

Transnational Architecture, Ethics, and the Reification of History: Park51 Islamic Community Center in New York City

Kishwar Rizvi

Times Square, 1500, Cordoba, Daniel Leibeskind, Islam, Bridgeport, garden, New York, Shahzad Faisal, Cairo, military time, Geller, mosque, car bomb, Christianity, storefront, immigrants, Pakistan, Ground Zero, 2010

The inventory of words can be multiplied infinitely, like the list in Jorge Louis Borges's imaginary Chinese Encyclopedia.¹ The list forms a taxonomy of knowledge, relying on its own order of signification; it is not a random collection but evocative of a particular historical moment and multiple geographic locations. The words would be recognizable to any number of people, English-speakers or otherwise, anywhere in the world. Its significance to the varied audiences, however, is far from homogenous. Religious identities are embedded in the list, just as they are situated at the heart of contemporary political ideology.² Religion provides legitimacy for individuals and governments, and inspiration for the construction and erasure of historical narratives. It also, importantly, serves as motivation for monumental acts of building and destruction.

Architecture at the turn of the millennium is called upon to provide solutions to a diverse range of issues, from homelessness and environmentalism to nation-building. In academic design studios, students travel the world, glimpsing indigenous building technologies and touring histories of different cultures. Seldom does the idealism translate into practice; seldom is the architect expected to be an activist. Indeed, much of the discourse on architectural practice revolves around commercial and institutional ventures (such as Burj Khalifa and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, both designed by American architectural firms, SOM and Frank Gehry, respectively). Less attention is paid to the impact of the buildings, or the debates that may surround their construction. Nor is the past—a potent force in contemporary political culture—considered within the context of design strategy. The aim of this essay is to explore the manner in which architecture may engage with issues of ethics and history, through the consideration of a highly-charged commission, Park51 Islamic Community Center in New York City.



Fig. 1. Image of the World Trade Center Attacks, 2001. Photograph by Sean Adair. © STR/Reuters/Corbis

We all know where we were on September 11, 2001. We recall the location, the room, the street corner, the subway. Being up late in the night listening to the news if you were in Asia; waking up to the horrific images of destruction and terror if you were in California.³ Wherever we found ourselves in the world, the images of airplanes flying into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and the collapse of those iconic buildings of midcentury American architecture, are forever etched in our minds (fig. 1). At least two sets of images come into play; the first is replicated on television and computer screens, or on the pages of newspapers and magazines. The second set is more intimate and refers to the earth below our own feet, the habitual spaces that we inhabit. The near and the distant came together that day, harbingers of the interconnected tragedies that would ensue, from bombings in London to drone attacks in Pakistan. Our personal locus and global events continue to coalesce, and are represented primarily through a complex deployments of images.

Issues of time and geography are reflected not in fleeting images alone, but in acts of building. Architectural production may be viewed as a form of agency,

in which the aspirations of various participants—clients, contractors, or designers—are negotiated. Historically and spatially contingent, buildings can nonetheless be referents as well as representations. Both through their program and their physical attributes, they are always the conveyors of social meaning and evocative of their times. In its multifaceted role as agent and actor, architecture raises the possibility of an ethical engagement by the builder, the patron, and the historian.⁴

The controversy surrounding Park51 Islamic Community Center, proposed to be built in lower Manhattan, brings to light the uncomfortable state of religion in contemporary America and the perceived threat of “global” Islam. Alongside this is a disengaged architectural culture that is increasingly removed from critical engagement with the contexts within which it is produced. Park51 is an example of how the discourse on architectural practice goes beyond the commercial and demagogic and moves the discussion away from the current focus on the biography of the “starchitects” and firms and less on the architectural product itself.⁵ Such a project is seldom considered in the corridors of architectural academies or between the pages of art historical journals.⁶ Connected as it uncomfortably is to September 11, 2001, Park51 represents the interstices between architecture and its fictional representations, between a particular site and its multiple relocations within the public sphere.

Park51’s location in New York City gives to the project an expansive stage. While representing, on the one hand, American corporate culture globally, New York City remains singular in its urban imprint.⁷ This duality also marks the fault lines between contemporary debates on the local versus transnational significance of such a project. The word, “transnational,” is a more inclusive term, which suggests different scales of participation, as Ulf Hannerz writes, in which “the actors may now be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises, and in no small part it is this diversity of organization that we need to consider.”⁸ The example of Park51 brings to the fore the diversity of participation that marks the transnational theater upon which discussions about this project have been staged.

Architecture emerges in this discussion as the repository of historical consciousness, serving as it does to both monumentalize belief and situate it within particular geographic and ideological sites. Although a building like Park51 may have a singular physical location, it will arguably reference places far removed from Manhattan and moments remarkably distant from its date of construction. This mobility marks contemporary architectural practice and subverts ideas of regionalism and nationalist styles that have pervaded the discourse on architecture

in the twentieth century. The multiple points of reference attached to this project also challenge the common representation of Islam as a monolithic identity that remains unchanged across centuries and continents. Instead, examples such as Park51 highlight the transregional and transhistorical trends that define architecture and religion today.

