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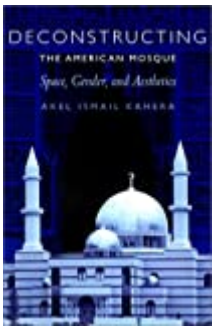

Akel Ismail Kahera. *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. xiii + 194 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-74344-1.

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Before the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo was completed in 1983, it was an unfinished edifice of soaring double minarets and arched doorways rising inexplicably out of the ground. From the highway, one could spot the curious structure, which closely emulates a fifteenth-century Ottoman mosque in design. The incongruity of this image–a little bit of the Middle East on the Midwestern landscape of an American highway–led one trucker driving down the road to explain to another that the nascent place of worship "must be a new Mexican restaurant or something" (p. 64).

In truth, the trucker's comment makes a certain amount of sense. In the postmodern grab bag that makes up contemporary American architecture, Mexican restaurants commonly derive their design from referencing, however superficially, a little bit of architectural history, namely the mission style of the American southwest. And, as Akel Ismail Kahera reminds us, the mission style itself owes a debt to Muslim architectural forms of Andalusia, hence the trucker's confusion. Of course, fifteenth-century Ottoman mosques are very different in form from Iberian-inspired mission architecture, but in the American vernacular, where there is no established idiom for the architecture of the mosque, a mosque could look like anything, or anything can look like a mosque, even a Mexican restaurant.

Kahera's *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, the first book-length study of American Muslim architecture, seeks to give theoretical weight to American Muslim architecture so it can locate its own idiom, and it largely succeeds. At the core of the book is an attempt to resolve precisely the same tension between history and regionalism we saw in the Toledo mosque example above. Should an American Muslim community, which is often comprised of a large number of immigrants from various locations, seek connection to its past and traditions through architectural design? Or ought a community aim to redefine itself architecturally through its new environment and built form? Such a redefinition may mean forgoing or reworking certain customary attributes associated with mosques, but it may also mean exploring anew what the requirements are for making spaces sacred. By the end, Kahera has clearly decided with the latter. Kahera's aim here is reminiscent of "critical regionalism," an architectural position Kenneth Frampton staked out in the early 1980s. Critical regionalists, for Frampton, are not interested in serving nationalist or universalist creeds in their designs. Rather, they approach design regionally and are looking to "reflect and serve the limited constituencies in which they are grounded" (as Kahera clearly believes architects for Americans mosques should).[1] According to Frampton, critical regionalism thus aspires "to some form of cultural, economic, and po-

litical independence."[2]

Kahera's method operates similarly. He notes how there is no established form for the American mosque and then asks, "will the stylistic features of the American mosque grow increasingly isolated from those of its counterparts in the Muslim world? One may cite a number of examples that suggest over time, a regional style gains insular importance that allows the freedom for such a style to develop" (p. 5).

Religious edifices are unlike other built forms in that they offer communion with the transcendent, and this fact allows Kahera to push his approach beyond Frampton. A critical regionalism in Kahera's hands would first need to identify the essence of Muslim sacred space, what Kahera calls the "spatial sunnah," and then integrate that notion into its immediate environment, thereby connecting the local with the divine. Minarets, onion domes, Kufic scripts, and cusped arches may no longer be necessary to turn a building site into a space of sacred reflection for Muslims in the United States. In fact, such attributes may be inappropriate for the American idiom. Instead, Kahera argues, American mosques should focus on "three guiding principles: order, habitat, and repose" (p. 75).

Kahera dedicates the middle of the book to an examination of extant structures along this line. Traditional edifices, like the Toledo mosque, hold little interest for him. Such designs for mosques may please the "emotional conditions" (p. 65) of an immigrant Muslim community looking for reminders from home, but they do little "to produce a new aesthetic language that will be appropriate to the American form" (p. 65).

