

UK

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Islamic architectural influences in Britain from India and Andalusia go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Inspiration from the Middle East appears in private houses, synagogues and mosques from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the immigration and growth of a British Muslim community in the last fifty years, purpose-built mosques have been constructed and have absorbed an older 'orientalist tradition'. Other mosques have been converted cinemas, private houses, churches and factories, often with some decoration intended to Islamize the building.



**Gujarati Mosque at Manningham, Bradford, formerly a factory.**

There is nothing alien about Islamic architectural influences in Britain. Nor is British Islam a peculiarly 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon. Close connections between the Islamic world and Britain go back for over four centuries, through trade, diplomacy, travel, art, the Empire and scholarship. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century there is evidence of a small community of Muslims in London – including craftsmen and a lawyer, though there is no record of a mosque.

### Imperial fantasies

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a great age for building in Britain. Styles often reflected an attitude of philosophical curiosity about the world. From Islamic countries there were influences from buildings from Grenada to India. Mosques were designed, not as places of worship but as 'garden embellishments'. One such example was at Kew where William Chambers built an exotic collection of oriental buildings for Frederick Prince of Wales. His mosque (now disappeared) had 'Gothic ogee arches' above the doorways with quotations from the Holy Qur'an in gold lettering.

Britain's closest contacts with the Islamic world two centuries ago were through the expanding Empire in India. In the first twenty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a vogue for an Indian style. British architects relied on artists' drawings that would have been produced in expensive folio editions. One pioneering artist was William Hodges who produced *Select Views of India* between 1785 and 1788. Hodges was impressed by what he called 'Moorish grandeur' and argued, as had Sir Christopher Wren a century earlier, that there was an historic connection between Islamic architecture and the Gothic arch.

The supreme example of replication of Indian Islamic architecture was the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, whose architect, John Nash, studied volumes on Indian Islamic buildings. Though a classicist throughout his life – he designed the Regents Park estates – Nash was versatile and delighted, as

# From Fantasy to Faith Islamic Architectural Influences in Britain<sup>1</sup>

one architectural historian has observed, 'in small domes or "pepper-pots" of every shape, some of them deliberately oriental.'<sup>2</sup>

Brighton Pavilion had an impact on many new buildings throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but other influences were reaching Britain from Andalusia and from the Middle East. Orientalist painting has been fully documented. Thanks to the development of steam-driven ships, travel to the Middle East from the 1830s became easier. Travellers returned with souvenirs, and also ideas of design and notions of space and leisure.

Two outstandingly self-conscious attempts at reproducing Arab architecture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have survived.

One is at Leighton House in London, built in 1865 for the artist Lord Leighton who collected ceramics and other Islamic artefacts during visits to the Middle East. The house was built to house his souvenirs. The model was La Zisa in Palermo, but the 17<sup>th</sup>-century wooden lattice-work came from Damascus.

Another example is the Arab Room at Cardiff Castle, built by William Burges for the Marquess of Bute. Burges had been to Turkey. He had taken time off from designing the Crimean Memorial Chapel in Istanbul to study the city's mosques. The floor pattern of the room, to quote John Sweetman, 'sets out the Islamic eight-fold figure, which is developed with pyrotechnic virtuosity in the domical ceiling.'<sup>3</sup>

### Faith takes over

Meanwhile fantasy was yielding place to faith. The first religious buildings to owe inspiration to Islamic models were actually new synagogues. Newly prosperous Jewish communities eschewed the Gothic or the Classical styles. One was associated with medieval Christianity, the other with 18<sup>th</sup>-century rationalism. The adopting of a 'Moorish' style was a reminder of Jewish glories in Arab Andalusia. The finest examples have been in mainland Europe, but there is one good example in Liverpool. Another in the heart of Muslim Bradford has a horse-shoe arched doorway and horizontal banding of alternate colours of stone.

Some new churches also displayed Islamic influences, albeit indirect. The best example is Christ Church Streatham in South London, whose architect, James Wild, used horse-shoe shaped arches and a grand west doorway modelled on the doorway of the Sultan Hasan Mosque in Cairo.

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a growing Muslim presence in Britain. At first, prayers were held in private houses or in rented halls. Sometimes there were rallies at Leicester Square (ironically by the Alhambra Theatre, now the Odeon cinema), Hyde Park Corner or Peckham Rye. The first purpose-built mosque was at Woking, south of London. This was constructed from funds left by the Ruler of Bhopal, and was built in 1889 by a British non-Muslim architect.

