A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Mosque

Daniel Davis, AIA, LEED AP BD+C
College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture
Department of Architecture
University of Hartford

Abstract

As an accredited Architectural Program, the University of Hartford’s Department of Architecture is required to demonstrate that each graduate possesses the knowledge and skills defined by the criteria established by the National Architectural Accrediting Board. One of these criteria is ‘Historical Traditions and Global Studies’, where the students are expected to develop an understanding of parallel and divergent canons and traditions of architecture, landscape and urban design.

Since 2008, we have addressed this criterion with our Fall semester second-year graduate architectural design studio class. Our students are required to research, program, and design an Islamic Community Center, which includes amongst other things, a Mosque. This project provides a unique educational opportunity. Students must understand and appreciate how architecture reflects not only its place, program, and client, but also the politically and emotionally sensitive issues it can evoke. This class also engages the accreditation needs for ethics and diversity.

Our Graduate Students

The Architecture Graduate Program at the University of Hartford attracts a diverse student population. There are native and international students of many faiths and cultures, and typically a small number of Muslim students. Over the years we have had students from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Palestine. The majority of our students have little if any exposure to the Muslim faith and culture. Therefore, for some a great deal of research is required for this 6-week long architectural design project.

Project Location

In an effort to keep the project fresh, we have used different sites, all of which come with unique issues. We have used sites in NYC (the Mosque at Ground Zero), in Hartford, CT (in the
shadow of the state capitol), and in Montreal, QC (in both residential and downtown locations). All sites have led to interesting results. The Montreal sites often prove to be the most interesting; as many students are designing a building with little direct experience in a location they are not initially familiar with. For many, the visit to Canada and the French influence in Montreal adds yet another dimension to the experience.

Mosque Visit

We kick off the project by visiting the Islamic Association of Greater Hartford in Berlin, CT for a tour of their recently built facility. We attend their Friday 1:00 PM Prayer. For many students, this is their first visit to an Islamic Center or Mosque. Some are a little apprehensive but this is quickly addressed as we are greeted by Dr. Ali Antar, a warm and welcoming host. His friendly manner and great sense of humor is evident as he addresses Mosque etiquette, prepares the students for the service, and presents the design features of the facility. We eventually separate into two groups, male and female, and with shoes removed proceed to our appropriate prayer spaces. We observe the prayer ceremony, which is presented in a mix of English and Arabic.

The students learn that Muslims do not worship a different God. Allah, the Arabic word for God, has an identical name in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; consequently Allah is the same God worshiped by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The students also recognize that the Muslim Prayer Hall, even though it is deliberately unornamented and with different proportions, resembles the prayer spaces of other faiths. They always feel welcome and comfortable within the facility and any initial apprehension is gone by the end of the visit.

Islamic Architecture Experts

The next field trip is to the Islamic Study Center at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, CT. There we receive an informative presentation from Dr. Yahya Michot, Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations. Dr. Michot is an Islamic Scholar and a converted Muslim himself. He presents and discusses an exhaustive list of Mosque structures from the ancient to the new, from all around the world. Dr. Michot notes that he has only presented Mosque structure that he has visited himself; this fact clearly impresses the students. Dr. Michot is an expert on Islamic architecture, and specifically Mosque architecture and design.

International Experts

We have been blessed with the opportunity to also include international experts from Canada and Turkey. Including, Dr. Tammy Gaber, MRAIC, Assistant Professor at the Laurentian University School of Architecture, of Sudbury, ON, an expert on gender issues in Canadian Mosques. Her paper entitled “Beyond the Divide: Women’s Spaces in Canadian Mosques” is shared with the
students and when schedules permit she presents and discusses her research with the students. Dr. Gaber’s research raises many interesting issues regarding how the sexes are treated in Islamic Centers and Mosque structures in different Muslim countries. It is a source of discussion for the students as they grapple with new ideas. Our international experts are also invited to participate on the design competition review and other preliminary and final design reviews.

More Research

Prior to developing the project program (a list of spaces, their requirements, number and sizes), the students continue their preparation by researching and analyzing the following:

- Islamic and Mosque architecture
- Community Center and Mosque project precedents
- Green and sustainable opportunities
- Historical/political context of site
- Locate other religious structures
- Planning and Zoning requirements
- Site views both of the site and from the site
- Adjacent street elevations
- Climatic influences
- Prevailing winds
- Sun/shade/shadow studies
- Site access by foot/car/truck

Local area public transportation both above and below grade

The students also build both a physical scale model and a computer generated digital model of the site and surrounding neighborhood.

Presentations

Typically, the project is assigned in early November, with field trips in mid-November, a preliminary review in early December, and a final review in mid-December. All student projects are prominently displayed in a much anticipated weeklong annual exhibit in the Hartford Art School’s Silpe Gallery on the University of Hartford campus. During that week the projects are viewed by visitors from both on and off campus. The students also present their projects to a diverse group of invited architecture, construction and religious experts. Prizes, sponsored by the Hartford Islamic Coalition, are awarded to the three best projects. The winning projects are also displayed at the University of Hartford’s Graduate Symposium of Creative Work. A few of the winning student projects are included below.
Results

We are proud to report that the projects are consistently excellent, vary in their design, but are always sensitive to the issues, misunderstandings, and phobias that come with an assignment of this type. The students approach the project as a community center with a prayer hall, or as an Islamic study center with a museum and restaurant, and not solely as a Mosque. Some have the prayer space open to the view of people visiting the facility or passing by, in an attempt to remove the secrecy and show people that Muslims pray just like people of other faiths. We
always find it interesting that it is typically impossible to identify the projects designed by the Muslim students from the projects designed by the Non-Muslim students.

Conclusion

After the reviews are completed many of the jurors are anxious to share their thoughts with the guests and students. This project is a testament to the ability of architecture to successfully deal with complex politically and emotionally sensitive issues.

What is gained through the design process can change stereotypical impressions of a project type. When approached properly, this Mosque project can help students grow and mature as architectural designers and professionals. The students learn to appreciate the power of architecture to address politically sensitive issues. Beyond this, we are certain our students have satisfied the National Architectural Accrediting Board global studies obligations…mission accomplished.
DANIEL DAVIS, AIA, LEED AP BD+C is a Professor in the Department of Architecture, in the University of Hartford’s College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture. He has served the College as both Director of the Graduate Program and Chairman of the Department of Architecture. Daniel is also an architect with more than 35 years of experience designing buildings. He is presently working with Quisenberry Arcari + Malik Architecture, where he is the Design Director.