

Women's Places and Spaces in Contemporary American Mosque

MARYAM ESKANDARI

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

"No, sister, you can't go in that way! There's a back door around the corner." I can't tell you how many times those words were said to me over the years as I tried to enter through the front door of many mosques around the United States. There seems to be this unwritten, yet nationally recognized and practiced, tradition of leaving the worst space for the separate women's prayer hall. From collecting funds to replace the soiled carpet and repaint the chipped walls, to silently walking in the front entrance and ignoring the disapproving glares as they make their way to the balcony rather than submit to the back prayer room turned childcare, through the years I've seen women protest against this dismissive treatment in a variety of ways.¹

The debate of gender equality surrounding the framework of the mosque has been a heated argument for over a century.² Profoundly, the questioning of gender ignites usually after Muslims visit the Kaa'ba, in Mecca. As the worshippers circulate, make "tawaf" together, and fulfill one of the five obligatory pillars of Islam, they visually are connected with the notion of equality in this holy site, "a place of deeply meaningful ritual practice for Muslims and a powerful symbol of parity: gender, race, ethnicity, and class where women and men have historically gathered together for prayer in a shared space. It has been exemplar of the ideal and practices of Quranic fairness – at the site of revelation (Badron 2009, 336)." Nevertheless, the 1500 American mosques or Islamic centers (Haddad 2006, 64) built throughout the United States have been struggling with this particular issue of gender and space. Often times, these retrofit buildings raise specific questions on the American Muslim identity struggling with the woven issues of religion and culture that is brought over from Muslim countries, such as: where do the men stand? How

much space is allocated for women and what happens to the hermaphrodite's position in a mosque?

The American mosque is a new type of building that is being developed in the urban context of American society. This new building lacks any historical literature and often finds itself constantly in the absence of discourse of the originality and aesthetic development as it weaves itself into the American context. To understand this "new building type", the emergence of a new theological design vocabulary and programmatic space that is articulated in the architecture, is to first understand the human expression, cultural integration and Islamic jurisprudence that is derived from the users to erect a form. The American mosque is comprised by users that are from various backgrounds: immigrant Muslims, converts, and American-born. Thus, the integration of this syntactical hybrid design is a challenge and to satisfy all demands more often than not results into a dispute amongst members of the American Muslim community. Furthermore, depending on the client the architect has to deal with the execution of space delicately.

The programming of the gender and design space of the American mosque has to formulate in a way that is equivocal to the users. Furthermore, the problem escalates when the elders of the community, who are more fervent and conventional, are pushing for a space that they are familiar with, from various parts of the Muslim world, and implementing them to the American context.

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duction of similar templates found in Muslim countries, which are from the immigrants' homeland, creating a space that is not necessarily bounded by the religion, rather a creation of space that is culturally nostalgic. For example, the Islamic Cultural Center of Washington designed by Mario Rossi played on the notion of memory, "by recalling the past, Rossi's design for the mosque makes a statement about memory and image, in two principal ways. First, it ignores the American architectural context; it makes no effort to address the prevailing architectural language or the sense of place. Second, it reinforces memory by using traditional crafts and calligraphy that were imported from Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, along with the craftsmen whose skills were engaged in the decoration of the mosque" (Kahera 2002, 69). Since the historical context does not exist, many architects feel the need to engage in precedences from countries that they are familiar with, and the countries which finances these American mosque, encourage their own culture, architecture and allowed for women to participate in the mosque.

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This direct emulation of mosque and implementation of the design from other Muslim cultures does not come without problems. Through various investigations and research have been conducted, there is a clear indication that suggests that the American Muslim women, are limited in regards to space allocated to them in the mosque "with regards to the right of worship" (Kahera 2002, 4). The architectural programmatic layout of the mosque creates a design that expresses a "patriarchal ethos: men are accorded the main or central space in the mosque, which they enter directly by a main door, and assume the role of the imam, leading the communal prayer and giving the sermon" (Badran 2009, 336). Typically, a "women friendly" mosque has been designed in a way that allows the women's entrance through a separate door, usually on the opposite end or the furthest distance away from the main entrance. The women are then "regulated to upstairs, downstairs, or adjacent facilities that are often inferior, cramped and out of sight or hearing of the imam" (Badran 2009, 336).

