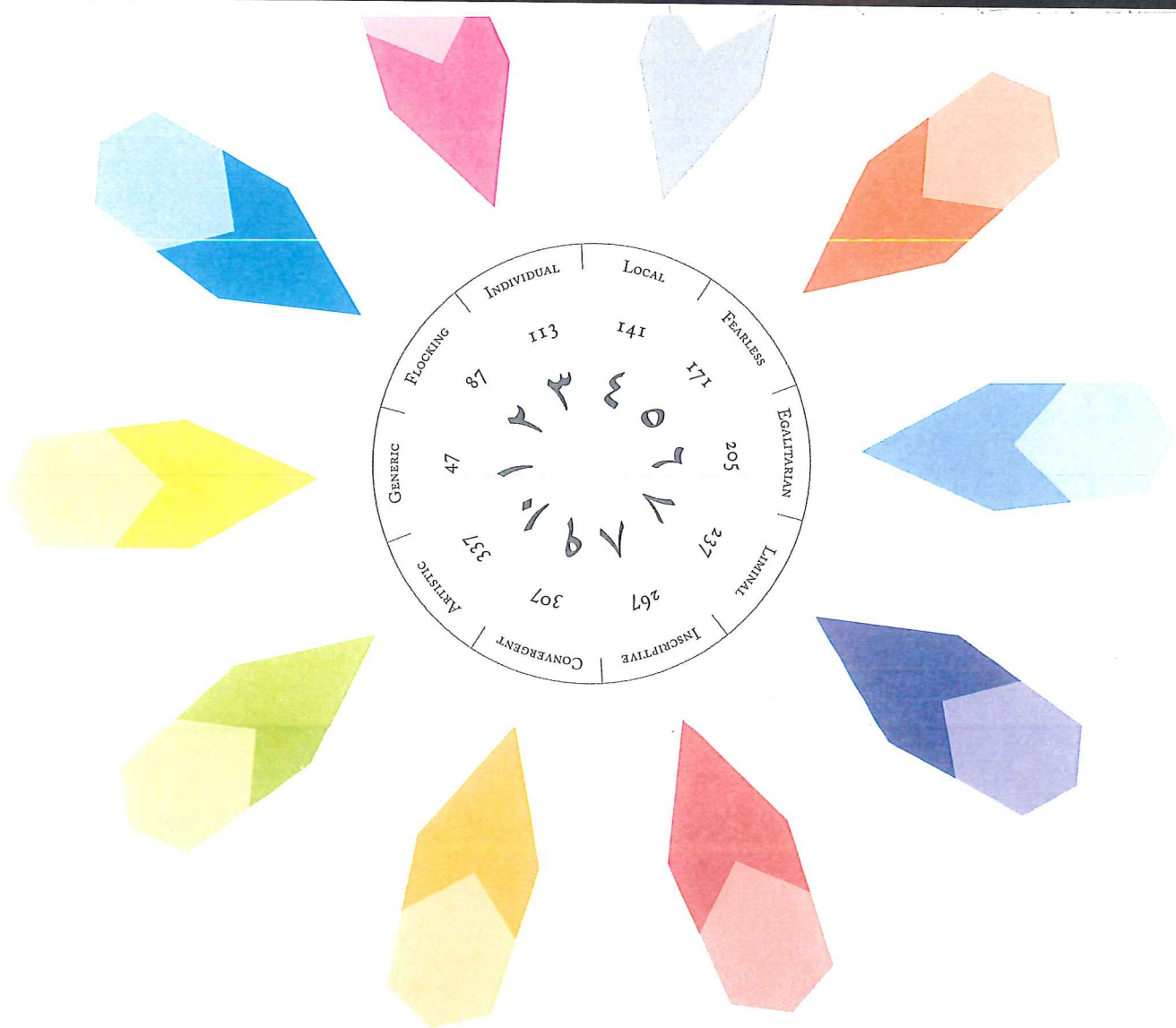


MOSQUE MANIFESTO

Propositions for
Spaces of Coexistence

AZRA AKŠAMIJA



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FOREWORD

Finbarr Barry Flood

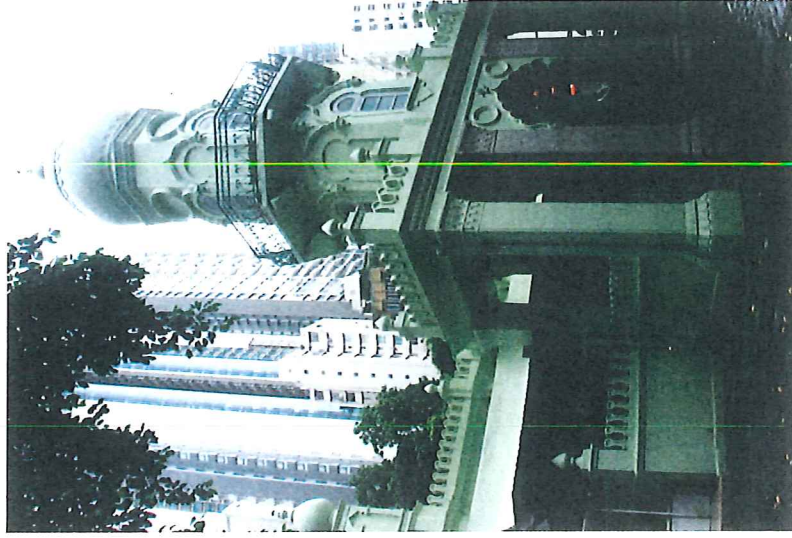
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"Professor, please stop asking about architecture.
... Architecture means nothing. It is the deeds of
the mosque, the deeds which make a mosque." ¹

ON AUGUST 15TH, 1915, the Muslim community of Hong Kong laid the foundation stone of a new mosque (fig. 0.1). The mosque was funded by Haji Muhammad Ishaq Elias, a resident of Bombay and member of the Memon community of Gujarat, which had been involved in trade since the sixteenth century. Trade and travel were embedded in the very fabric of the building. Not only was

its colloquial name the Lascar Mosque, Lascar being the name for Indian sailors who served on European (in this case British) ships, but the foundation stone was laid by one Sulaiman Karim Muhammad, named in the foundation text as a *nakhuda*, a ship-owner, using a term that had designated Arab and Persian traders operating around the Indian Ocean basin and beyond from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward. Placed in a prominent position on both the foundation text and the interior of the entrance gate to the mosque was the *tughra*, the monogram of the Ottoman sultan Mehmed V (r. 1909–1918). Mehmed's role as caliph made him an appropriate figurehead for the mosque just a few years before the war then raging in Europe would lead to the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire and the end of the caliphate.

This conjunction of colonialism, mercantile cosmopolitanism, and transnational Islam was reflected in the choice of style for the new mosque of Hong Kong, which adopted the