Cordoba House

The original name of the Park51 Islamic Cultural Center was Cordoba House, in reference to the Andalusian city that flourished for many centuries as a diverse and multiconfessional medieval center.⁹ Cordoba is renowned for the monumental Great Mosque, built in the eighth century by the ruling Umayyad dynasty (756–1031) over the foundations of a Visigothic church and was converted back into a cathedral in the thirteenth century following the Spanish Reconquest.¹⁰ The mosque remains one of the most well-known examples of Islamic architecture, even as it serves today as a Christian devotional space (fig. 2). Such transfers of authority and overlays of belief are not uncommon in the history of religion. Yet at the turn of the twenty-first century, they are fraught with nationalist politics and sectarian fears.



Fig. 2. Great Mosque of Cordoba, Spain. Photo by Mohammad Al-Asad (Jordanian, b. 1961), 1986, Courtesy of the MIT Libraries, Aga Khan Visual Archive

Cordoba House was a collaboration between a real estate developer, Sha-reef al-Gemal, and a local cleric, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, whose ministry was in lower Manhattan. In 2002 Rauf had established the Cordoba Initiative, which he characterizes as a “multi-faith organization,” whose goal it was to build bridges between different religious communities. Rauf, an Egyptian-American who grew up in Malaysia and Kuwait and studied in the United States, currently lives in New York City and is viewed as a proponent of Sufi Islam.¹¹ He has also served as a representative of the State Department to Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia.¹²

In his writings as well as his diplomacy, Rauf’s stated goal is “to repair the damages done to Muslim-American relations [in recent years] and to use this formula (that of the Cordoba Initiative) to forge a partnership between faith traditions so as to build a new Cordoba.”¹³ In 2004 he published, *What’s Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West*, in which he explains the divergent conceptions of history, philosophy and eschatology in Islam. More mundanely, he asserts that “history is important in helping us understand why many Muslims and Americans feel the way they do about each other.”¹⁴ Moving beyond the need to quantify and understand this schism, Rauf sees the present moment as an opportunity to move toward creating an ideal, multifaith, society. In establishing Cordoba House in New York City, then, Rauf aims then to create a historical referent that crossed both geographical and temporal boundaries.

Rauf stresses the symbiotic relationship between Islam and America and suggests that the founding principles of the nation may be seamlessly joined with the teachings of Muhammad to create a “globalized religiosity.”¹⁵ His stated challenge is to reconcile the particularities of Islam with the generalities of a democratic constitution. In addition, the goal is to merge the so-called universals of human belief with the specificity of contemporary life in the United States. The conjunction of Islamic values and American constitutionalism is clearly inspired by a close observation of American political history and its representations.

Indeed, Rauf’s rhetoric connects directly with one of the most prominent monuments to American constitutionalism, the United States Supreme Court in Washington, DC. The relief sculpture of Muhammad, shown with a sword in one hand and the Qur’an in the other depicts the Prophet as one of eighteen famous lawgivers in history, includes Moses, Charlemagne, and Napoleon (fig. 3).¹⁶ New York City had been host to an earlier version of such sculptural depictions of lawgivers, when in 1902 sixteen figures of historical and allegorical significance, were placed on a New York Statehouse in midtown Manhattan. By the mid-



Fig. 3. Adolph A. Weinman (American, 1870–1952), Detail of frieze within the United States Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., c. 1935. Office of the Curator, Supreme Court of the United States

1950s, however, the figure of Muhammad was removed over protests by the ambassadors of Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia.¹⁷ Over a hundred years later, an Islamic cultural center, was to be built in New York City—a building that was meant to highlight, interestingly, the link between Muhammad’s prophecy and the foundations of the American nation. There is, thus, in Rauf’s intellection, a consideration of American political

ideology overlaid with modern Islamic universalism. This version of universalism is based on a loose interpretation of Sufism, or mystical Islam, and pays little attention, ironically, to Islamic law, or shari’a, itself. A tension is thus manifest between the nation and the world, and between universal time and the historical moment.

The new cultural center was to be built by Soho Realities, Shareef el-Gemal’s development company. Together with the Cordoba Initiative, they proposed that Cordoba House, the name given to this new institution, be built on Park Place in Lower Manhattan. The new building would include diverse facilities such as a swimming pool, an auditorium, and a prayer space. Cordoba House was to be modeled on other successful institutions such as the 92nd Street Y, a Jewish organization with strong ties to its Upper East Side neighborhood. The siting and program focused on the local impact of Cordoba House, located as it was in the heart of lower Manhattan and with aspirations to reach out to the resident community, regardless of religious or sectarian affiliation.