The gender separation that are executed in mosque designs reflect the inequality and limits the opportunities for women's access and participation in the mosque as well as the decision making process of the community as a whole. Similarly, if the mosque does not completely exclude women's attendance, "the separation in congregational prayer usually relegates women to an inferior place, either behind the male prayer lines or invisible to them in congregational setting" (Wadud, 175). Reformist scholar Margot Badran indicates, that "if allowed access to the main prayer space, [women] are typically positioned behind rather than alongside men. (Badran, 2009 336)." Nonetheless, they have yet to surmount the unrestricted separation barrier, in order to allow equal prayer lines of women and men side by side.

I personally believe that it is the architect's responsibility to create a space that is intriguing, psychologically effective to the users and within the boundaries of Islam. However, architects, particularly Muslim architects, have neglected their responsibilities in order to avoid any tensions that may arise with the Islamic community as a client. For example, Ahmed Mokhtar, an architect, writes that "Male and females pray in separate spaces or in separate zones in the same space. They have segregated access to the prayer spaces and consequently segregated access to the ablution spaces. Females will not pray during the menstrual period which results in relatively less space requirements for them and consequently smaller ablution space" (Mokhtar 2006, 2).

Eliminating women from the prayer space because they are menstruating is rather a weak argument. The place that one is to prostrate is to be clean and pure, the worshipper is to be in the state of purity in order to qualify for prayer is in parallel with all religions, however to state that a woman who is menstruating is impure and transfers her impurity to others has been borrowed by other "Abrahamic" faiths and implemented into Islamic practice nevertheless is un-doctrine with Islam.

"And they ask you about menstruation. Say: it is an illness [adan]; therefore keep aloof from the women during menstrual discharge and do not go near them until they have become clean; then when they have cleansed themselves, go into them as God has commended you; surely God loves those who turn much, and he loves those who purify themselves." (Quran 2:222)

The contribution of modern scholars who interpret the Quran in a gender-egalitarian way such as Asma Barlas, argues that there is a misconception of menstruation and the notion of purification in prayer spaces. She states that the "root meaning of 'adan' are 'damage, harm, injury, trouble, annoyance, and grievance'." Menstruation, therefore, is defined as hurt, an injury and so on, not pollution or contamination. Even if we view menstrual blood as polluting, it does not follow that the woman or her body are polluting since there is no statement to that effect in the Quran. Moreover, in the Quran the menstrual taboo extends only to intercourse; it does not extend to sexual intimacy, nor does it call for social ostracization. There are hadiths, or religious traditions, to the effect that "menstruating women may go to the mosque, participate Hajj, in prayers, and even have the Quran read on their laps, following the Prophet's example" (Barlas, 161). Through these examples from the Quranic text we are to conclude the misinterpretation often executed and to derive to that there are no religious or legal imperatives that prohibit the women from attending the mosque. In fact, a handful of Islamic countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iran allow for women to attend the mosque despite their menstruation. Hence, in many of the contemporary mosques in America, a set of rigorous "man-made" chauvinistic rules have been applied to deviate women from attending the mosque, and more often than not architects, attain to the demands that are set forth.

Nevertheless, there are a growing number of women who are now demanding their place in the mosque and want equal access to the main prayer space. American Muslim women, and particularly converts are often well educated in Islam. These women often find themselves at odds with the idea of "various zones in the mosque space, because of the Judeo-Christian traditions that they were raised in. Consequently, the American-born, demands for new accommodations and integration of traditions with modernity within the boundaries of Islam and the American context (Kahera 2002, 15)." For example, women in North America have paved the way for other Muslim women to embrace the role of the imam, and lead prayers for both men and women. On March 18, 2005 Amina Wadud led a group of men and women in prayer, an attempt to prove that women have equal Islamic rights and have the ability to lead prayers and be the imam. The prayer

was then followed by a sermon that is often given by religious male leaders of the community. Many of the observers accused the Islamic Professor, as a stunt to support her long time friend Asra Nomani's book, "Standing Alone in Mecca."

In 2003, during the eve of the first day of the holy month Ramadan, Nomani walked through the main doors of the mosque of Morgantown, West Virginia to attend Friday prayers. The concern was not the act that she attended the Friday prayers, rather the mere action of walking through the main doors of the mosque. The main entrance of the mosque has been designated specifically for men, and where she chose to sit was in the prayer space on the main floor of the mosque which has been traditionally occupied by men. Many Muslim women did not agree with the "unnecessarily confrontational" challenges that these women brought upon themselves. However, "one person compared it to the statement made by Rosa Parks in her celebrated refusal to sit in the back of the bus" (Haddad 2006, 62).

