

MIDDLE EASTERN

IMMIGRATION LANDSCAPE in America



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Submitted to:

EDC Student of the Year Award | 2014

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How have diasporic cultural subjects, throughout history, reappropriated the urban landscape and social sphere for the purpose of place-making and identity formation?

PROJECT ABSTRACT

With the arrival of Muslim immigrants to Europe and the United States in the early twentieth century and their settlement in various industrial cities, varied sub-groups, each with differing values and expressions, brought their own ideologies and aesthetic representations into the Western ground. One third of Muslims across the globe live in non-Muslim-majority-states. Through their presence and activities and the way they inhabit social space, these immigrant communities—many of which are disadvantaged at the outset—express their social agency in the way they challenge, and in some instances subvert, the customary use of social spaces. Life on the street, shops, public spaces, schools, religious buildings and etc. entail examples of how spaces have been converted to look familiar and in the process meet the purpose of place-making.

Working from a broad cultural context, this project examines the question of cultural and urban conservation in the setting of modern urbanism. As contemporary cities embark on an ambitious journey towards (re)creating themselves as high-tech, high culture, and globally connected metropolises, nevertheless, people from diverse ethnic backgrounds—outsiders from the dominant group—suffer from their *otherness*. In this context, membership in a religious group, even a marginal one, can be an important source of identity formation, hence offering modes of expression that lends meaning to one's existence in a pluralistic society.

This research uses spatial analysis to investigate how—in a constant process of in/exclusion—changing urban landscapes become the locus of representational conflicts. This allows for the examination of the processes through which diasporic subjects throughout history have reappropriated the urban realm and social space for the purpose of place-making and identity formation. These communities produce complex spatial overlays in which similarities and differences coexist. It is through the creation of expressive social signs that the urban dweller defines a new collective identity and in the process embody the conservation of a culture as much as the conservation of architectural forms. Understanding how this process of meaning-making occurs, is essential to the study of urban places and culture, especially where the presence of the *other* group is concerned.

View submitted maps: https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/48948768/Somayeh_Chitchian_EDCAward_Maps.pdf



Street art by Stik, East London; One of the rare bits of street art relating to the Bengali inhabitants of Brick Lane, 2011, Ravish London. © Steve Reed

PROJECT SUMMARY

In an increasingly transnational and multicultural world, identities—fragmented and nonsingular—are shaped through a constant process of displacement, mobility, and change. Multiple crossings of physical and/or impalpable boundaries have resulted in the formation of a new form of cultural landscapes that are more the product of exclusion rather than unity. Class, racial, and ethnic hierarchies have constantly marked urban space with different meanings. It is through the presence of these communities and subcultures within the urban realm that modes of aesthetization, representation, and place-making have severely been challenged.

Occasionally these changes have significant external expressions, while in many instances, this process of meaning-making occurs internally, far from any dominant form of urban expression. When certain modes of representation—whether architectural, cultural, social—are discouraged within the public domain, individuals retreat to their safe-haven interiors, resulting in a situation where interiority becomes superior to an external form of expression; hence the notion of storefront architecture, or in this specific instance *storefront mosque*. Storefront mosques abound across the United States and in total represent close to 90 percent of all the mosques and Islamic centers within this country. Unfortunately, purpose-built mosques, while forming a small percentage of this specific building typology, have been the center of attention—at least on an aesthetic level—of major architectural scholarly work.

Thus, this study, by using these religious institutions as the nucleus of its community study, is primarily concerned with processes through which diasporic cultural subjectivities, throughout history, have reappropriated the urban realm and social landscape for the purpose of place-making and defining a new form of identity. More specifically, how have Muslim immigrants, in the Western contemporary urban landscape, (re)configured spaces for the purpose of expressing their new Islamic identities as minorities in the Western society? And ultimately, how is/can cultural integration be accomplished through the medium of design, architecture, and space?

The study of these urban adaptations, although multiple within their meaning and hybrid in their manifestation, can act as powerful mediums for the further understanding of cultural differences and



intolerances within our societies. It is through these expressive social signs that the urban dweller is trying to define a new collective form of identity. These communities, in response to their ever-changing socio-spatial landscape, produce spaces of mixture, where both similarities and differences coexist. This entails practices, representations, and expressions of cultural spaces that individuals, groups, and communities—part of an ethnic-religious minority—recognize as their cultural heritage, providing them with a sense of identity and continuity. Only when cultural conservation has been recognized as such it has the capacity of contributing to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity for helping individuals from different backgrounds to feel part of society at large.

Through the medium of demographic research, i.e., mapping, I have looked (and will be looking further) at several neighborhoods in the United States of America, which contain the highest numbers of Muslim residents. How have these communities been distributed within these neighborhoods? Where do they mostly reside? To what social, ethnics and economic class do they belong? Where are the local mosques, schools, local shops located? How do they look architecturally? What type of mosques are they? Are they converted spaces or are there any examples of purpose-built-mosques? Through these various data collections from these communities, one is able to analyze how micro-segregation and group interactions have produced a distinctive urban landscape –constrained and challenged by the social, cultural, religious barriers of its locales.

Submitted maps can be downloaded through the following link:
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