



Shahed Saleem - Mosques - our story within the landscape



Guest Speaker, architect Shahed Saleem, unpacking The British Mosque at the Suleman Lockhat Auditorium, Durban

Despite calls for mosques to blend into the environment and be as close to traditional English shapes, the minaret is here to stay - this is what architect Shahed Saleem, author of *The British Mosque* said in Durban this week. Saleem graciously included two talks on his family trip to Durban, after taking in the scenic Drakensburg Mountains, a trip made memorable by his sons Ayman and Zakaria (ages 7 and 10 respectively) being the youngest to trek the 18km round trip to the Marble Bath Cave. Hosted on Thursday afternoon by the local Institute for Architects (SAIA-KZN), Saleem brought his story to our shores, sharing his 8 years of research with architects from a range of backgrounds, providing insight and discussion around the themes of heritage, research, and future possibilities. His book, which has been warmly received, by both architects and the Muslim community alike, is described as an architectural and social history of Muslim places of worship in England.

The British Mosque

The British Mosque serves as a representation of a diverse community within a cosmopolitan country with its own rich heritage, the time was overdue for other stories to be documented therein, the story of the Muslim diaspora included. Baroness Warsi, a Muslim British cabinet member, has said that mosques should be redesigned without minarets so that they “look like English places of worship”. With regards to the call for future mosques to blend in with the traditional English environment, Saleem commented “If you asked me if mosques that are built 50 years from now would have minarets - then I would have to say yes”. The conversation continued that evening, hosted by the Islamic Forum and the Association for Muslim Built Environment Professionals (AMBEP) at the Suleman Lockhat Auditorium where local architect Adheema Davis chaired a panel comprising Saleem and local community activist, Aneesa Vawda-Moosa, introducing the research and call for reflection to our local community. Jameel Shaikh, member of AMBEP, briefly shared their role in the built environment.



Local architect Adheema Davis, chairing the discussion

Saleem told the tale of his research over time, with visuals describing the evolving relationship that a growing Muslim community had with their adopted home in the UK and the resulting form of the mosque. The socio-politics of migrancy and cultural difference were hard to ignore, despite the firm grip of planning regulations, to which any architect can attest to, the conversation of the British Mosque has stood the test of time. “Often the community would collect money, buy a property and use it as a place of worship. But as conditions improved, buildings were acquired and converted into mosques,” he said.

From the humble beginnings of community piece-meal home conversions in the late 1800s; to the stylized purpose-built mosque; and those built in a Historicist style in the late 1990s, Saleem documented the attempt to authentically represent an Islamic identity.

The image and growth of the British Mosque revealed “[sic] that there were more Muslims in the British Empire than Christians. Yet they did not have a place of worship in London. That there was a need for a national mosque in the city to serve the international Muslim community,” said Saleem. The Regent Street Mosque in London was a noted example of a product of both diplomacy from the British government and the request of the community itself. Today, the British Muslim community is described as the most diverse in the world, if one were to follow the trajectory of *The British Mosque* as illustrated by Saleem, the reflection of our diverse ummah would be easily traced therein – minaret intact, by sheer nostalgia.

Reflections at home

It is not difficult to compare the Muslim diaspora within South Africa to that of its British counterpart. Our deen, and shared histories of coloniality connect us. This is eminent perhaps in the form of our mosques, but not in their evolution. Davis commented that Saleem’s discussion left the room with possibility in the air both in terms of spirituality and space-making, and this was picked up by co-panelist, Aneesa Vawda-Moosa.

The space in which Muslims should be their best spiritual selves, is also the place where “as humans, we are our most sexist, misogynistic, and exclusive selves”. Sharing the experience of women in the mosque, Vawda-Moosa introduced the floor to the global concern of women who felt reform urgently needs to come to the mosque. Vawda-Moosa made reference to the Prophet’s Mosque as the gold standard in mosque design, commenting that it needs to be inclusive of all members of our community, and accessible to them in both form and function, versus the often exclusive, corporatized, and capitalist spaces that they have become. The prophet’s mosque had no physical barrier to segregate men and women during prayer. The men prayed in the front and the women behind the men. This allowed for women and children to be part of the spiritual and community space that the mosque functioned as.

Vawda-Moosa added that many women are “un-mosqued” because of their gender, and many choose to avoid sacred spaces that infringe on their human dignity. “We are equal in the sight of God but not in the eyes of men/designers of mosques. A mosque with a barrier makes women invisible. It erases my existence and dehumanizes me on the basis of my gender. It limits my agency in that I am unable to contribute to the mosque community. Our community is not male, it is women and men working together for a common good as the Qur’an reminds



Aneesa Vawda-Moosa calling for reform within The South African Mosque



Project Manager Jameel Shaikh of the Association of Muslim Built Environment Professionals (AMBEP), co-hosts of the evening’s event. For more information visit www.ambep.co.za

us" in surah 9 verse 71.