Today it is reckoned that there are about 1.5 million Muslims in Britain. In addition to

the small number of converts, about 600,000 are of Pakistani origin, 150,000 from India and 200,000 from Bangladesh. A majority of British Muslims have now been born in Britain.

The South Asians have tended to occupy particular areas of inner cities. In many places South Asian Muslims have often been the latest wave of outsiders. The appearance of an area may be like a palimpsest with physical evidence of earlier settlements. Manningham in Bradford, for example, has been successively the home of German Jewish immigrants, then Irish and now South Asians. Near the synagogue already mentioned, is an Irish pub. Synagogue and bar are incongruous prominent buildings in an area inhabited by people overwhelmingly of Pakistani origin.

There are today about 1200 mosques and praying areas in Britain, of which approximately a hundred have been purpose-built. The major mosques of Britain – at Regents Park London, in Whitechapel, the cathedral-mosques of Birmingham, Leeds and Edinburgh – have been built with funding from outside Britain. The others have been conversions of houses, warehouses and cinemas. Richly carpeted rooms where shoes are discarded, calligraphic texts and some decoration have helped to 'Islamize' the building. In the 1960s, the architect Gulzar Haider arrived in Britain from Pakistan and attended prayers at a Wimbledon house. There was no *mihrab* niche, just a depression in a side wall, a cold fireplace with a checkerboard of green and brown ceramic tiles. A small chandelier with missing pieces of crystal was suspended asymmetrically in a corner. A rickety office chair with gaudy plush rug draped over its back acted as the *minbar* pulpit. Twenty five years later he returned to the house-mosque which was 'now wrapped with a glazed finish: arched windows sat squeezed into what seemed like an endless line of sharp crescents: and there was a number of token minaret domes, whose profile came less from any architectural tradition than from illustrations of the *Arabian Nights*.'<sup>4</sup>

The Sussex area has a small, but ethnically heterogeneous community of Muslims, with 39 mother tongues. Of the three Brighton mosques, one occupies a private house that was previously a Jewish school, another is a converted shop, the third is above five shops. To the east, is the Hastings mosque – a converted church – and to the west is the Worthing mosque – a converted warehouse. The new town of Crawley, inland, near Gatwick airport, has a purpose-built mosque.<sup>5</sup> This pattern is fairly representative of British mosques.

### Orientalism revived?

By contrast, the Manningham area of Bradford is almost wholly Muslim. Of the 30 mosques in the city, four have been purpose-built, two are in former cinemas, three are former churches and nine are converted

industrial premises. The rest have been adapted from private houses. What is likely to be the largest mosque, in Darfield Street, has been under construction since 1986.<sup>6</sup> Part of it has been opened for prayer, but problems of funding have led to slow progress. Nonetheless the architect, Neil Waghorne, has a clear vision of how the building will develop. He is a student of Turkish architecture. Part of his inspiration is the Suleymaniye mosque in Istanbul. A superb *muqarnas* doorway has been carved by a local stonemason, David Bedford, from Yorkshire stone.

Islamic architecture has historically adapted to local traditions of building. In Britain many purpose-built mosques have been in a tradition of 'orientalist' architecture, going back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The best models from the Islamic world have been studied, used or copied. The sponsors of the buildings today are Muslims but the architects, designers and craftsmen are likely to be non-Muslims. What makes a building an Islamic building? Its purpose? Its owners? Its source of inspiration?

Is a distinctly British Muslim style emerging? Is it the blending of work from the Islamic world with local materials? Or is it the striking adaptation of a building originally designed for other purposes? ◆

### Notes

1. This article is based on a talk given at the Felix Meritis Foundation, Amsterdam, 24 January 2000.
2. Conner, Patrick (1979). *Oriental Architecture in the West*. London: Thames and Hudson, p. 141.
3. Sweetman, John (1988). *The Oriental Obsession: Islamic Inspiration in British and American Art and Architecture 1500-1920*. Cambridge: University Press, p. 193.
4. Haider Gulzar (1996). 'Muslim Space and the Practice of Architecture: a Personal Odyssey'. In *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, edited by Barbara Daly Metcalf. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 36, 42.
5. I am grateful to Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid JP for information in this paragraph.
6. I am grateful for guidance on Bradford to Dr Philip Lewis and Mr Neil Waghorne.

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