

THE WOMAN, THE MOSQUE AND THE MALL

A NATION'S SOCIAL NORMS ARE INSCRIBED ON THE WALLS AND FLOORS OF ITS PUBLIC SPACES—LEADING SANDRA HIARI TO ASK, WHAT SPACE IS LEFT FOR WOMEN IN JORDAN'S PUBLIC SPHERE?

Words by Sandra Hiari. Photographs by Alaa Sukhni.

HERE IS A familiar scenario: I'm on my way to appointments or meetings (part of that modern, urban lifestyle) and in need of a place to pray. In a city like Amman, what place comes to mind?

The mosque, or the mall. Depending on which part of the city I'm in, many options may surface, though not necessarily pleasant. Looking for the women's prayer hall at a mosque, a sign usually points around a corner to a narrow alley. If it's late (or even if it's not) and I'm alone, do I really want to walk down that alley?

This is just one common example of how even a modernizing society makes space for women separate, and unequal. In Jordanian society, as in many others, girls are raised to accept spatial limitations. We are taught to occupy space, but not to control it. Our local architecture reveals the different frames of reference for women and men. These gendered realities of our built environment are influenced by social agendas scripted by men, and are often more concerned with masculine dominance than social or religious equality.

Mosques in Jordan are a highly gendered setting, in which men are provided space, and women are deprived of it. Typically,



women have a separate prayer hall which is located in the basement or the attic. It's common to see a spatial discrimination between these halls in terms of height/scale, accessibility, and the nature of the layout.

Take the Kalouti mosque, a popular one located in the affluent area of Al Rabieh. This

is one mosque a substantial number of women actually use. This mosque originally had one prayer hall specially designated for women—located on the second basement floor. Later, as it became more of a local destination for praying, the mosque was expanded, and another hall was granted to women, once again

located in the basement.

A cross-section of the building (before expansion) shows a remarkable difference in height between the spaces. Women are squished in their hall, while men have an open, airy setting to pray in, including a dome. Here is an architectural experience that clearly serves one gen-



THE KALOUTI MOSQUE IN ABDOUN: A GRAND, MAIN ENTRANCE FOR THE MEN, WHILE WOMEN MUST WALK DOWN A NARROW ALLEY AND AROUND THE BACK TO PRAY.

der. The men have a grand entrance that is located on the main street. However, the women have to move in a narrow area between the outer edge of the mosque and the boundary wall to reach flights of stairs that lead to the hall. The entrance is harder to access, and this area is well out of public view; its seclusion makes it unsafe.

This can be seen in many other mosques. One particularly interesting example is of the Zatarra mosque, which was designed by a well-known modernist architect in the Jordanian scene, but never constructed. On the plan, the modernism shows in the building's style and appearance, but gender-wise it isn't "modern" at all. The women's prayer hall is in the cramped attic, and the plans show the same height-compression issue as in the Kalouti.

The rules of the Ministry of Religious Affairs require architects building mosques in Jordan to design a prayer hall specially designated for women, but in cases where there is limited land area and the financial means are strict, this condition is dropped. So, in reality, women end up avoiding many mosques altogether.

Where does this spatial discrimination come from? Is it religious? One of the first mosques in Islam comes to mind, that of the Prophet Mohammad's in Medina. A prominent historian on early Muslim architecture, K. A. C. Creswell, describes the mosque as a structure that began as a house, and was designed as such. Its plan was constructed as a square, with a large courtyard and a sequence of huts set adjacent to one wall.

In the Hadith, it is mentioned that a place was designated in the courtyard for the poor; many people used the space permanently or temporarily. One person who lived there was a black slave girl who had embraced Islam. The use of the court was not limited to men or women, access wasn't based on gender or on race.

Is discrimination then the law of Jordan? Constitutionally, all people are equal before the Jordanian law, no gender-based discrimination is stated. But it's well known that the reality on the ground is different. In recent years, women's empowerment has been a major

concern of the government and female royal figures like HM Queen Rania.

On a list of the most equal governments in the world, Jordan ranked 117th, according to the latest figures from the inter-parliamentary union. Women in Jordan occupied 8.4 percent of parliamentary seats (only 6.4 percent in the lower, elected, house). The regional average for the Middle East and North Africa is was 9.2 percent, and the world average was 18.4 percent.

Women make up only 15.6 percent of Jordan's labor force, according to the Department of Statistics' 2006 figures—despite the fact that women make up more than half of the students in Jordan's universities. Almost three quarters of all illiterate Jordanians are women. Socially—and physically—women remain excluded.

Having seen how the mosque positions itself as uninviting to use, one would think that the mall would be more considerate. Shopping, after all, is an activity that was developed in the 18th Century around the largest agents of consumer spending: women. Window shopping, shopping sprees, spending full days in the mall all came into being as a consequence of the effort to establish a safe environment for women living in urban contexts. Malls (and other outlets of capitalism) created this gender-safe arena by sweeping women off the streets into climate-controlled, surveillance-equipped interior spaces.

The mall is a woman's space, and a modern one. But are malls' prayer halls more inviting to women? The answer is once again, no. Malls developed first in the West, under secular auspices, and were imported to a religious East with little contextual processing. Several of Amman's landmark malls do have prayer rooms, but they are put in what appears to be "leftover space," behind service doors. This is true for both men's and women's prayer rooms. Capitalism puts up a nice face, but it is still universal and generic in nature.

As a woman who needs to pray, I find neither new or old, East or West has a place for me. What do I do now, if I'm on the run? I pray in clothing store changing rooms. ■

EVEN IN THE NEW ADDITION TO THE KALOUTI, THE DISTINCTION IS CLEAR: MEN ASCEND THE STEPS TO THE PRAYER HALL, WHILE WOMEN MUST DESCEND INTO THE BASEMENT.

THE ENTRANCE IS HARDER TO ACCESS, AND THIS AREA IS WELL OUT OF PUBLIC VIEW; ITS SECLUSION MAKES IT UNSAFE.

DIAGRAM OF THE KALOUTI MOSQUE, SHOWING THE DIFFERENT ENTRANCES FOR MEN AND WOMEN

