

AN EVALUATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ISLAMIC CENTER IN NEWPORT, MELBOURNE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXTUALISM AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to evaluate the Australian Islamic Center at Newport, Melbourne from the aspect of contextualism in relation to the physical urban fabric, the planning of spaces for interaction among Muslims and non-Muslims and the interpretation of historical references. In the present day, most of the manifestation of mosque architectural language is out of physical, social and historical context. The grand scale and monumental architecture shows shallow interpretation of Islam teachings and emphasize on the identity of mosque as a symbol of Islam's past glory. As a result, the conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims and eventually lead to grave consequences. Hence, this paper seeks to remind the mosque designers to rethink their design ideas towards the approach of contextualism by engaging the Australian Islamic Center as a case study because this mosque is an extraordinary example of contextual architecture in terms of adaptability in physical and social context as well as the interpretation of historical references. The methods used to obtain the information for this research paper are online research, on-site observation and photograph for evidences, literature research of the elements of traditional mosque in the past as well as the intentions of Glenn Murcutt in transferring them into modern context. Besides, interview with the second imam of the mosque and person in-charge of Islamic Council of Victoria was carried out.

Keyword: Islamic Center, contextualism, mosque

INTRODUCTION

The Mosque is the most important and sacred building in Islam. However, the architecture language of the mosque, in the modern times, is always presented in a grandiose expression and lack of consideration for the neighborhood context. These monumental mosques have illustrated a symbol of the domination of Islam over other religious cultures and traditions of others. Indirectly, this kind of architecture approach reflects the intolerance and isolationist attitude of Muslims society and has led to the serious rift between Muslims and non-Muslims. Unfortunately, the contradiction among the societies becomes more and more drastic recently. Hence, it is important to determine the importance of contextualism in mosque architecture. This paper seeks to contribute to the on-going conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslim at the social and political level by evaluating the architecture of mosque to be more in context. The

Australian Islamic Center, a modern and progressive mosque in Melbourne is engaged as a case study. In this way, it was hoped that such mosque design would present a new paradigm among mosque architects in order to ease the tension of societies.

This research attempts to look at context in three aspects, which are physical contextualism in terms of the physical conditions of that particular area, social contextualism in terms of space planning by emphasizing community activities and finally the interpretation of historical references in modern elements.

MEANING OF CONTEXTUALISM

Architectural contextualism can be approached in three manners, which are physical contextualism, social contextualism and historical contextualism. The detailed definition of each of them is presented in the following sections.

Physical contextualism simply means that the building is in context to the physical condition. Physical context forms the tangible attributes and can be categorized into three levels of fitness, which are within the urban scale, the streetscape and the building itself. The urban context is meant by urban fabric, orientation, the hierarchy of urban skyline in terms of volumetric form and other features that are in macro scale. The streetscape contextualism is basically referred to by the façade design, accessibility and the height of street wall; while the fitness of building itself includes the spatial structure, the building typology, massing and form as well as the materials used. Buildings that are in a physical context should be approached in a current and contemporary fashion. This forms the continuity of physical identity with the neighborhood.

Social contextualism covers the subjects that are intangible, like the living patterns and daily needs of the neighborhood building residents as well as the social, cultural and religious background of that particular society. Buildings that are in social context simply means that the buildings respect the social status of that particular area and exists with the society in harmonious condition. It is important to translate the intangible attributes into architecture space planning by emphasizing activities that invite and engage the larger community in order to encourage social interaction and eventually enrich the living quality of the society.

Historical context portrays the traditional ‘identity giving’ surroundings and act as anchor for the society. Urban and architectural identity are related to the collective memory of the inhabitants, for example grid organization of the roads, squares, green public spaces, landmarks, events taken place in the city and so on. Historic and traditional built forms provide the framework and therefore the new architecture should be implemented in that particular historical urban fabric as infill to conserve the identity and continuity. The relationship between new architecture with its historical context is determined from the values assigned to the meaning of its heritage architecture and consequently its modern interpretation. Hence, it is important to understand the sensitivity required towards historical context to adequately deal with any conflict or dispute.