Ground Zero and the Mosque

Despite the multifaceted program of Cordoba House, one element became the primary focus of a vitriolic debate about its legitimacy. In the spring of 2010, a group called “Stop the Islamization of America,” led by political commentator Pamela Geller and activist Robert Spencer, started to protest the construction of what they called the “Ground Zero Mosque.”¹⁸ Until this time, Cordoba House’s

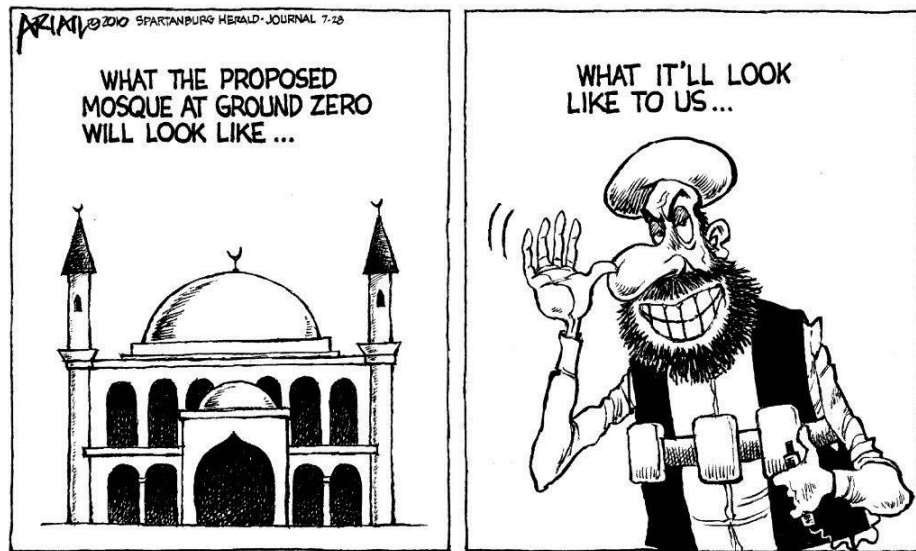


Fig. 4. Robert Arian, Political cartoon referencing the "Ground-Zero Mosque," 2010. Robert Arian © 2010 Spartanburg Herald-Journal. Dist. By Universal Uclick for UFS. All rights reserved

mandate as a multifaith center had not been questioned. Isolating one of its functions, namely, a devotional space, opponents of the Islamic Community Center attached to it another reference, Ground Zero (fig. 4).

Some family members of the September 11 victims spoke now of the grave disrespect done to the memories of their loved ones if Cordoba House were to be built; others warned that this was a cynical move by Muslim extremists to commemorate their own dead.¹⁹ Petitioners turned to the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to block construction near Ground Zero, arguing that the area and its buildings were historical landmarks.²⁰ The plea was rejected by the commission, but the insistence on preserving the memory of the site continued. Several New Yorkers, including Mayor Michael Bloomberg, rallied against the petitions and the xenophobia underlying the resistance to Cordoba House. The issue gained such traction that leaders of progressive Jewish organizations and those of the Palestinian Hamas together gave their support to its construction. President Barack Obama registered his support in his speech at the annual Ramadan gathering at the White House on August 13, 2010.²¹ For the President, as for the critics and supporters of Cordoba House, at stake was the question of preservation of both history and personal liberties.²² How each group defined those terms was, of course, vastly different.

Opponents of Cordoba House had conjured in their minds a stereotypical image of a mosque—its monumental dome casting a shadow over Ground Zero, and its minaret piercing the New York City skyline, like a victory stele.²³ The image was a powerful one, used in satire as well as political propaganda, to lampoon the issue and to fuel the heated debates that surround it. In neither case was the image—i.e., the mosque—an innocent one. What had for millennia been seen by Muslims as a symbol of their religion was now used against Islam.

The internet was flooded with cartoons and commentary about the dangers of building a mosque in Manhattan. One of several anti-Muslim websites showed an excerpt from a speech by the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Erdogan: “The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets, and the faithful our soldiers.”²⁴ Below the quotation is an image of an Ottoman mosque, with its dome and “pencil minarets” (fig. 5). Despite the fact that no design had been submitted, or even considered, the “Ground Zero Mosque” had acquired an image, one that was deeply rooted in Orientalist representations of the Middle East.²⁵ The image also fed into the perceived civilizational conflicts



Fig. 5. Internet meme showing speech by Recep Erdogan, quoting Ziya Gökalp

between “the West and Islam” espoused by conservative pundits and academics.²⁶ Thus stereotypical and fantastical images were overlaid with the rhetoric of fear, depicting the mosque as a symbol of militant Islam.²⁷

SOMA and Park51

The controversy over the center resulted in disagreement between Rauf and el-Gemal and, ultimately, a permanent break in their partnership. At this time the name, Cordoba House, was changed to Park51, after the street address of the property belonging to Soho Realty. Recognizing the need to diffuse the issue, el-Gemal brought in the designer Michel Abboud, principal of SOMA Architects, to give form to Park51.²⁸ A new set of representations were to be deployed, with the hope of defining Park51 on its own terms. According to the architect, the immediate goal was to negate the virulent media onslaught, with its stock of caricatures of mosques and missiles, with a more benign image; one that would resettle the project back to the context of New York.²⁹ The Burlington Coat Factory tenement building, a typical New York housing stock, was to be replaced by another symbol of Manhattan architecture, the skyscraper.