Jamia Mosque, Hong Kong, China (1915).

fig. 0.1

contemporary Indo-Saracenic style championed by British architects in India. This combined the symmetry of neo-classicism with architectural forms and ornamental details derived from earlier Indo-Islamic (and to a lesser extent "Hindu") monuments, its synthetic qualities designed to express the harmonious coexistence that flourished under the aegis of British rule.

In the adoption of this invented historical style, imperial cosmopolitanisms coincided with emergent nationalisms, which fueled a search for modes or styles of architecture appropriate to the articulation of ethnic, regional, and sectarian identities. The phenomenon was premised on a question as old as Islam itself, a question that is central to Azra Akšamija's *Mosque Manifesto*: What does, what *should* a mosque look like?

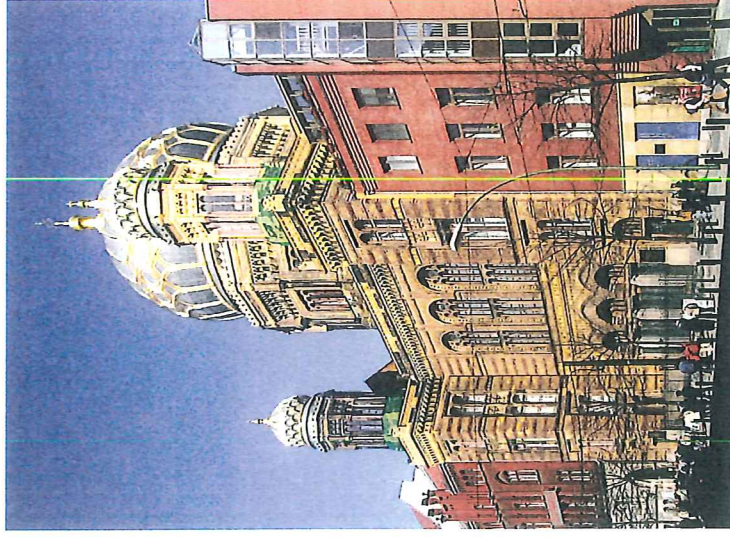
The question was and is especially pressing in diasporic communities. There are interesting parallels here between the search for a de-

fining architectural style among the Jewish communities of Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth century, and the styles adopted in diasporic mosques, such as Hong Kong's Friday Mosque. One striking feature of both diasporic mosques and synagogues is a tendency towards self-Orientalization through the common use of specific architectural forms (prominent domes, for example), and the use of ornamental details designed to evoke either a generic "Eastern" ambience or specific regional affiliations. The use of exoticizing vocabularies to stake minority claims to representational space is directly related to questions of public visibility, questions that underlie many of the propositions outlined in the ten modes of imagining the mosque presented in the manifesto that follows.

