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Mount Menoikeion Seminar

Spirituality and Senses

Multiculturalism and Sacred Architecture:  
Religious Spaces in Changing Times

Berlin is currently experimenting with an architectural project that has never been done before. The project is called The House of One and its unique characteristic is that it will house a synagogue, a church, and a mosque under one roof. While this structure that enables three Abrahamic religions to be confined to one building does not exist anywhere in the world, this architectural ambition is not surprising in a city like Berlin. Berlin is often described as the largest construction site, a playground for architects to reconstruct and give the city a new image.<sup>1</sup> The House of One reflects the goals of architects who believe that architecture should “address and ultimately solve the problems of the modern metropolis and its masses of people.”<sup>2</sup> Berlin faces a change in the religious scenery with the rise of migrants and refugees to the city. The construction of the House of One is intended to be a solution in the face of changing situations and challenges of the rise of the far-right in Berlin.

In context of the theme of this seminar ‘Spirituality and Senses,’ I will consider new forms of architecture that sacred spaces have embodied today and in the recent past. The House of One interests me because it allows us to see sacred spaces take on a socially conscious understanding in an unprecedented built form. By placing The House of One at the center, this paper will focus on how multiculturalism affects sacred spaces. I look at the House of One and the planning of the Birmingham Mosque in Britain to portray how multiculturalism elicits two polar responses: either new structures whose built forms are a

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<sup>1</sup> (Lisiak 2010), pg. 202

<sup>2</sup> (Pugh 2014), pg.23

response to a changing environment or built form that is “traditional,” meaning familiar and unchanged to the immigrant community.

The first question that comes to mind when one thinks of The House of One is: how will it look? Will it have a dome? Will there be a minaret? Where would one place the cross in proportion to that minaret? Stained glass or an austere interior? While these questions seem perhaps simple, I would argue that they are critical questions to ask. William Glover, author of *Making Lahore Modern*, writes about the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-European thought that shaped architecture in the colonial cities. These 19<sup>th</sup> century architects and thinkers believed that the material world had the power to shape human conduct and behavior. Therefore, they engaged in city hygienic projects, which included making the streets wider and creating more open spaces such as parks. If the city and the buildings were created in a particular way with specific intentions, those buildings in turn shaped the way people lived and therefore, would have the capacity to change behaviors and even mindset.<sup>3</sup> This was the ideology that framed the architectural work done in colonial cities such as Algiers, Delhi and Lahore. While it is clear why such a framework is problematic and unrealistic, there are some truths to this.

Architecture is all around us. It is what we see, touch and inhabit everyday. The immense influence it has on us is inescapable. The House of One is a project that is intended to work with this sense of power by being conscious of the changing religious scenery in the city, and thus, creating a built environment that is an appropriate response to that change. Similarly, to the 19<sup>th</sup> Anglo-European architects, the House of One uses architecture to create and symbolize unity. Amer A. Moustafa in “Architectural Representation and Meaning: Towards a Theory of Interpretation” points out that the task of the “architect is to create a physical environment that is readily identifiable by members of a society as their own. Architects...have always faced the dilemma of what formal language to use in order to

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<sup>3</sup> (Glover 2008), pg.10

represent people's beliefs, traditions and identity—how to represent their reality.”<sup>4</sup> While Moustafa equates the question of representing people's beliefs with representing their reality, I would argue that these two can bring about two different approaches with different outcomes. The House of One is not exactly representing people's traditions and identity; the concept is new and untraditional. Yet, the structure is representing reality in a way. It is trying to create a symbol of unity within faiths, which is seen in Berlin. People of different faiths are living in a single city, and the House of One is one way to represent that reality through sacred space. However, more importantly, The House of One is trying to create an *imagined* reality more than anything else. The advocates for this project are creating a symbol of unity with the three religions in an atmosphere where the far-right continues to grow in Berlin.

The House of One is the material manifestation of multiculturalism and, to some very slight degree, syncretism. They are all Semitic religions with well-documented historical connections. From their particular conventions, each is monotheistic and frames spirituality as a relationship with God, who is both creator and protector. Philosophically, spiritually, and prophetically, there is much convergence. Jerusalem is usually thought to be the global symbol of the meeting place of three religions. The House of One functions in a similar regard, though its locality informs its appearance.