The male dominated Mosque Boards were called upon to implement the prophetic model, and bring down the barriers which isolate women; to elect them onto mosque boards; to mentor them to become leaders; and create platforms for women's spiritual leadership. "One mosque in Durban bans not only women but also young children. As an OT, I am acutely aware of how we also exclude people or families with disability in our mosques. Disability is not just people in wheelchairs, but those who are hearing impaired or people with autism," she said.

Vawda-Moosa's parting words were a call for action to Muslim men to acknowledge their privilege, to listen to women, and allow them to lead; and lastly a request to those within the audience on boards involved in designing mosques of the future, to open up their discussion to include women – "let's start the process here". As hoped, the community in attendance opened up, responding with comments of affirmation and willingness to gain insight, to reflect, and reform. Healthy debate left all in the room with a fire for continuity. As a community, what, and how will we document The South African Mosque?

Sana Ebrahim - Greening the scene with the iconic BunnyKat

Eco-art practitioner, Sana Ebrahim speaking on Al-Ansaar's Friday night talk show, *90 Minutes* stressed that "it is important for people to have confidence and believe in their talents so that those who possess these attributes don't have to downplay their achievements." Ms Ebrahim is a greenwill ambassador and co-founder of the Green Heart Movement, Book & Design Fair Durban, and Board Game Champions. "Let your life's ambition be guided by an innate passion. Self-belief and determination. These are the key determinants," she says.

Board games assist with strategy and decision-making skills. She believes that engaging in face-to-face interaction through board gaming is vital especially for young people who are bound to face an ever-demanding future due to technological and other high-tech advances.

It is important for the youth to have inquiring minds in order to meet the future. She spoke about her own efforts to realise her aspirations. "Curiosity sparks interest in different subjects – you'll be amazed at what you can achieve, if only you believe." Amongst them is a city branding initiative to place Durban at the forefront of the Green Economy and make it a city that is renowned for its "green" lifestyle with an active citizenry committed to caring for nature and the environment.

She is a visible campaigner for Durban to be affectionately known as Green Heart City – an effort she hopes will place Durban on global radar screens, thereby growing the local economy through tourism and related merchandising. But she is more well-known for her promotion of the BunnyKat, a soft toy like symbol, which she uses to champion a number of causes.

The BunnyKat folk craft doll is handmade by indigenous crafters in the Valley of 1000 Hills on the outskirts of Durban who are linked to the neighbouring Woza Moya community store in Hillcrest. Woza Moya is an income generation project of the Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust that assists over 350 crafters impacted by HIV/AIDS to earn a sustainable income. The BunnyKat project is empowering more people as time goes on and the demand grows for these lovable characters in countries around the world. BunnyKat costuming is often green-themed while others scamper about in brightly coloured attire. Their diversified appeal enables them to leap across boundaries of geography, ethnicity and age. They are fashioned using upcycled materials displaying modern motifs patterned with African



symbols depicting zigzags, circles and triangles. The culturally-sensitive materials are influenced by traditional attire known as 'shweshwe' with occasional beaded trimmings decorating the more ceremonial puppets. The green-hearted BunnyKat 'socialheroes' are cultural signifiers of Green Heart City Durban. They wear South African flags and have green hearts on their jerseys. The BunnyKat motto is: 'Read Write Draw... X-play!' During a visit to Ireland, a pack of BunnyKats befriended traditional leprechauns at the Leprechaun Museum. The intertwining of BunnyKat and Leprechaun folktales advanced the idea of linking Durban and Dublin as Writing Cities.

The annual Book & Design Fair Durban coordinated by the Green Heart Movement was piloted in September 2015 at KwaMuhle Museum, Durban Central. A key attraction is The Frameside Lounge offering conversational spaces for comic book artists, graphic novelists and folk craft entrepreneurs. The activations include storyboard frames mounted on display stands with visitors encouraged to enrich the process by continuing and contributing to the storylines of 'BunnyKats on the Run.'

Crowd-sourced material from The Frameside Lounge will be incorporated as part of graphic novels, video and board games, and a comic book series titled 'Down BunnyKat Lane.' The comics and graphic novel series depicting the

BunnyKat escapades have been originated by the citizen-based organisation, Green Heart Movement that aims to position Durban as Green Heart City.