The sheer Orientalist exuberance of a building such as the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue in Berlin (1866) might, for example, be understood as responding to a long history of attempts to restrict the visibility of minority

faiths and their impact on European cityscapes (fig. 0.2). This was an undertaking that operated across inter- and intra-sectarian divides. Until today, the main Catholic cathedral of Dublin is located not on any major thoroughfare, but on a minor artery of the city, its location determined by the legal restrictions on public displays of Catholicism at the time of its construction in 1825.

If the marginalization of minority spaces of worship lies at one end of a spectrum of visibility, at the other lie the spectacular experiments with Orientalist forms and tropes exemplified by buildings such as the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue. It was by such extravagant means that access to public representation was staked in synagogues built in Europe and the United States in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as in many recent diasporic mosques. This self-Orientalization might be understood as a kind of strategic essentialism, but ultimately risked contributing to the perceived "otherness" of minority faiths.



Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue,
Berlin, Germany (1866).

fig. 0.2

Once again, there are earlier European histories of representation and Islam to be excavated here. During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, for example, Catholic polemicists frequently compared the image-free whitewashed spaces of Reformed worship with those of Ottoman Turks, accusing Protestants of transforming Christian places of worship into “Muhammedan churches” (*Ecclesias Mahumetanis*).

Seen across the *longue durée*, what is striking is the de facto distinction made between the historical appropriation and valorization of highly visible “Islamic” forms for the architecture of commerce and pleasure—in exotic follies or tobacco factories, for example—and contemporary attempts to proscribe or regulate the use of the same forms in places of Muslim worship constructed in European cityscapes now designated pristine cultural artifacts. That these (often defunct) hollowed out signs of “Oriental” architecture have sometimes served as sources of inspiration for European mosques, or that

Muslim communities have sometimes tried to convert them for worship, only underlines the self-evident contradiction.²

The inconsistencies and paradoxes in these battles over access to representational space are rich, if disturbing. They include the ban on the conduct of group prayer in streets introduced in France in 2011 (despite the difficulties in securing planning permission for new mosques), and related attempts to compel the legibility of the female face while denying public visibility to Islam. The two were explicitly linked in posters urging a vote in favor of the 2009 referendum to ban the construction of minarets in Switzerland, posters that juxtaposed the image of a generic Muslim woman wearing hijab and niqab with a series of missile-like Ottomanizing minarets. Seldom mentioned were the antecedent histories of prescribed visibility, including spectacles of stripping and forced unveiling integral to campaigns of modernization, both as autonomous campaigns of self-occidentalization and as part of colonial

attempts to enforce the liberating values of modernity on cultures held to be rife with taboos on looking and seeing.³ A connection between the metaphorical iconoclasm that banishes taboos inimical to secular modernity and the stripping of the veil was made explicit in one of the infamous Danish caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed published in 2003, which linked taboos on seeing the face of prophets in Islam to taboos on viewing female faces.⁴ The dissemination of caricatures ostensibly made the case for a “no holds barred” approach to representation that contrasted sharply with contemporary attempts to regulate the urban representation of Islam. Adding to the ironies and paradoxes in these battles over representation and visibility, state regulation of the public modalities of religious expression is often presented as integral to liberal values of free expression.

Combining artistic practice with theoretical approaches to architecture and its potential to create spaces of encounter and coexistence,

the work of Azra Aksamiya engages many of these contradictions and paradoxes, while also challenging the construction of essentialized identities, however strategic. Aksamiya’s ten-point manifesto moves beyond a rigid adherence to purely formal solutions intended to mediate between emplacement and displacement, alterity and identity, offering instead a variety of imaginative and innovative answers to the core question: What does, what *should* a mosque look like?