Next, he discusses syncretic designs for mosques, and uses the Islamic Cultural Center of Washington, D. C., one of the older mosques in the country, as his model. Like the traditional structure, this neo-Mamluk mosque "ignores the American architectural context" and instead "reinforces memory by using traditional crafts" from Turkey, Iran, and Egypt (p. 69). But in its effort to speak to all segments of its immigrant community, the mosque becomes a hybrid structure, a mish-mash of iconography and form, where "the original meanings of the forms are absent" (p. 72). Although perhaps appropriate for diplomats, such a structure, Kahera writes, is "sentimental" (p. 72).

The Islamic Center of New York also serves an ethnically diversified Muslim community, but its design answers are fundamentally different from the syncretic solutions of the Washington, D. C. mosque. Kahera labels the New York structure "avant garde" (p. 72) for its choice of simple geometric schemes and bare compositional elements. "Closer to a modernist, secular interpretation than to a traditional cosmological one" (p. 73), Kaheri explains, the New York mosque does still develop a space that has all necessary elements (order, habitat, and repose) for the design of a successful sacred space. (He links the design, through its interpretative feats, to *ijtihad*, the term for independent reasoning in Islamic thought.)

But Kahera is most drawn to two other mosque designs, Gulzar Haider's Islamic Center of Plainfield, Indiana (labeled as "transcendent form"), and the legendary Hassan Fathy's Dar al-Islam Village in Abiquiu, New Mexico (called "a Simple Order"). These are both visionary designs, where the structures themselves become "aesthetic expressions" of the sacred with "intelligible beauty and allegorical meaning" (p. 80). Kahera finds that both structures integrate into their present environments, enabling regional dialogue concurrently with the experience of form to promote transcendent experiences. Here, the mosque is both "material and spiritual." Rather than merely illustrating Islamic design, these mosques allow form to encourage one's encounter with the Omnipotent.

It is in these discussions that Kahera's insights are the most revealing. Deeply interested in a kind of phenomenology of form and how form relates to religious experiences, Kahera remains, at the same time, sensitive to more mundane architectural concerns like satisfying a client and building with available materials. Unfortunately, the fact that he understands both the worldly and the otherworldly and their relationship to each other so well is what makes his discussion of gender disappointing.

Although the subtitle of the book promises an investigation into "space, gender, and aesthetics," gender remains under investigated. Kahera does provide a lengthy and rich discussion of why women and men should both be able to worship in and use any mosque. However, this discussion remains largely at the level of history and argument and frustratingly not one of design. Why not include examples, even theoretical ones, that would push the design discussion further? There would be both theoretical and practical benefits to be had by such exercises.

Furthermore, Kahera develops and employs his own critical vocabulary, adapted largely from the Islamic legal and cultural lexicon, towards his theory, but this I

also found distracting. Thus, Kahera reinterprets the *sunnah*, i.e. the traditions of the Prophet, into "spatial sunnah." *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning in Islamic legal and moral thought) becomes an architectural effort, and *maslahah*, traditionally a method toward legal decision making in Islam, becomes the architectural demand to meet the needs of the community. Can such terms, invested with specific histories and methods in Islamic law and culture, be so easily transposed onto an architectural terrain?

On the flip side, deconstruction, we are told early on, has nothing to do with Derrida but much to do with Ibn Arabi, the thirteenth-century Andalusian philosopher. Deconstruction, for Kahera, "suggests the origin of a core and an outer shell" (p. 2), and Ibn Arabi's deconstruction "argues that the created object is not necessarily an absolute innovation, since it exists in relation to proceeding products of the agent" (p. 11). Kahera employs Ibn Arabi's ideas creatively, but why label them "deconstruction" in the first place? In all this word re-association, there is a certain will to create a new critical idiom out of redefinition, but it strikes me (perhaps ironically) as too syncretic (for what histories are diminished when one meaning substitutes for the other?) and too idiosyncratic, for idioms and languages develop organically from a community, not individually.

This issues do not disqualify the work from its significance or achievement, however. Indeed, this book is part of a growing corpus of material on American Muslim life, and it is deeply invested in the relationship between faith and form and integrally interested in the future of Islam in the United States, all important subjects to many. Architects and historians will find much to work with here. And general readers will find that what most characterizes the book is its abundance of heart and optimism for the future.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1985), p. 313.

[2]. Ibid.

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