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Tammy Gaber

**Beyond the Divide: A Century of Canadian Mosque Design**

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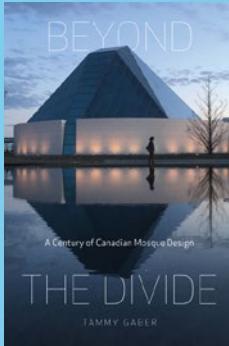
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As an undergraduate student in the fall of 1994, I walked into the School of Architecture at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, through the loading zone doors at the back of the school. This entry opens into tall, double-height space, with a roof gantry that extends perpendicular to the long length of the hall ahead. The garage doors were open as I strolled into the building, accompanied by the loud roar of the wood and metal workshop dust collecting system. As I entered, to my right, the massive doors of the Michael Coote Gallery were propped open. A lanky man, his long hair pulled back into a ponytail, was wearing safety glasses and slowly sanding smooth the profile of what happened to be the in-progress dome of the soon-to-be Kingston Islamic Center. Over the course of the next few weeks, I visited the gallery frequently, watching the dome take shape and watching Steve Beverley (the craftsman) work its materials, slim trusses disappearing under layers of foam and cladding. We talked about the dome, and how it came to be. One of the mosque architects, Gulzar Haider, now Dean at Lahore's Razia Hassan School of Architecture at Beaconhouse University in Pakistan, was



then faculty at Carleton, teaching classes in design studio, morphology, and Islamic miniatures. Dr. Haider would meet us in the gallery and show us drawings of the dome, its construction and proportions, with beautiful, mathematical sketches drawn in ink on graph paper. He described the trusses in the prayer-hall as a thicket of trees, their metal spans and the future skylights above them as canopies of architectural leaves and light, and the dome as a highlight over the women's prayer space beneath it. The mosque was described as an analogue of a Kingston grain tower and barn, with simple materials, and an early sketch shows it in an eastern Ontario farm setting, the dome rising up out of patch of wheat and corn. The dome eventually would be moved from its workshop space in the school, trucked on the back of a semi to Kingston, Ontario, where it would be installed on the building described in Tammy Gaber's excellent and necessary new book, *Beyond the Divide: A Century of Canadian Mosque Design*.

Dr. Gaber, an Associate Professor of Architecture and Director of the McEwen School of Architecture at Laurentian University, has compiled

in *Beyond the Divide* a multifaceted and layered text in a thoughtful and timely addition to Canadian architectural history. Her book works in multiple ways, all interwoven into a volume that is at once a compelling initial survey of Canadian mosques, a parallel history of Muslim communities across Canada, an initial probing of questions of gender and spatial segregation and their architectural implications, and a concluding index of building plans that were the subjects of Dr. Gaber's cross-country fieldwork. The book, following a general introduction, is front-ended with six surveys that pair major themes of the text to a regional context. The prairies, which begin Dr. Gaber's study, are linked to the formal establishment of Islam and the Muslim community in Canada. Quebec follows, with an emphasis on the "potential of converted space." Third, the text looks west to British Columbia and explores "purpose-built" design, then east to Maritime mosques contextualized with an investigation of these sites as "hubs of community space." The shortest chapter of the text couples questions of orienting mosques in Canada and the extreme north, and the final section of *Beyond the Divide* takes up the prompt of the book: the knotty questions of gendering mosques in Ontario, informed, as Dr. Gaber writes, by "years of study on the history and practice of contemporary mosque design, always with an eye to women's place and space within them" (219).

*Beyond the Divide* is thoughtful and necessarily constrained as a text, while addressing an important

lacuna in Canadian architectural history and in Canada's built environment. The surveyed buildings and their parallel social contexts of local and immigrant histories, peoples, ideas and efforts are given centre focus, and deservedly so. We have here, at last, a collected and more complete image of the history of Canada's diverse Muslim communities, and of their attempts to build home, hub and community, in new geographical, climatic and social geographies. Dr. Gaber demonstrates how individuals and community organizations worked and wrestled with both pragmatic and everyday questions, in addition to the larger religious and spiritual concerns that underpinned their efforts at crafting a sense a sense of belonging in new and unfamiliar places, while maintaining essential connections to familiar religious terrains and antecedents. The conceptual structure of the book allows for these questions to be explored across the diversity of the Canadian landscape, and in turn, as enduring issues in local spaces. *Beyond the Divide* allows for a fuller locality to be foregrounded in what can often become a more universal (and less particular) study of Islamic spaces. The book substantially expands and builds on Hassan-Uddin Khan, Kimberly Mims, and Renata Holod's engagement with the limited Canadian mosque landscape in their text, *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons and Designs Since the 1950s* (1997). Twenty-Five years on, Dr. Gaber has provided the first

attempt at an expansive and local accounting of Canada's Islamic community since the establishment of the Al-Rasheed Mosque in Edmonton in 1938. While Dr. Gaber's study includes ninety of the "approximately 160–180 mosques" (10), the surveyed buildings in *Beyond The Divide*, add, critically, the voices of Muslims, worshippers and community organizations into the conversation around architecture. This is a great strength of the book, and Dr. Gaber's decision to prioritize this, over the more typical and perhaps more expected typological monograph (common to architectural publications), celebrates both diversity and unity, the celebrated and the contentious.