Aksamiya’s elegant responses to this question also address the attempted regulation of Muslim bodies and mosques by blurring or even collapsing the distinction between the two. Much of the work looks to the body as the most fundamental unit of aggregation and (re)configuration; dynamic, portable, and perpetually in motion. Interrelationships between architecture, the body, and dress are deep and long-established, not only in the xenophobic discourses of contemporary Europe, but even in Islam itself. Implicit in the centrality of

the body, as in the adoption of the manifesto format for Akşamija's ten-point proposal, is a call to action deeply rooted in the habitus of daily life. Far from depoliticizing the modalities of architecture, the shift in emphasis from macropolitics to micropolitics that is central to Akşamija's work challenges the canonical nature of both in ways that go beyond the immediate question of Islamic identities and visibilities. As Niliüfer Göle noted in a quite different context, "[t]he body, as a sensorial and emotional register, links the implicit nonverbal practices and learned dispositions (namely habitus) into a public visibility and conscious meaning. Public visibility refers to the techniques of working from inside out, transforming implicit practices into observable and audible ones."⁵

Central to the embrace of micro-practices is the idea of modular or generative units—clothing, kilims, prayer rugs—ephemeral textile spaces that are metonyms for the individuals through which communities are constituted as aggre-

gates. In this way, Akşamija's work negotiates between the solipsism of subjectivity and the collective constitution of a community capable of infinite expansion and endless reconfiguration in ways that transcend the sum of its parts. The principle is exemplified by *Kunstmoschee* (2007) or *Flocking Mosque* (Manifesto 2), a cluster of geometric flowers formed by constellations of pillows, rugs, slippers, and prayer beads, the chromatic and formal echoes of the whole recalling blue glass discs designed to keep the evil eye at bay.

In addition to the intermedial aspect of such ephemeral formations, questions of elaboration and scale are especially relevant here, contrasting with many of the formal and ornamental solutions adopted in contemporary mosques, especially congregational mosques (diasporic and other). These generally hark back to a narrow range of historical sources, chief among them imperial mosques designed to articulate dynastic as much as religious identity. By contrast, the mosques that Akşamija proposes as

spaces of coexistence draw upon the quotidian vocabularies of domestic and vernacular space. In this, they follow a foundational precedent exemplified by the use of the Prophet's house in Medina for prayer, among many other functions. Often overlooked in favor of major congregational mosques, many of the most beautiful mosques built within the Islamic world and by Muslim minorities living beyond the boundaries of the *dar al-Islam* represent adaptive uses of domestic and vernacular (rather than imperial) architectural forms, imbuing the space of prayer with an intimacy and warmth often lacking in more monumental iterations (fig. 0.3).

In Azra Aksamija's work, the modular use of carpets, dresses, and textiles as the materials of making and marking resonate with her enthusiasm for geometric membranes as a way of relating the structures outlined in her manifesto to antecedent histories of the mosque. Within the context of this manifesto, the centrality of textiles constitutes the performance of the

quotidian as a potent site of memory, negotiation, and resistance. The materials of making are quite literally woven and interwoven with complex narratives of accommodation, aspiration, and contestation that the occlusion of Islam's European histories seeks to regulate, if not obliterate. For Aksamija, the resulting mnemonic and ontological density constitutes the woven world as efficacious, as a *Monument in Waiting* (Manifesto 8). Here a Bosnian kilim hand-woven by refugee women incorporates fragments of prayer beads collected in the mosques damaged during the 1992-1995 war, a telling of tradition and trauma that is both synecdoche and substitute for the prayer spaces destroyed in the war. Aksamija's aspiration is to see this portable, woven witness to the attempted obliteration of cultural traditions (as well as to their capacity for endurance) bear its silent testimony before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague.

Mobilized as witnesses, the textile cultures that are central to many of the spaces imagined in Akšamija's manifesto challenge the very notion of the monument, with its bombastic grandeur and often overtly patriarchal associations. The challenge is not simply to those who stand outside the cultures of Islam, but also to those situated within. The reconfiguration of the monumental that is central to Azra Akšamija's work points to an engagement with questions of gender that are directly relevant to the very concept of a mosque, and that underlie her highly effective deployments of the quotidian.

In her mobilization of small-scale and apparently mundane artifacts and her insistence on their agentive qualities or potentialities, Azra Akšamija acknowledges a debt to the anthropologist Alfred Gell. It is worth noting Gell's interest in the animating effects of Islamicate geometrical patterns, such as the delicate membranes and trceries that are central to Akšamija's own work. These are exemplified by the shingle mihrab discussed in *Convergent*



Kvirike Mosque, Kobuleti, Western Georgia
(Eighteenth century?)

fig. 0.3

(Manifesto 10), whose pattern appears animated to a viewer moving in space.⁶ Once again, the primary characteristic of this built feature is its ever-changing visual properties, which lend it a dynamic and even ephemeral quality.