While many moderate scholars such as the Grand Ayatollah Saanaei applauded the action taken by both Wadud and Nomani, he encouraged this notion of equality a decade earlier and has been talking about it for the past couple of years. In 2007 in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, the leading international magazine, Saanaei, one of the most liberal and moderate Islamic scholars of Iran, issued a fatwa stating that "Women are not only able to lead prayer while the men pray behind them, rather women are capable of becoming the *Wali al-Faqih* (the Shia' muslim guardian jurist). Therefore the actions of Wadud and Nomani, where within the boundaries of Islamic jurisprudence and backed by the fatwa that had been already issued a decade earlier.

The other debate that Ayatollah Saanaei has put on the forefront is the highly debated space of which hermaphrodites are to stand for prayer in the mosque. Nevertheless, in a recent issued fatwa that he emailed to me, he states: "there is no problem for the man and woman to stand next and after each other and hermaphrodites / transvestites who are difficult to be recognized as male or female should observe two sexes of male and female while fulfilling the religious rulings. And according to the previous answer in regards to place [there is no problem for the man and woman to stand next and after each], there is no problem of where the hermaphrodites

and transvestites are to stand (Grand Ayatollah Saanaei email message to author October 2010)."

The action for creating a space for women, hermaphrodite and all genders in the mosques is a bold move. The current generation of Muslim women has been so accustomed to attending the mosque that the participation of the mosque community is part of their daily lives. However, "many immigrants" women come from cultures in which women seldom, if ever, attend the mosque. For example, the theologian Ibn Hazm narrated from Abu Hanifa and Malik when he discouraged Muslim women from attending the mosque stating that "Abu Hanifa and Malik endorsed the idea that women's prayers in their own houses are better for them. Abu Hanifa allowed elderly women special permission to attend the night prayer and the dawn prayer, but he did not approve of them attending the two feasts, that is, Eid al-Adha and Eid al-fitr. Malik appears to be more cautious, saying, 'We do not stop them going out to the mosques and allowing the elderly to attend the feast prayers and the prayers for rain'" (Kahera 2002, 129). These zealous attitudes have carried over to modern practices, even in the West, and being implemented in American Muslim communities.

Nevertheless, religious scholars often refer back to the prophet of Islam, "Prophet Muhammad, not only allowed and but even encouraged the participation of both women and men in communal worship, this had not been the general practice in Islamic societies" (Haddad 2006, 62)." The American Muslim community needs to redirect it's precedence on Mecca and the Prophet's mosque in Medina, to engage in the fundamental foundation of Islam, where culture and religion are not mixed, in order to implement those in American Muslim society. Therefore, when immigrants move to the states and are confronted with these scenarios in the mosques, they "look with disdain at such activities, which they considered to be much too Americanized (Haddad 2006, 63)."

However, these reactions are not aligned with the America Muslim society.

Since the Quran never mentions the specific spatial allocation of a mosque, many Muslims rely on hadiths. However, in the Quran, it points to three explicit examples that are to be articulated regarding the mosques. First, the Quran mentions the

prayer niche, mihrab, or sanctuary (Quran 3:37). Secondly, the direction that Muslims are to pray in (Quran 2:142) and last, we see that Mary was able to pray alongside men, God commands her to "bow down [in prayer] with those [males] who bow down" (Quran 3:34). Thus, Mary participates in the congregational prayer with the male members of the community. God accepted her service at the temple despite her gender. "Oh! Mary! God has chosen you and purified you and chosen you over the women of all nations" (Quran 3:42).

Many hadiths and examples lead by Prophet Muhammad encouraged women to attend the mosque. The mosque of the Prophet was historically used as a public gathering for both men and women. He decided to build his house and mosque at the place where his "she-camel stopped." The initial phase of the house, only consisted of only two apartments, but later seven more were added to meet his familial needs. "Each apartment was given to one of his wives, and the rest of the mosque was dedicated to communal use. When the Prophet constructed Ayesha's apartment, he opened the door into the inside wall of the mosque that faced Ayesha's apartment. The mosque and her room were so close that the Prophet had only to lean his head from the mosque to Ayesha's doorstep" (Kahera 2002, 122). "Thus, the sunnah or tradition of allowing women and men free public access to the mosque was established by explicit approval of the Prophet" (Kahera 2002, 130).