Abboud was to quickly provide a representative image for Park51, with the assumption that a better-known firm would be brought in later in the design development phase. However, his firm, SOMA, was—perhaps unintentionally—the perfect choice for marketing the concept behind the community center. The firm is based in New York City, with offices in Mexico City and Beirut. Design development takes place in each of the three offices, with construction management overseen by locally-based employees. According to the firm’s website, the goal of the three offices is to “ensure around the clock success of projects of all scales. An international amalgamation of a young and highly developed workforce spanning thirteen nationalities and led by the Principal Michel Abboud allows for the ease of execution of creative and complex programs within complex sites, globally.”³⁰ Information is saved and shared in a cloud server that is accessible anywhere in the world, such that SOMA operates simultaneously in multiple time-zones and during twenty-four hours of the day.

Technology allows for the ease of such a transnational practice, yet it is the individual biography—the mobility of identity—that is the ultimate apparatus needed for its success. Abboud was born in Beirut, grew up in Paris, received his architecture degree in New York, and foregrounds his Mexican roots. He is a Christian Lebanese, who claims both French and American nationalities.



Fig. 6. Michel Abboud, Park51 Islamic Community Center, exterior view. Image courtesy of SOMA

Abboud's familiarity with several ethnicities and cultures legitimizes his claim to design diverse projects, from condominiums in the United States and beach villas in Lebanon, to a new residential development in Erbil, Iraq. Bridging gaps between the United States and the Middle East, as well as between Christianity and Islam, Abboud can claim to relate to multiple audiences, even as he defines himself primarily as a New Yorker. All these attributes were crucial for the Park51's public image and branding as a project that bridged cultural difference.

The most prominent feature of SOMA's design is the façade (fig. 6). A translucent white building rises between the historical fabric of lower Manhattan, its organic and delicate structure like a spider's web overlaid upon a perforated *jali* (screen) reminiscent of a Mughal palace or a Cairene *mashrabiya* (window or balcony grill). The solid massing, punctuated with recessed openings, also evokes Manhattan high rises, such as the National Maritime Museum (1963) or the now-demolished Museum of Arts and Design (1964).³¹ But perhaps one of the closest parallels is the

Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) in Paris, which was designed by Jean Nouvel and completed in 1987 (fig. 7). The window openings of the IMA imitate the intricate patterns of wooden *mashrabiya*, but are comprised of highly sophisticated photosensitive lens, that open and close the apertures depending on the exterior



Fig. 7. Jean Nouvel (French, b. 1945), Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris. Aga Khan Trust for Culture Library, Geneva, Switzerland. © Aga Khan Award for Architecture

light and time of day. The facade of Park51 is similarly functional, the openings responsive to the architectural program.

Michel Abboud, like other architects designing for Muslim clients, relied heavily on ideas of Islamic geometric patterning to generate a design strategy (fig. 8). Ironically, the prayer spaces in Park51 are given the least attention thus far, relegated to the basement of the structure, masked and submerged from open display. The architectural proposal for Park51 is captivating, if not groundbreaking in its rendition.³² The sparkling white elevation contrasts with the dull browns and grays of the neighboring buildings and looks like a clean incision into the urban fabric. The brutality of a modernist cut is muted by the careful articulation of the exterior, with areas of light and shadow variegating the surface of the building. Abboud manipulated the decoration to create a three dimensional endoskeleton that would act both as the facade and a structural armature. The endoskeleton creates spaces of density and transparency that respond to the program and create zones of public and private access (fig. 9). The depth transmitted by the skin of the building was achieved through parametric design which is the method commonly

