entranceway. The architects created an elegant combination of curved and flat shapes, connected by a circular tower capped by a dome. Another New York architect, H.P. Knowles, designed the City Center of Music and Drama (originally a Masonic temple), which had a tiled, arched Moorish façade and plaster Mamluk domes with muqarnas. San Francisco's Alcazar Theater is another outstanding example of the Moorish style.

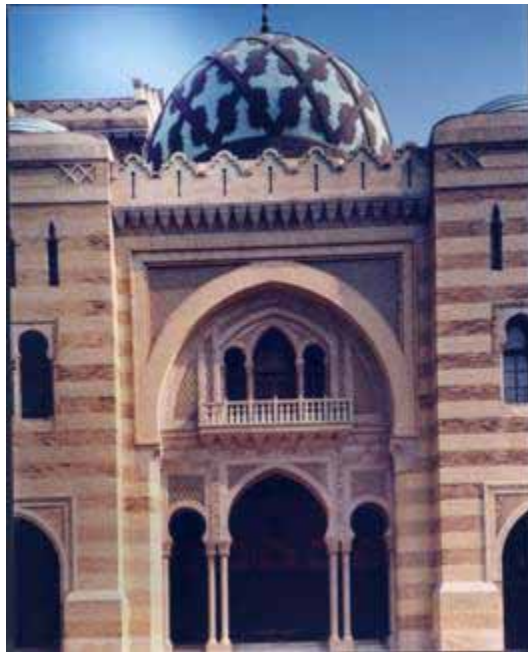
In a Boston suburb, Brockton, Massachusetts's City Theater is another example of a Moorish-style theater. This building, designed by Boston architect John A. Fox, combined a theater, a Masonic Hall, and the Brockton town offices behind a Renaissance façade. The theater interior was executed with extremely ornate Moorish detail, including horseshoe arched boxes and proscenium. The concept of the Arabian fantasy was even carried out on the curtain, which presented an oriental scene featuring an onion-domed building. Sadly, the theater was demolished in 1954.



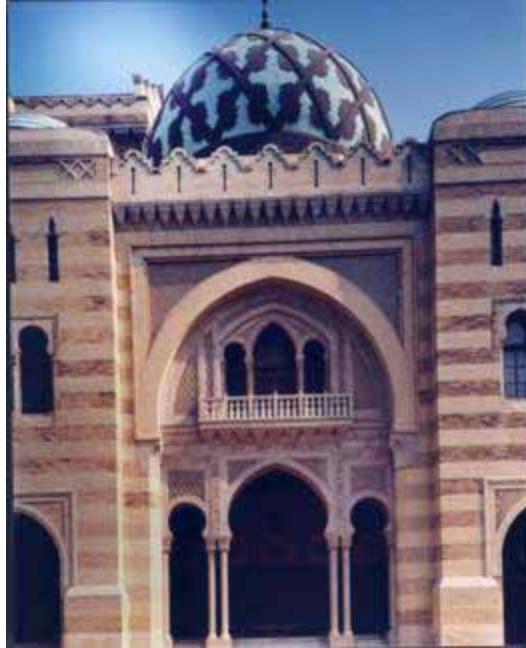
(Fig. 9) Fox Theater, Atlanta, GA (Michael Portman)



(Fig. 10) Fox Theater stage (Michael Portman)



(Fig. 11) Fox Theater (Michael Portman)



(Fig. 12) Tour of Fox Theater (Michael Portman)

The most elaborate version of Moorish-style theater architecture in the United States is the Fox Theater and Cinema in Atlanta, Georgia, designed by Marye, Alger and Vinour (1929). Oliver J. Vinour was a Beaux-Arts-trained Frenchman who reputedly turned to picture books on Nubia and the Holy Land, as well as postcards brought back by a friend touring the Middle East, for inspiration in his work. The walls of the two main street elevations are branded with alternating courses of cream and buff brick, like the Cairene buildings; the horseshoe-headed window recalls Mamluk Cairo. (Fig. 9 - 12). As many as 27 theaters throughout the United States have been designed in the Moorish style, serving as strong evidence of the style's popularity.