Akšamija's co-option of specific forms, fabrics, and materials invests the undertaking with further valences that negotiate between regional particularities and diasporic cultural flows. Typical in this regard is the *Dirndlmoschee*, the wooden shingles of the Vorarlberg Mosque, or the *Lace Masbrabiya*, works whose forms, materials, or techniques perpetuate Austrian cultural traditions, now reconstituted in dialogue with the aesthetic histories of immigrant Muslim communities. In the *Lace Masbrabiya*, the delicate hand-wrought ornaments of Middle European are reconfigured to evoke the hand-turned wooden lattices that screened the windows of Cairene and Damascene houses. These were popular tropes in the images of European Orientalist painters, not only for their picturesque qualities, but also for their ability to evoke the

occluded world of the domestic spaces that lay beyond. In more recent neo-Orientalist scholarship, the *masbrabiya* window has been depicted as a symbolic form that exemplifies a specifically Islamic approach to seeing, viewing, and representing, one radically at odds with the single-point or linear perspective of European humanistic traditions.⁷ No less than the minarets or head-coverings rejected on the streets of contemporary Europe, therefore, the image of *masbrabiya* engages questions of visibility and emplacement that are directly relevant to entangled histories whose existence, legacy, meaning, and future implications are the subject of contemporary contestations.

Throughout the work, there are traces of these contestations. The resulting tensions within the work resist any recourse to reductive or simplistic visions of coexistence as *Convivencia*, the inverse of our dystopian present. The ill-fated "Ground Zero Mosque" in New York was, after all, originally planned as a community center called Cordoba House in a nod to the paradigm

of utopian coexistence.⁸ By contrast, Akšamija insists on the “the affirmative dimension of contestation,” the paradoxical potential of agonistic struggles to catalyze mutually transformative cultural and even ethical processes. Akšamija is undoubtedly correct, but this is hardly a popular position at a time marked by shrill hysterias that insist on the immutability of identity within hegemonic visions of belonging.

Far from immutable, the spaces that exemplify the principles of this manifesto are both events and places, momentary happenings defined by the body in its performance of prayer. As much as concrete or mortar, dresses or textiles, therefore, time itself is among the most fragile of the materials that constitute the various spaces that Akšamija advocates or imagines. In the end, it is perhaps time that provides a resolution of sorts to questions of alterity and identity, displacement and emplacement, through its relentless operations on the material fabric of the praying subject. Beyond the high-profile hysterics about the public visibility of Islam in

Europe, beyond the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, and beyond the battles over minarets and veils, it may be the decision of Europe’s immigrant Muslim populations to be buried on its soil that offers the best hope for the future. There could be no better vote of confidence, no more serene expression of belonging than the graceful calm of the cemetery and mosque at Altrach (Manifesto 10), in which light is filtered through an ever-changing screen of wooden shingles whose fixity of form and local materials recall deeply rooted histories of Middle European architecture. In Akšamija’s work, these are now convergent with a patterned and ever-changing play of light whose wax and wane provides a brilliant index of time passing, harnessing that most allusive and fugitive of media to the illumination of the mihrab and qibla wall, which orient the worshiper towards Mecca, diminishing the distance between here and there, then and now.

NOTES

¹ Imam Hafiz of the Masjid Alfalah, Queens, New York City, quoted in Jerrilynn D. Dodds and Edward Grazda, *New York Masjid: The Mosques of New York City* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2002), 67.

² Nebahat Avcioğlu, "Identity-as-Form: The Mosque in the West," *Cultural Analysis* 6 (2007): 91–112.

³ Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* (London: Earthscan, 1989), 62. See also Esther Benbassa in Marti Bunzl, ed., *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 87–88.

⁴ Finbar Barry Flood, "Inciting Modernity? Images, Alterities and the Contexts of 'Cartoon Wars,'" in Patricia Spyer and Mary Margaret Steedly, eds., *Images That Move* (Santa Fe: SAR, 2013), 41–72.

⁵ Nilüfer Göle, "Islam in Public: New Visibilities and New Imaginaries," *Public Culture* 14:1 (2002): 173, 177.

⁶ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 76–77.

⁷ Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2011).

⁸ Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick, & Jerrilynn D. Dodds, eds., *Corvencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christianity in Medieval Spain* (New York: George Braziller, 2007).

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of Art, 2012). Recent books include *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (2009), awarded the 2011 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Prize of the Association for Asian Studies for the best English-language book on South Asia, and *Globalizing Cultures: Art and Mobility in the Eighteenth Century* (*Ars Orientalis* 39, 2011), co-edited with Nebahat Avcioglu. His current book project is provisionally entitled *Islam and Image: Polemics, Theology and Modernity*.