Farook Khan - 90 Minutes Radio Al-Ansaar - 6th April 2018



"The reference to Durban as Green Heart City echoes the promotional branding of New York as the Big Apple and Paris as the City of Love. In South Africa, Cape Town has the Mountain, Johannesburg has the Brixton Tower and the mine dumps, and now Durban is becoming recognised for the BunnyKat and the giant Green Heart, following on from earlier but fading symbols of bananas, sugar cane, rickshas and surfboards," explains Ebrahim.

Blockchain Seminar

The first Blockchain and the Islamic Perspective Conference is due to be held at the Al Baraka Bank, Durban on April 21. Among the keynote speakers are Dr Ariff Ismail, head of Fintech at the South African Reserve Bank, Justin Clarke, Co-Founder of Private Property and One Africa Media, Nicholas Allen, co-founder and chief executive officer of Avantcore. Also in the line up of a speakers is Nevellan Moodley, an associate director of Blockchain Lead at KPMG, Sonya Kuhnel, founder and Managing Director of Blockchain Academy and Sheik Joe Bradford, American scholar of Islam and ethical investment advisor. Mufti Umair Patel of the Jamiathul Ulama of South Africa, Mufti Faraz Adam, Director of Amanah Finance and consultant in Islamic Finance and Shaikh Mahomed Shoaib Omar. Registration is at 8.30am. Register at <https://www.quicket.co.za/events/43334-blockchain-cryptocurrency-and-the-islamic-perspective/#/>

Al-Isra' wal-M`iraj - A Pedagogy of Hope & Reassurance

Imam Dr. A. Rashied Omar

There are only three references in the Glorious Qur'an to the extraordinary mystical journey of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) known as *al-Isra' wal-M'iraj*. These occur in *surah Bani Isra'il*, chapter 17 verse 1 and verse 60 and in *surah al-Najm*, chapter 53 verses 1 through 18. These Qur'anic references, however, are limited compared to the extensive and detailed accounts found in the prophetic traditions (*ahadith*) and the *sirah* literature.

Because of the expansive nature of the evidences concerning *al-Isra' wal-M'iraj* and moreover because of the extraordinariness of the event itself, scholars of Islam have interpreted it as a rich and multi-vocal experience which contains numerous lessons for Muslims. I would like to reflect on this mystical experience of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), taking account of the historical context of the event as well as the nature of the journey, to draw out a critical message that should inform the practices/disposition of every conscientious Muslim.

Historical context of *al-Isra' wal-M'iraj*

From the historical perspective, it is paramount for us to appreciate that *al-Isra' wal-M'iraj* occurred at one of the most difficult periods in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), almost exactly one year prior to the *hijrah*. At this time in his life he had lost his two most important pillars of support. The death of his uncle Abu Talib followed by his beloved wife Khadija was a devastating blow to his mission. Because of these great losses, it came to be known as the year of sadness or sorrow. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was now left defenceless in the face of a relentless enemy.

Because of his precarious position the Prophet (pbuh) decided to leave hard-hearted Makkans and try to preach his message to the people of the nearby city of Ta'if. But the people of Ta'if were no more receptive to his message and encouraged street urchins to drive him out of the city. Traditions inform us that the Prophet (pbuh) was humiliated and stoned until blood was flowing freely from his wounds and dripping at his feet. And as he lay outside the city of Ta'if a forlorn and scorned man, he made one of his most poignant prayers which clearly articulate his anguish and the state of despair he found himself in at this time:

O my Lord! I complain to you of my weakness, the lack of my resourcefulness and of my humiliation before the people. O most Merciful of those who are merciful. You are the Lord of the oppressed and my Lord. To whom have you entrusted me, to an unsympathetic foe, who receives me with hostility, or to an enemy to whom you have given control over my affair? I do not care for anything so long as you are not displeased with me. Your pardon is that which I desire the most. I seek shelter and assistance in the light of your countenance, which dispels all sorts of darkness and which remedies the condition of this world and the hereafter.

Significance of 15th Sha`ban

The month of Sha`ban is the eighth month in the Hijri lunar calendar and comes as a timely reminder of the imminence of the blessed month of Ramadan, the most important and most sacred month of the year for Muslims. The month of Sha`ban is thus a prelude and gateway to the blessed month of Ramadan. The classical Muslim scholar, Abu Bakr Warraq use to say: Rajab is a month of cultivation, Shaban is a month of irrigating the fields, and the month of Ramadan is a month of reaping and harvesting.