SACRED

American religious organizations that had real or imagined roots in the Near East also built house of worship, shrines and meeting halls in the Moorish style. One of the most conspicuous uses of Moorish forms in the architecture of post-Civil War America was in the synagogue. Jewish houses of worship appeared in American cities from New York to Galveston, Texas, with "Moorish" minarets rising above the horseshoe-arched façades in fantastic combinations of historical and imagined forms. These "Moorish" synagogues were inspired by a 19th century German architect, Gottfried Semper. He believed that the purpose of the building could be best expressed by evoking a historical association with it, and since the Jews originated in the Near East, Semper concluded that an Oriental-rooted architectural style would be appropriate for his synagogues. Exactly how the architectural motifs of one religion could ever be considered "appropriate" to another was never successfully resolved; nevertheless, the "Moorish" style became an accepted architectural treatment for the synagogue well into the 20th century and continues to appear today. In 1840, Semper designed a synagogue in Dresden with features derived from "medieval Saracenic architecture." Semper's students followed suit in designing a synagogue in similar spirit in Leipzig. Designing a synagogue in the "Moorish" style served at least three clear-cut purposes. First, it differentiated the temple from the style of Christian churches. Second, the Moorish style appealed to many Jews during the Golden Age of Jewry

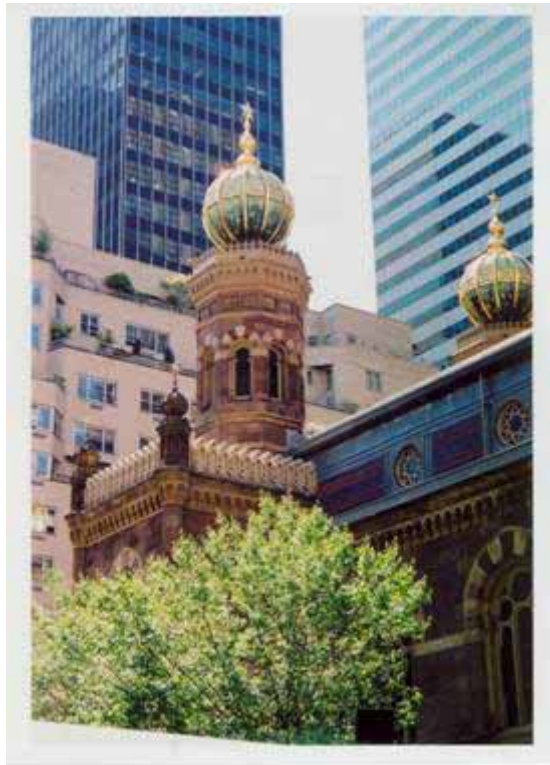
under the benevolent and tolerant rule of the Islamic rulers of medieval Spain. Lastly, the Gothic revival style, which was the prevailing idiom for church architecture in the United States during the 19th century, was perceived as inappropriate for synagogues as it was associated with an era of European history marked by anti-Semitic persecutions. Since there were no mosques of distinction in America at that time, (Omar Khalidi, Archnet¹; Archnet²) the question of mistaking “Moorish” styled synagogues with Islamic places of worship did not arise.

One of the first American synagogues to be influenced by the wave of European “orientalism” was designed for the Congregation of B’nai Yeshurun on Plum Street in Cincinnati in 1864. The architect was James K. Wilson, a local designer, who created a mixture of Gothic and Near Eastern elements both within and without. The gray brick exterior, featuring two lofty minarets, flanking the main façade, has been related by one author as being related to the 14th century Syro-Egyptian architecture of the Mamluk dynasty. Isaac M. Wise, rabbi of the Plum Street Synagogue at the time of its construction, considered the building to be based on the Alhambra, and subsequent publications of the synagogue describe it as an “Alhambra temple with slender pillars and thirteen domes.”

A synagogue in the Moorish mode, which set the style for Jewish houses of worship in New York City for more than half a century, was Leopold Eidlitz’s Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street in Manhattan. Eidlitz’s structure, built in 1868, was a brilliant exercise in Moorish forms, as was his Iranistan, discussed earlier. An imaginative use of color was evident on the exterior, where a yellow and brown stone façade contrasted with alternating courses of red and black tile on the roof. The interior was composed of variously shaped arches, with dominant numbers of horseshoe and cusped forms. The carved and molded “Alhambresque” decoration was brightly painted in reds, yellows, and blues, with gold accents. Although demolished in early in the 20th century, the building was very much admired in its day and was widely illustrated in contemporary publications.



(Fig. 13) Central Synagogue, New York City, NY
(C.K. Bill, Central Synagogue Archives)



(Fig. 14) Central Synagogue (Anne Mininberg, Central Synagogue Archives)

Central Synagogue is New York City’s longest continuous used synagogue. It was designed by the Jewish architect Henry Fernbach in 1870, and was built in the Moorish Revival style with a “basilica” floor plan. In common with other Moorish-style synagogues, the interior features a variety of ornate patterns, including original stained glass windows over the doors, a painted ceiling, carved wood, and a floor of encaustic tiles made in England.