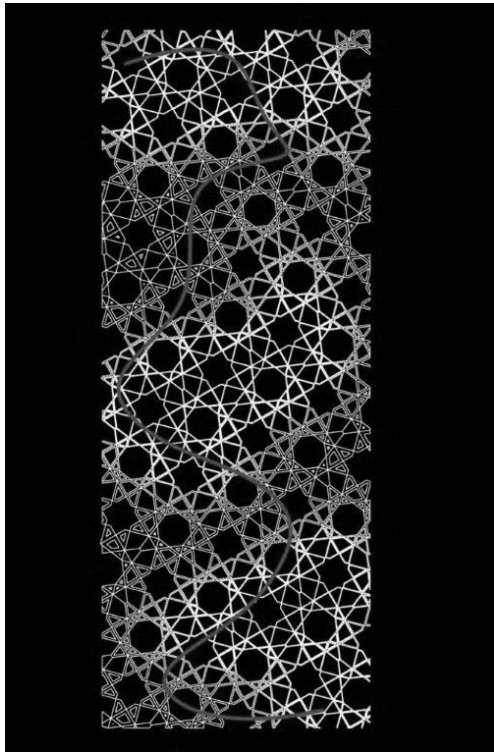


Fig. 8. Michel Abboud. Park51 Islamic Community Center, pattern analysis. Image courtesy of SOMA



Fig. 9. Michel Abboud, Park51 Islamic Community Center, interior view. Image courtesy of SOMA

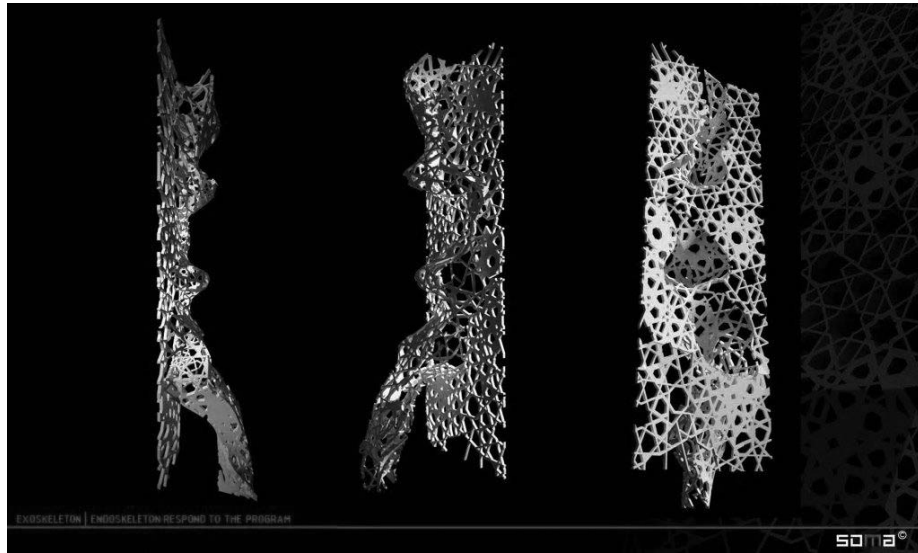


Fig. 10. Michel Abboud, Park51 Islamic Community Center, design development. Image courtesy of SOMA

employed by contemporary architects to solve complex design problems through computer programming (Fig. 10).³³

In an intriguing play with pseudohistorical design elements and contemporary graphics software, Abboud appeared to be looking for sources for what is, by his own characterization, a formal design exercise that does *not* aim to engage with history. In his public presentations he insisted that he is not inspired by Islamic architecture, yet he incorporated visual quotation with particular geographical and cultural associations. The heavy insistence on using Islamic ornament in the design of Park51 highlights the role of historical style as a generative design principal and the utility of architecture as a source of negotiating that temporal and, by extension, philosophical distance.

The architectural design proposed by SOMA aimed to serve as a resolution between the conflicting opinions surrounding the building of an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero. As Abboud said in his presentations of the project, “The iconography of the building became the main concern: to promote a message of openness and integration of the Muslim community with the city of New York and its various communities of faith.”³⁴ Thus the highly charged, if anachronistic, image of Park51 created in the virtual spaces of weblogs was to be replaced by one that was equally powerful, if seemingly less threatening. However, the pristine white facade and its intricate tracery also give the impression of erosion

and decay, as though parts of the facade have been hollowed or burned out. The devolution of the Islamic patterns, like the erasure of the curtain wall, serves thus as a critique of the monolithic fictions of identity and history.

Iconography is the driving force behind the visual representations of Park51. Its design reflects the manner in which architectural history in this millennium is implicated as a source of inspiration as well as an ethical principal. Architecture—like history—has a narrativizing tendency that requires moral imagination as a mode of creative expression.³⁵ Indeed, the moral underpinnings of architecture have long been accepted, yet their political contexts have often been understated. In the case of Park51, it is precisely the taking of ethical and ideological positions that have brought the project global attention. The question remains, however, how much the building's design may itself (as opposed to external factors, such as patronage and program) provide clues to the type of engagement sought. That is to say, can moral imagination and parametric thinking be brought together to form new modes of both designing and describing architecture?³⁶