According to many Muslim scholars the 15th night of the lunar month of Sha`ban (Layla al-Nisfi min Sha`ban) is a "special" night of blessings in which Allah's forgiveness is more readily available. The night is also known as the "Night of Repentance" (Layla al Bara'ah), the "Night of Mercy" (Layla al-Rahmah) and the "Blessed Night" (Layla al- Mubarakah). Historically however, there has not existed unanimity and consensus amongst Muslim scholars with regard to the significance of this night. Some scholars dispute the authenticity of the Prophetic traditions (*ahadith*), which deal with the importance of this night. They argue that the 15th night of Sha`ban has no special religious and spiritual significance, and should be treated just as any other night. The majority of Muslim scholars however acknowledge that the night does have a special religious and spiritual significance. One such scholar, 'Ata Ibn Yasar, purports that it is the second most virtuous night after Laylatul-Qadr. There has been a long-standing debate concerning the authenticity of the *ahadith* extolling the virtues of laylatun nisfi min

Within a few weeks of this most difficult period in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) *al-Isra' wa-al-M'iraj* occurred. Many scholars have therefore concluded that these difficult circumstances provided the impetus for this nocturnal mystical journey (*sabab al-M'iraj*).

Two Stages of a Single Mystical Journey

Putting all the evidences together the following picture emerges of the nature of the mystical journey. On the 27th night of Rajab in the twelfth year of his prophethood and one year before his migration from Makkah to Madina, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was accompanied on a nocturnal mystical journey, first to *al-Masjid al-Aqsa* in Jerusalem (known as *al-Isra'*) where he prayed with earlier Prophets of God, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon all of them). From there the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) ascended through the seven heavens to the lote tree (known as *al-Mi'raj*), where he witnessed some of God's glorious signs.

A Pedagogy of Hope and Reassurance

Al-Isra' wal-M'iraj as seen from the historical perspective represents a pedagogy of hope and reassurance. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) finds himself at his lowest ebb, yet his faith remains strong, and God, the Most Merciful, through *al-Isra' wal-M'iraj* provides the Prophet (pbuh) with the reassurance of His Omnipotence. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) gets a glimpse of God's glorious signs through his ascension of the seven heavens. Shortly after this uplifting spiritual experience the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) left Makkah and was joyously welcomed to Madina where he became the leader of a new society whose destiny was to change the fortunes of the Arabian Peninsula forever.

This is also the relevance of *al-Isra' wal-M'iraj* in our personal lives as we journey along in the quest for meaning and transcendence. The lesson is clear that no matter what difficulty we may be encountering in our own historical sojourns we must never lose hope. If life is to be sustained, hope must remain, even when confidence is wounded and trust impaired. Without hope there can only be despair. Notwithstanding the despondency which abound both within and outside our community, it is the responsibility and duty of the conscientious believer to keep the spirit of hope alive in our communities. We need to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit against all odds. There are many Qur'anic passages that exhort us in this regard. The most striking of these come from *surah al-Inshirah*, chapter 94, verses 5-8: **Verily after difficulty there is ease. After difficulty there is ease. And when the difficulty is over still strive, and make your Lord the object of your striving (Q 94:5-8)**

Dr. A. Rashied Omar is the Imam at the Claremont Road Mosque in Cape Town and Research Scholar of Islamic Studies and Peacebuilding at University of Notre Dame, USA.

Sha`ban and particularly the special supplication (*du'a*) that is made on this night and the theological implications this has for the Muslims' understanding of the Nature of Allah, the Most High. Whilst it is not our purpose here to enter into the details of this debate, it suffices to say, that both the special supplication was never made by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) himself. Certain portions of it were formulated by two famous companions (*sahabah*), `Umar Ibn al-Khattab and `Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with them). They used to supplicate in this manner at various places and occasions such as for example, during the circumambulation of the Ka'bah (*tawaf*).

I recommend the reading of the most significant supplication for forgiveness recommended by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) known as the *sayyidul istighfar*.

'O Allah, You are my Lord; there is no God except you. My Lord You created me and I am Your servant. I am keeping my pledge and promise to you to the best of my ability. I seek refuge with You from the wrongs I have done. I acknowledge the blessings You have bestowed upon me, and I confess my sins to you, so forgive me indeed, no one can forgive sins except You.'

Let us seize this blessed month of Sha`ban as a great opportunity to improve our lives by nourishing our souls. I advise myself first and then you to seek Allah's forgiveness during this great season and to prepare ourselves for the blessed month of Ramadan by dedicating some of the days of this blessed month of Sha`ban in fasting.

See Islamic Forum Website for full version of these two lectures.