But even more important than these patterns are the two large ornate arches (one on the west, bimah end, and one on the east, choir loft end) reminiscent of, if not directly inspired by the *mihrab* (a niche in the center of the qibla wall) in the mosques! (Fig. 13, 14). Another example of a “Moorish”-styled synagogue is George Street (B’nai Jacob) in New Haven, Connecticut. The Moorish style remained popular until the late nineteenth century. However, assimilated Jews found it too exotic and deemed it “un-American.” New classical edifices considered to be more austere and monumental began to be built, reflecting the favored style of America’s wealthy Jewish elite. The success of Jewish Americanization encouraged many congregations to cast off both Moorish and European historical styles and embrace contemporary forms.

FRATERNAL



(Fig. 15) Tripoli Temple, Milwaukee, WI
(Scofield Souvenirs)

A number of fraternal orders and benevolent societies that played a prominent role in American society during the later 19th and early 20th century included the Shriners, properly known as the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine for North America, drew on Near and Middle Eastern sources both for philosophical guidance and for architectural inspiration for their meeting halls and regalia. Philadelphia's Lu Lu Temple was the first building to be built solely to house a Shrine temple. This precedent-setting structure is, in many ways, a model by which we can understand all subsequent Shriners meeting halls. These meeting halls exhibited three basic qualities: a neo-Moorish style, floor plans prominently featuring a banquet hall, and an auditorium with a stage and secondary service spaces. Most often the architects were also affiliated with the Shriners. The Lu Lu Temple, designed and built in 1904 by Frederick Weber, was based on the Alhambra, the icon of Moorish architecture.

In the Midwest, there are two very well known examples of Shriners buildings. One is the Medinah Temple on North Wabash Avenue in Chicago. Built in 1912 by Huehl and Schmidt, the Medinah Temple's Moorish revival style is conveyed through the design of the entrances and many of the second floor windows, framed within horseshoe-shaped arches. Intricate patterns of geometric forms or stylized plants—the arabesques form—surrounds the door and windows. The second widely known example is the Tripoli Temple on 3000 West Wisconsin Avenue, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. (Fig. 15) The Temple's official publications describe it as a "rare example of Indian Saracenic architecture," no doubt due to its central dome, clearly inspired by the Mogul India, though the dome is surrounded by slender Ottoman minarets, an entrance decorated with turquoise Persian motifs, and horizontal bands of colored bricks recalling the Moorish style.

CONCLUSION

What could the various buildings and styles discussed here convey to us? First, American people of various backgrounds were fascinated by the material culture of the Orient, particularly the Middle and Near East, as early as the 19th century, at a time when the U.S. was least in contact with non-European lands. As a country far removed from the East, its culture seemed most

exotic and unusual. For some Americans, adapting the architectural style—real or imagined—of that geographic area guaranteed individuality to their buildings. For religious and ethnic groups, such as the Jews, it provided an architectural style distinct from the Christian churches, one associated with their period of peace and prosperity under the Umayyad caliphs of Spain. For others still, like the Shriners, the use of the Islamic mode linked their meeting places with the supposed geographic place of their fraternity's origin.

LIST OF FIGURES, PHOTOGRAPHS TO BE CREDITED

Figure	Building Name/Location	Photo Credit
1	Iranistan, Bridgeport, CT	
2	Zorayda Castle, St. Augustine, FL	Florida Souvenir, St. Augustine, FL.
3 – 6	Opa Locka Complex, Opa Locka, FL	<i>Saudi Aramco</i> World Magazine
7 – 8	Country Club Plaza, Kansas City, MO	Highwoods Properties, Inc.
9 – 12	Fox Theater, Atlanta, GA	Michael Portman
13	Central Synagogue, New York City, NY	C.K. Bill, Central Synagogue Archives
14	Central Synagogue, New York City, NY	Anne Mininberg, Central Synagogue Archives
15	Tripoli Temple, Milwaukee, WI	Scofield Souvenirs

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²Khalidi, Omar. "Import, Adapt, Innovate: Mosque Design in the United States," *Saudi Aramco World*. November/December 2001. pps. 24-33. <http://archnet.org/library/documents/one-document.tcl?document_id=9161>