METHODOLOGY

There are three methods used to carry out the research based on the objectives above.

The first was a site visit to the Australian Islamic Center. During the visit the researchers were briefed by the contractor and Imam. A physical survey of the surrounding neighbourhood were made and photographs taken so as a comparison with the Australian Islamic Center can be made.

Secondly, an interview was made with the Imam of the mosque and a representative of the Islamic Council of Victoria.

THE NEWPORT MOSQUE

The Australian Islamic Center of Newport was designed by Pritzker Price winning Australian Architect Glenn Murcutt. The Australian Islamic Center of Newport is located at the suburb area of Melbourne – Newport. Newport is a low rise residential suburb around 10 km away from Melbourne city. The Australian Islamic Center of Newport served as a mosque for the Muslim community in Newport and also part of the center to serve as a community center for the non-Muslim community. (Neustein, 2016)

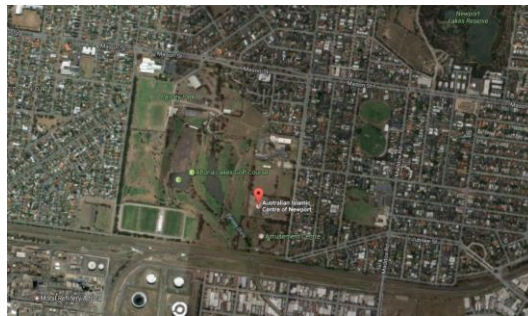


Figure 1: The location of the Australian Islamic center of Newport, Melbourne.

Architect Glenn Murcutt had worked with the local Islamic Council called Australian Islamic Council at Melbourne city for 10 years. At the same time he had also collaborated with local Islamic architect Hakan Elevli (Taylor, 2017). Architect Glenn Murcutt worked with the council members and the Muslim architect to collect the idea and understanding of the meaning of Islam which helps him to design the Australian Islamic Center of Newport. (Taylor, 2017)



Figure 2: (Left) The prayer hall that have transparent wall which the people can see through.

Figure 3:(Right) The classical mosque had solid wall to block visual from outside looking into the prayer hall.

Glenn Murcutt provided an image to the reporter when he described that the mosque has no “fourth wall” which means there was no fencing wall that will hide the mosque that will bring mysterious feeling to others. (Taylor, 2017). Glenn also said that instead of entering into a private courtyard through a small opening such as traditional mosque design, he felt that it was better to open out the courtyard for the public so that people can see what Muslims are doing inside the mosque. This will help non-Muslim to understand more about Muslims. So, Glenn used the transparent glazed façade at the ground floor to

achieve the intention. Thus, he had planted willow bottle brush and olive tree uses as a shade and shelter for the external space.

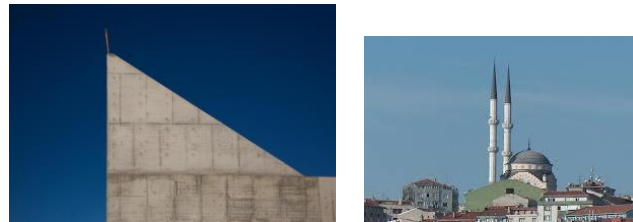


Figure 4: The minaret design by Glenn Murcutt for Newport mosque

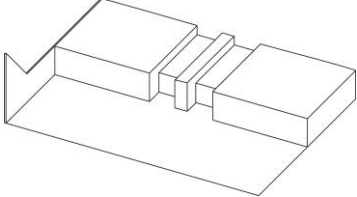
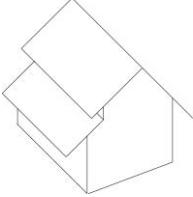





Architect Glenn Murcutt had persuaded the client to transform the traditional minaret into a sculptural wall, a blade-like concrete wall which will provide the feeling that would bring visitors into the building (Taylor, 2017). In the transformation of the minaret, he wanted to send out the message that building design should improve and fulfill the current environment and the tenets of modernism. Architect Glenn Murcutt also used the small unit of the golden crescent to replace the huge dome. Inside in the prayer hall, there was opening on the ceiling area and all the opening is connected to the golden crescent lantern. The lantern had a distributed fenestration facing four directions which are the north, south, east. These different facing had different color plates and the sunlight through the color plate will reflect different color scheme in every different time.