Nevertheless, if the Quran and the sunnah were traditions and the concept of gender biased did not exist, why has this become an issue? After the Prophet's death, the congregational Mosque of Medina was used as a "contested space", and the expansion by succeeding caliph altered the configuration of the mosque. As Kahera describes "the seminal edifice was attached to nine inner apartments; these domestic rooms were later destroyed by the succeeding caliphs to expand the building (Kahera 2002, 121). After the alternation and expansion there was no designated space set aside for women to participate and "this would suggest that the allowances that were made for women to use the building during the lifetime of the Prophet were restricted in later periods (Kahera 2002, 122). This alternative type of space that was just to be an expansion excluded the women of the community from appearing in public and participating in

their rights of public worship, set the precedent for future generations to continue to exclude all genders except for men. However, in the past century women are reclaiming their right.

In America, Muslim women are educated, and the most independent in comparison to other women in Muslim countries. American Muslim women, particularly the younger generation, are demanding equality and equal participation in the religion. On the contrary, Muslim women immigrants' ideas on the role of women in Islam vary in comparison to the American Muslim women. These women believe that their roles are to be the tradition wife, who is "obedient to and supportive of her husband and that her sphere of activity should be confined as much as possible to the home" (Haddad 2006, 145). However, this type of "homebody" and contiguous dwelling of adhering the culture to the faith is not comprehensible to the urban fabrication of America. Rather, these well educated, professional Muslim women are affirming their faith to the Divine and distilling the Quran and the traditions to a susceptible interpretation that is fitting to the American context.

American Muslim women have the most responsibility in the States to make sure that the next generations of the Muslim community are familiar with the basis of the Quran and the traditions. These women are on the forefront of managing Islamic schools, having weekend programs at the mosque and teaching across America. They are ambassadors to the inter-faith dialogues that happen in the community and are responsible for future generations. Ergo, the question that arises, is where should these women turn to, in order to get their religious education, if the foundation of the religion is adhered to the mosque? How are young boys, who are to be husbands, and father of the next generation to view the American Muslim women, when she is demeaned by the other men, and not taken seriously? What will he perceive of these women who are their teachers?

I believe that Muslims, are responsible for accommodating and realizing the needs of fellow Muslims and the next generations. I believe that Muslims, whether a woman, man, hermaphrodite, transvestite and etc. have a responsibility to make their voices be heard. As the future Muslim American generation grows and as the number of Muslim

women surpasses the men, we must celebrate that achievement through architecture. As an architect, it is my responsibility to create new things, test new ideas, push design boundaries, challenge and understand a faith that is so malleable and be responsible as I leave my design impressions on earth. After all, Architecture is art and a symbol of our time. Just like art which is an expression, it is bounded by rules and theory that is modified and expressed to resonate in the landscape and accommodate the present and the future generation. Nevertheless, the religion of Islam is on the forefront of our time. It is a religion which is constantly changing and trying to adapt to the American culture of its time. Mosques in America are an expression and should be a symbol of the reformation of a modern Islamic practice of which should be initiated here in this country. The first step of Islamic reformation is designing an architecture that demonstrates equality through all aspects and is compliant to the American culture.

including the prestigious Aga Khan Award in Islamic Architecture for her work on Muslim women's spaces in contemporary American mosques. In 2007 the American Institute of Architects awarded her with the Associate of the year award for commendable architecture and design. Maryam is a contributing writer for PBS Frontline and New York's *Elan Magazine*. She has lectured on issues of Islamic Architecture in America, and Modern Islamic Architecture at Harvard University, a visiting critic for Yale University School of Architecture and Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture. Her current touring exhibition: "Sacred Space? (Re) Constructing the Place of Gender in the Space of Religion" executes and documents over 100 mosques focusing primarily on issues of gender and space.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Women in Mosques" last modified November 21, 2010, <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/print/3587/>
- 2 In 1911, in a conference that was taking place in Egypt, the tradition of the "she-camel" was narrated to campaign for the rights of women in public worship spaces. The woman who was at the forefront of the "legal rights of women who has been denied the right to perform public worship" was Bahithat al-Badiyyah

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Maryam Eskandari is an architect and a graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with a focus on modern and contemporary "Islamic" Architecture in the West, and in particular gendered aspects of devotional spaces. Maryam has received many prestigious awards