History, Geography, Mobility

Religious ideology and architecture collide in ways that reveal not just the state of world politics, but also the manner in which architecture (as form and rhetoric) becomes a palimpsest for how communities express themselves.³⁷ Park51 continues to be the focus of immense controversy; in an episode aired in September 2011, the PBS Frontline series called the Islamic Cultural Center “the most controversial building in America,” no doubt in reference to the polemics that surround the project.³⁸ In response to the burgeoning paranoia surrounding the project, Soho Reality has developed sophisticated programing that represents Park51's mandate as catering to a diverse local community. Besides hosting daily prayers for the Muslims, there are activities that aim to educate the general public about Islam.³⁹

Historical reference penetrates all aspects of Park51's mission; the past is a vital resource, as seen in two cultural programs that have recently been undertaken. A photographic exhibition of immigrant children in New York City affirms that the primary audiences of Park51 are New Yorkers, regardless of their religious identities (fig. 11). Another show, “The Bridge of Light: Rumi, America's Bestselling Poet and a Voice for Interfaith,” foregrounds the life of the thirteenth-century Persian mystic, whose poetry touches on themes of love and devotion.⁴⁰ Promoting Rumi as “an essential bridge between East and West,” and “making him a



Fig. 11. Danny Goldfield, Advertisement for the exhibition NYChildren at Park51 Islamic Community Center, 2011. Graphic design and photograph

symbol for interfaith dialogue,” is certainly anachronistic, if indicative of popular religious trends. The local context is thus merged with ahistorical references that subvert what had been the manners of criticism launched against the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque.”

An anachronistic temporality typifies the debates surrounding Park51. History is shaped by both the critics and promoters of the building in ways meant to serve particular goals. Why bring history into the debate at all? What is it about the present moment that makes it necessary to collapse temporal distance? The mutability of ideological positions and the ambiguity of historical representations manifest in the Park51 design reveal the significance of considering the past as a resource. An intangible relationship to religious history defines contemporary society, whether it be evangelical Christianity in the United States or Salafist Islam in Saudi Arabia. Religion provides the primal moment in the discourse on political identity today. In an age where histories of nations and empires are suspect, religious fundamentals cannot be so easily contested. That is, religion serves as an ideological ground zero. In a parallel abstraction, space is collapsed, as though Pakistan, Cordoba, New York, Saudi Arabia, all fall into a broadened experiential field that gives access to what at first seem like profoundly different landscapes. However, knowledge about these sites is abbreviated and predetermined, dependent on the political locations from which the information emanates.

Studies on globalization have tended to flatten difference through an exuberant positivism that fails to answer questions of transnational mobility, which is the mobility of religion, politics, images, and even building design.⁴¹ Indeed,

nodal exchanges emphasize the associative and appropriative nature of architectural representation, as they are enacted by designers, their patrons, and the public. The “mobilities paradigm,” a term coined by Mimi Sheller and John Urry, represents well contemporary social practices. In their characterization, the movement of ideas, people, and art is best understood as a series of “fluid interdependencies,” not as separate phenomena.⁴² In analyzing Park51, from its conception to its representation, it becomes clear that the project is deeply affected by local New York politics and the state of religious expression in the United States today. But it is also, to an unprecedented scale, acted on by worldwide media and transnational architectural production. Within this broadened landscape, it is important for an ethical engagement by architects and historians, both in terms of design and in the manner of its critique.

Ethical engagement

The design of Park51 was meant to move the project from “controversy to resolution.”⁴³ In his presentation to the Architecture Foundation, Michel Abboud said that “the true challenge was to create an architecture that would propose a platform for the mediation of social, cultural, urban and political differences in one coherent environment that would equally cater for all parties.”⁴⁴ That is, the design would appeal equally to Muslims, who would recognize its cultural references, and to New Yorkers, who would see the building as another innovative insertion into the fabric of their city. That the design is flexible enough to reference simultaneously Islamic ornament and a modernist aesthetic, speaks both to the polyvalent nature of urban life and the fluidity of visual culture. It also speaks to the agility of Abboud in identifying a language of conciliation that is not above cynical reproach by his critics.

The idea of architecture as negotiation is not a novel one. Nonetheless, it does stand out in the current climate of celebrity architects and mega-projects that often gloss over or pay lip service to issues of political ethics, moral judgment, and environmental activism. While Park51 does not address these subjects directly, the project does introduce the themes necessary for consideration. By taking a stand against their detractors through particular, not unproblematic, aesthetic and programmatic choices, the designer and developer of Park51 place architecture squarely within the debate on the role of religion in the public sphere, the rights of minority groups, as well as what constitutes historical preservation. They recognize clearly the impact of Park51’s representation, and utilize architectural



Fig. 12. USS Akron (ZRS-4) flying over southern Manhattan Island, New York City, c. 1931–33. Naval History & Heritage Command, Washington, D.C.

design as a mode of resolution. Without presenting the project as undeservedly heroic—this is, after all, a quasi-commercial venture—it is also necessary to note the aesthetic approach taken by the designer. There is little specifically Islamic about the representation, in either the articulation of the design or the process used to achieve it, despite ambiguous references in the design.⁴⁵ In the manner in which the white, transparent façade blends in with other high-rise buildings populating lower Manhattan, the project appears to inadvertently reject the overt historicism of the Cordoba House which had been at its inception. Instead, the historical reference is that of modernism itself, exemplified in the clean lines of the New York skyline (Fig. 12).