Figure 5: The color skylight ceiling on the prayer room.

From the description above, we understand that architect Glenn Murcutt tried to bring the mosque design into another level that is friendlier to the surrounding and more contextualize. He had eliminated the minaret and dome and converted those element into others architecture elements. It also shows that Glenn had changed the decorative ornament into functional ornament but still able to create a holistic prayer area for the Muslim. The Islamic Council of Australian also agreed to architect Glenn Murcutt when he convinces them with solid reasons. (Neustein, 2016)

FINDINGS ON PHYSICAL CONTEXTUALISM

	Australian Islamic Center of Newport	Neighbourhood	Remarks
Mass	 <p>A big opening welcoming outsider to join before entering the building.</p>	 <p>Smaller mass compare to the mosque but it is a mass housing area.</p>	The mass of the mosque is partially in context with the neighbourhood.
Scale	 <p>Two storey building with a huge setback from the two storey housing community</p>		The scale of mosque is in context with the neighbourhood.
color	 <p>Concrete Grey contrasting with a colourful interior</p>	 <p>Variety of colour but not sharp colours</p>	The colour of the mosque is partially in context with the neighbourhood
Material	 <p>Concrete as major construction material</p>	 <p>Timber and masonry</p>	The material of mosque is not in context with the neighbourhood.

Style	 <p data-bbox="375 436 651 464">Bare finished brutalism</p>	 <p data-bbox="732 415 1011 443">Vernacular architecture</p>	<p data-bbox="1070 300 1341 394">The style of mosque is not in context with the neighbourhood</p>
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Based on the finding, we conclude that there are five aspects from the physical contextualism by comparing Australian Islamic Center of Newport, Melbourne with the surrounding. The following aspects are mass, scale, colour, material and style.

Mass

The Australian Islam Center of Newport is a 2 storey building which is of similar building height with the surrounding. It also consists of an open space which in Islamic term is called – Sahn. However, the architect reinterpreted the Sahn and he shifted the Sahn to the front of the mosque which then became a fore court.

Scale

The Australian Islamic Center of Newport has smaller scale and blended with the neighbourhood. The fore court and the long setback create a buffer zone with the neighbourhood. These intention make the mosque looks smaller in scale when standing at the housing community area.

Colour

The Australian Islamic Center of Newport used raw finishes which is concrete finishes. However, the ceiling of the main prayer hall has four different colours which represent the four elements in Islamic teaching.

Material

Both mosques use one major construction material. The Australian Islamic Center of Newport uses fair faced concrete as its major construction material but the neighbourhood of the surrounding use local material such as timber and stone masonry.

Style







The last aspect of comparison is the building style. The Australian Islamic Center of Newport is a bare finished brutalism building which the neighbourhood housing building styles is in the vernacular style.



Summary

Based on the overall finding of physical contextualism of Australian Islamic Center of Newport, the mosque is in context

Finding on Historical Contextualism

The following table summarizes the findings on how Glen Murcutt re-contextualize the historical elements of the mosque into modern day interpretation:

	Newport mosque	Sabah city mosque	Remark
Dome (qubba)	The roof lantern 	Dome 	Partially not in context with the dome, Roof lantern interprete the use Islamic geometrical by sun light.
Minaret (Call to prayer)	Blade-like concrete wall 	Tradition Minaret 	Partially not in context with the traditional minaret. The architect intended to design a new minaret.
Qibla wall	Arabic word on concrete wall with Natural sunlight 	Traditional Niche 	Partially not in context with the traditional niche. A shallow pool is situated behind the qibla wall utilized to reflect afternoon sun into the prayer hall.