While the voices of designers and architects (such as Sharif Sembel and Gulzar Haider) are present in the text, *Beyond the Divide* is a plural project of community rather than the usually valorized singular voice of design. This raises a potential future trajectory for this work: a deeper dive into the design of Canadian mosques. The Gulzar Haider Design Group, for example, was a multidisciplinary collaborative that included young designers of Chinese, Iranian, Egyptian and South African descent. Conversations around and for the design of some of the mosques mentioned in Dr. Gaber's texts (including the Kingston Islamic Center, the Edmonton Islamic Academy, and early designs for mosques in Vancouver) engaged directly with questions of tradition and modernity, with the entanglements of gendered space and of cultural/religious needs and perceptions, and ultimately, of the search

for Canadian expressions of Islamic architectural identity.<sup>1</sup> *Beyond the Divide* is an attempt to do this from the ground up, as it were, rather than the drafting board (or computer screen) down.

It is of course, impossible to disentangle the spiritual from the spatial in this context. Mosques, as catalysts for worship and connection to the divine, are instruments of community, of faith, and togetherness. Etymologically the words in Arabic for mosque, for congregation, for assembly and collectivity are tied together and share similar roots structures. Mosques are, ultimately, spaces that are intended to facilitate '*ubudiyah* (which very loosely translates as "acts of worship"), but this is a worship that is informed and guided by loving devotion and loving submission. And this '*ubudiyah* is spiritually centred in the heart, where one (potentially) sees the Divine. But this is not a review from the perspective of religious studies, but centred rather in the discipline of architecture. The discussion of gendered space in Dr. Gaber's book is particularly powerful as seen in the index of architectural plans that conclude *Beyond the Divide*. Here, one can see quite clearly the implications of the gendered assignments of space across these drawings. The discussion of seeing in *Beyond the Divide* is rendered through three categories—no view, partial view, and full-view—of how the space for women in the mosque connects to the fuller optical experience of worship, through views of the mihrab and the mimbar, and of the more total expanse of the prayer hall. Helpful as a spatial prompt, I would offer that

the potential of “view” and “viewing” (perhaps even inspired by the same etymological entanglements described above) could serve as a useful conceptual premise, particularly in extending the conclusion of Dr. Gaber’s text. Perhaps a result of the necessary constraints of the text, *Beyond the Divide* ends a little abruptly, but this is acknowledged by Dr. Gaber when she writes “there are varying cultural trends in the Islamic world regarding women’s spaces in mosques, and a study of this needs separate research” (218). Perhaps that additional study will help additionally nuance Dr. Gaber’s already excellent work. What might it ultimately mean to view in part, in full, or not at all, in the context of both the physical and the spiritual space of the mosque itself? What does it mean to view (or not) in a Canada still wrestling with the fraught, tragic (and ongoing) issue of settler colonialism, or in the face of increasing Islamophobia? How does architecture begin to wrestle with other existing divides?

I drive to Toronto often, and as is our usual habit, we’ll stop just past Kingston (exit 613, to be precise) at the Kingston Islamic Center. This place conjures up all sorts of meanings, memories and histories. I’ll see its familiar dome above the trees, a mosque-barn amidst the slow urbanization of its surroundings and am always struck by how local the project aimed to be—in its design, its building, and its realization. This locality is a core—and a gift—of Dr. Gaber’s expansive text, particularly when she enables the reader to see the fullness *and* the localness of these places across Canada’s

Islamic landscapes of place. Dr. Gaber’s books is an attempt, through architecture, to help make a place, a home, an orientation, and to overcome—or at least to try to—some divides.

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1. Full disclosure: The author of this review was both a student of Dr. Gulzar Haider, as well as a member of GHG (Gulzar Haider Design Group), from 1994–2005. GHG’s core designers included Raymond Chow (now an architect and principal at gh3 in Toronto), Marjan Ghannad (an architect and professor/coordinator of the Architectural Technology program at Algonquin College in Ottawa), and Muhammad Moussa, an architect in the United States.