If one accepts the premise that architectural design and the mobility of its references are part of dynamic processes, one may also accept its role in negotiating both religious ideologies and aesthetic possibilities. In so doing, we may expand the notion of transnational connections that provide room for difference,

but also foundations for communication. It is within these interstitial spaces that architectural history may also find its voice. That voice would need to engage, critically, with projects that push the limits of public discourse and to transgress disciplinary boundaries, in order to assume its role at the nexus of culture, ethics, and inhabitation.

Thanks are due to Aruna d'Souza, Jill Casid, and David Joselit for their advice and encouragement. Colleagues at a recent faculty colloquium at Yale made helpful suggestions, for which I am also grateful. I'd like to acknowledge the research assistance of Senem Cilingiroglu in the preparation of this essay.

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," in *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 101–5.
2. For an insightful consideration of the place of religion in contemporary "secular" society, see Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). My thanks to Jill Casid for bring this collection to my attention. The example considered here coheres with the arguments presented by the editors, in their introductory essay "Times Like These," in which they argue—among other things—for the Protestant roots of religious ideology in the United States, regardless of political affiliation.
3. On the making of public memory in the context of 9/11, see Edward S. Casey, "Public Memory in the Making: Ethics and place in the wake of 9/11," in *Architecture, Ethics, and the Personhood of Place*, ed. Gregory Caicco (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 69–90.
4. Recent publications have brought up the issue of architecture and ethics, such as William M. Taylor and Michael P. Levine, *Prospects for an Ethics of Architecture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011). Also, Dorian O. Mandrelli, Pino Brugellis, and Michele Azzopard, *Less Aesthetics, More Ethics: 7th International Architecture Exhibition* (Venice: Marsillio, 2000). The latter showcases the work of notable architects and artists but, with few exceptions, the projects are opaque and self-referential. For the art-historical contexts, see the anthology, Beth Hinderliter et al., eds., *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
5. This issue was raised in *Perspecta* 47 (2005), the topic of which was "Famous." Articles relevant to this essay are those by Mark Jarzombek, Peggy Deamer, and Michael Sorkin, which bring up issues of history, branding, and the limited scope of "international" recognition, respectively.
6. Seldom, but not never; the architect, Michel Aboud has been invited to present the project in NYC universities, such as his alma mater Columbia, and institutions, such as the Architecture

League of New York. The absence of such a project as this in architectural and academic circles has been noted in Mark Jarzombek and Alfred B. Hwangbo, "Global in a Not-so-Global World," *Journal of Architectural Education* 64 (2011): 59–65.

7. The term was made popular through the writings of Saskia Sassen, in *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University press, 1991).

8. Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 6.

9. Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 2002).

10. Fuat Sezgin, ed., *The Umayyad Mosque in Córdoba: Texts and studies*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 2008).

11. His biography is presented in the introductory chapter of Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, *Moving the Mountain: Beyond Ground Zero to a New Vision of Islam in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

12. Interview with Imam Feisal Rauf on July 6, 2011.

13. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, "Helping Moderate Muslims," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (November 2010): 20.

14. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, *What's Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 242.

15. *Ibid.*, 248.

16. The sculpture was designed by Adolph A. Weinman, and the building opened to the public in the 1935. Judith Resnick and Dennis E. Curtis, *Representing Justice: Invention, Controversy, and Rights in City-States and Democratic Courtrooms* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 119.

17. "Foreign Relations: Hegira from Manhattan," *Time Magazine*, April 18, 1955. Also cited in Resnick and Curtis, *Representing Justice*, 119.

18. "How the 'Ground Zero Mosque' Fear-Mongering Began," *Salon* (August 16, 2010) http://www.salon.com/2010/08/16/ground_zero_mosque_origins/. Accessed October 17, 2011.

19. See, for example, Hope n' Change Cartoons: 8/15/10 - 8/22/10. http://hopenchangecartoons.blogspot.com/2010_08_15_archive.html. Accessed June 7, 2012.

20. A brief discussion of this issue is presented in Randolph Bergstrom, "Editor's Corner: When History gets Sticky," *The Public Historian* 32, no. 4 (November 2010): 7–10, 8.

21. His remarks came under fire soon thereafter, forcing the president to clarify his remarks. For a transcript of the original remarks, see <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2010/08/obamas-remarks-about-ground-ze.html>. The clarification was noted in a *Huffington Post* article, "Obama's Ground Zero Mosque Comments: President Recalibrates," posted on August 14, 2012. <http://www>.

huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/14/obamas-ground-zero-mosque_n_682377.html. Both accessed June 5, 2012.