<p>Forecourt</p>	<p>Open courtyard</p> 	<p>Enclosed forecourt with 4 wall</p> 	<p>Partially not in context with the enclosed forecourt. Open courtyard which open to the public.</p>
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It is therefore concluded that the Newport mosque does not conform literally to the populist elements of mosques in the muslim traditional world. Glen has given all the elements a new interpretation within context of the modern life and social and cultural expectations.

FINDINGS ON SOCIAL CONTEXTUALISM

A formal interview was conducted at the Islamic Council Victoria with the person in charge. In Melbourne, the ICV has always engaged with the local Islamic communities. In Melbourne, Victoria, 60% of the population are youth, 35% are the elderly, and 15 % are the youngest. This resulted in the Islamic Council of Victoria mosque conducting sermons in English as the main language to communicate and preach the young generation. However, the older generation still requires the Arabic language. Furthermore, they also have classes to integrate with the society. Sometimes ICV will conduct some event and work with the other local organization.

Lastly, Madam Liyana of the ICV mentioned that the Qurban ceremony is not allowed outside of the house by the Islamic Council because of it is barbaric to the human eyes. However, a proper Islamic way to run the Qurban ceremony is allowed in the slaughter house. Based on the conversation between the second imam, he mentioned that the lantern roof served the purposes of capturing and directing sunlight into the space with various colors representing Islam. The lantern has yellow, blue, green and red color and the sunlight falling into the space will change accordingly to the orientation of the sun. In the early morning, the morning sun will direct Yellow color into the space which symbolizes paradise, followed by the blue color representing water, green color of the midday..

The mosque is located at the center point of the western part of Victoria. This would help attract people from both sides of the area. Besides that, the mosque welcomes non-Muslim to join their activities such as in the multifunctional hall, recreational hall, exhibition center, shops, and restaurants.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Invisible fencing is one of the important elements to show the Australian Islamic Center contextualising to the site surrounding. In this case it had provided the sense of welcoming due to the transparency of the fence. The fencing only functions as marking the territory of the building but not to block other people for coming in. Thus, due to the transparency, outsiders would be more willing to enter the site. People in Australia like to picnic and take a break off such as the open area in front of the state library of

Melbourne. Based on the openness of the mosque, it had become a community gathering hall or center which had achieved the intention of the architect for the public to visit.

Next, the Recreational Hall and Gallery are the next topics to discuss regarding contextualism to the environment. This is because this type of space is the most attractive space to people to visit the mosque. The architect was concern about the space as exhibition for the mosque committee to operate and organize an events to outsides and non-Muslim in order to promote the Islamic teaching.

The Restaurant or Café, and shops also happen to be another best selling point to attract people. This is because in Australia the culture of having daily coffee which is why this space would be a perfect attraction to the public. The location of this area was all set and perfect because it is located directly in front of all other spaces which will provide a sharp visual catchment from the main road. Thus, drinking in the café also can increase the probability of interaction and communication between Muslim and non-Muslim.

CONCLUSION

In short, the Australian Islamic center has offered a new paradigm of contextual mosque design. Physically, this mosque is designed in moderate scale, and the hierarchy and massing of building is attempted to conserve the continuity of neighborhood. There are no monumental features that illustrate the domination of Islam over other religious cultures and traditions. On the matter of social interaction, this mosque attempts to interpret the social activities into space planning. For instance, the forecourt, recreational hall and café are designed to encourage social interaction. The absence of fencing and transparency of building structure shows the openness and toleration of Islam and expresses the desire of the mosque to be part of the community. On the matter of historical context, this mosque is able to interpret the traditional features of mosques in a modern way. For instance, the concrete minaret wall is displayed in humble way.

To conclude, this building has shown that the mosque is not only a house of god, but a community center with multi-functional spaces and humble appearance which will enhance the interaction between the Muslim society and non-Muslims.

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