One can argue that the exterior being free of symbolism may be a suggestion that what links these life philosophies is not symbolism or convention or exterior presentation, but something more fundamental and interior. Hence, the church, mosque, and synagogue are "inside" and very close to each other, which mirrors the broader relation between the philosophies they represent. Or, perhaps, the physical proximity inevitably leads to an exchange of ideas and, consequently, a union between otherwise separate cultures. Just as

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<sup>4</sup> (Moustafa 1988)

above, form (material, symbols, specific practices) lose meaning while content (the supposed relation to God, ethics, morality) come to the fore. This could be seen as an example of the formation of multiethnic communities around shared values.

While the architecture's spiritual essence which points towards the interior and then to shared values of the three Abrahamic may be true, this imagined reality not only serves to reinforce a multiethnic community around shared values but to also make political claims. In an interview, the Imam for The House of One remarks that "for us Muslims, it (the House of One) represents a wonderful opportunity to be perceived and taken seriously in our home, in Germany."<sup>5</sup> The House of One is an example of how sacred space interacts with politics to react to the contemporary moment.

While the House of One seems to be the ideal example where politics and spirituality amalgamate into the built structure, other examples of sacred structures in a multicultural society, while not obvious, take on a different approach. Those structures make the exterior embody the familiar.

At the heart of this conversation about new sacred architecture is the dichotomy between the old and the new and the familiar and the unfamiliar. The architect must face the diverse attitudes towards beliefs, technologies and values. Paul Tesar in *Neophilia, Spirituality, and Architecture* writes that the "human experience is inevitably suspended between the familiar and the new." Tesar argues that "for reasons too many and too complex to entertain here in any detail, this systemic balance between familiar and the new has become increasingly more lopsided in favor of a disproportionate supply and avidity for the new in our contemporary world."<sup>6</sup> Tesar's claim perhaps explains why we have something like The House of One. While multiculturalism curates the formation of new ideas such as the House of One, it does not always create an affinity towards the new.

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<sup>5</sup> ("One House of Worship for Three Religions - Saudi Gazette" 2016)

<sup>6</sup> (Barrie and Bermudez 2016), pg. 83

Tesar's remark, that we have an avidity for the new, is not nuanced enough to explain the trends that arise within immigrant communities. For example, as Angel Rabassa explains in *Muslim World After 9/11*, the second- and even third- Turkish community in Germany tend to have a strong traditional social outlook.<sup>7</sup> This might be a reaction to the rise of Islamophobia but it can also generally be explained by the notion that when one is placed in an unfamiliar society, one will stick to what they know best.

Familiarity is a fundamental, and sometimes unnegotiable, characteristic in sacred spaces. Not only does familiarity in newly-built structures provide a sense of security by assuring that the religious traditions have not been altered; it is also an important aspect of identity for those in a multicultural society. This can be manifested in the architecture of the religious space. For example, in the planning for the Birmingham Mosque in 1978, many people expressed their concerns over the lack of a minaret and dome in the original design. One response, by a local councilor who was employed by the Community Relations Council, went as far to say that not including a minaret or dome "could be construed as racial prejudice." This remark makes it clear that architecture is intrinsically linked to a sense of identity. The Muslims behind the Birmingham Mosque in 1978 who were mainly immigrants to the UK, wanted to see the building "postulate the function it performs."<sup>8</sup> Even though the construction of a mosque is allowed, the forbiddance of a dome and minaret, which makes the structure indubitably a mosque from the exterior, is portrayed as a racial problem.

This paper illustrates how multiculturalism produces two different approaches to sacred space. One approach relies on challenging the problems that arise in a multicultural society by creating new, untraditional spaces, like The House of One. The second approach explains how immigrants, in an unfamiliar environment, favor outward symbols that affirm and recognize their full identity. This by no means encompasses the entirety of methods taken

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<sup>7</sup> (Rabasa et al. 2004)

<sup>8</sup> (Gale), pg. 27

in a multicultural society. This paper only intends to offer a different outlook on how sacred spaces transform in the face of changing situations. This allows us to raise several questions related to the monastery. How does the monastery change with new visitors, if it does at all? Is it important that sacred spaces reflect or interact with the the changing community? How does physical seclusion (not seclusion from people) affect the monastery's relation to the rest of the community?

I have not violated Princeton University's honor Code

X Robia Amjad, June 6, 2016

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