22. See for example, Likayat Takim, “The Ground Zero Mosque Controversy: Implications for American Islam,” *Religions* 2 (2011): 132–44.

23. On the metonymic quality of contemporary mosques, see Nebahat Avcioglu, “Identity as Form: The Mosque in the West,” *Cultural Analysis* 6 (2007).

24. For several such cartoons criticizing the project, see “Some Thoughts on the Ground Zero Mosque,” posted on August 13, 2012: <http://www.crethiplethi.com/some-thoughts-on-the-ground-zero-mosque/usa/2010/>. The original writer, in actuality, was the early twentieth-century nationalist Ziya Gökalp, and the poem is titled, “The Soldier’s Prayer,” (in 1912). In Jenny B. White, “Islam and politics in contemporary Turkey,” in *Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

25. The literature on Orientalism and the politics of representation is too vast to cite here; see, for example, Mark Crinson, “The Mosque and the Metropolis,” in *Orientalism’s Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography*, ed. Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 79–101.

26. Such as Samuel P. Huntington in his now much-criticized book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

27. Recent events, such as the siege of the Red Mosque Islamabad, Pakistan, in 2007, were clearly the inspiration for this association. For a fascinating reading of this event, see Faisal Devji, “Red Mosque,” *Public Culture* 20, no. 1 (2008): 19–26. See also, Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: Hurst, 2005).

28. Michel Abboud is the principal and designer of record on all the projects.

29. Interview with Michel Abboud, September 17, 2011.

30. <http://www.soma-architects.com/#752310/Profile>. Accessed October 27, 2011. While the architects he employs gain seniority and increased responsibility, the firm is seen as the singular vision of Michel Abboud.

31. I’m grateful to Edward Cooke Jr. for sharing this observation.

32. SOMA’s design for Park51 is a template, to be finalized once the design gets underway. The interiors are most likely to be outsourced to other entities, from architects to designers.

33. On the political dimension of such design strategies, see Alejandro Zaera-Polo, “The Politics of the Envelope: A Political Critique of Materialism” *C-Lab* 17 (2008): 76–105; <http://c-lab.columbia.edu>. Accessed December 12, 2012.

34. Michel Abboud, transcript of presentation, “The Architecture of Park51: From Controversy to Resolution,” given to me on September 19, 2011. The explicit use of the term “Islamic Cultural Center” as opposed to a mosque typifies the language of assimilation adopted by many immigrant

Muslims in the United States. On mosques in the United States, the work of the late Omar Khalidi stands out; see for example, Omar Khalidi, "Import, Adapt, Innovate: Mosque Design in the United States," *Saudi Aramco World* (November/December 2001): 24–33.

35. Jane Collier, "The Art of Moral Imagination: Ethics and the Practice of Architecture," *Journal of Business Ethics* 66 (2006): 307–317.

36. According to Zaera-Polo, buildings such as Park51 are typologically suited to respond to an "increasingly differentiated urban population" and to the ideals of a modern, multicultural society. Zaera-Polo, "The Politics of the Envelope."

37. The issue is not just one of building, but also of destruction. The classic case is that of the Ayodhya Mosque in India, destroyed in 1992. For a commentary on the Palestinian context, see Saree Makdisi, "The Architecture of Erasure," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010): 519–59.

38. The televised episode may be viewed on the PBS website, titled *The Man behind the Mosque*, which aired on September 27, 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/man-behind-mosque/>

39. A recent public event brought in three young and upcoming designers to consider the issue of "branding" Park51. See <http://vimeo.com/38071744> for highlights of "SALON 1 - Rebranding Park51 Muslim Community Center." My thanks to Jill Casid for bringing this event to my attention.

40. Abbie Fentress Swanson, *Park 51 Opens Renovated Space with Photo Exhibit of NYC Immigrant Children*. <http://culture.wnyc.org/articles/features/2011/sep/21/park-51-gallery-show/>.

41. I consider these issues in my book, *The Transnational Mosque: Architecture, mobility and the contemporary Middle East*, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming).

42. Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006): 27–226, 212. Scholars have previously acknowledged that globalization has to be seen through the transnational lens (Hannerz) whose enactment is dynamic and contingent, and takes place within zones of both fixity and mobility (Sassen).

43. Abboud, transcript of presentation, "The Architecture of Park51: From Controversy to Resolution."

44. "Faith in the City: Park 51," Michel Abboud, SOMA Architecture Foundation, November 10, 2010. <http://vimeo.com/26912373>.

45. Indeed, one might question any design that purports to do so in the twenty-first century. The prestigious Aga Khan Awards for Islamic architecture push the definition the furthest, but also fall short of specific designations. The awards are given to architects and projects serving Muslim communities globally. A recent publication of the tenth award cycle is *Intervention Architecture: Building for Change* (London: IB Tauris, 2007).