Architecture, Culture and Needs of Australian Muslim Communities: Challenges and Opportunities for Social Inclusion

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Abstract
Although Muslims have lived in the West for many decades, they still face many challenges and exclusion from socio-cultural and recreational activities in facilities that sometimes do not cater to the needs of people from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, Muslims cultural and religious obligations may limit their participation at a range of public venues. These kinds of limitations and exclusions highlight the need for places that cater for Muslims special requirements whilst providing for a healthy interaction with non-Muslims.
The literature review of this research paper explores the history of Muslims in Australia and highlights the needs for community centers and their role in helping Muslim migrants, to settle, develop and integrate in their new countries, whilst preserving their identity.
The research methods include Focus Groups techniques to collect, analyze and interpret data in order to identify the challenges that contemporary Australian Muslims face today so that one can understand their main social needs and cultural requirements.
Data interpretation also provides guidelines to define the architectural design concepts and criteria required to develop functional socio-cultural Muslim community centers and recognize their role in developing and integrating Muslim families in the West.

Keywords: Architecture and culture, Community centers in Australia, Muslims needs, Social inclusion, Challenges and opportunities.
Introduction
This paper reviews the literature to identify Muslim communities in Australia and their history. It introduces their early community centers and places of worship. Furthermore, this research explores Muslims’ journey and settlement in the West and describes the situation of the contemporary Muslims and their communities in Australia. This paper also discusses some challenges that face Australian Muslims in today’s vibrant life, focusing on women and youth, and defines some of their obligations, socio-cultural needs and requirements.

Approach
To better understand Muslim communities in Australia, their socio-cultural obligations and needs that directly and indirectly affect the criteria and shape of their communities and existence, it is important to understand Muslims’ background in general, explore briefly their journey in Australia, and highlight the challenges that faced them in the past and urged them to establish their own Muslim community centers and other types of Muslim built forms.

Background: History of Muslims in Australia

The Macassan Fishermen
The history of Muslims in Australia dates back to the sixteenth century when Macassars (people from Indonesia) interacted with Aboriginal communities living in the northern parts of the continent (Yasmeen 2008, 5).

The interaction left an imprint on the state in the form of common words and expressions between the Muslim visitors and indigenous populations (Cawte 1996 and Balint 2007) (Figures 1 & 2).

Malay Divers
Malay divers were employed in the pearling grounds off Western Australia and the Northern Territory. By the eighteen seventies, Australian pearlers were actively recruiting Asian divers for the pearling industry, acknowledged as being of primary importance to Australia’s emerging economy. In eighteen seventy five, it was estimated that there were one thousand
eight hundred Malays working in Western Australian waters. They were mainly recruited from Koepang under an agreement with the Dutch colonial authorities (Matthews 2007).

Afghan Cameleers
During the gold mining boom of the eighteen nineties, camel drivers coming from various parts of Afghanistan and present-day Pakistan worked at Coolgardie, Kalgoorlie and coastal port towns such as Albany, Fremantle, Geraldton, and Port Hedland. They lived in “Ghan” camps or towns and followed their Islamic faith.

Religion and Culture
The early cameleers and hawkers, in the eighteen nineties, were practicing Muslims living in a non-Muslim society. For most of the year, they were solitary travelers lacking the companionship and strong sense of community inherent in Muslim life. There were no mosques for them to pray in and no special ‘Friday prayers’ with an Imam (a Muslim Priest) to lead the prayer and deliver a sermon. Usually, the camel men and hawkers performed their prayers five times daily out in the desert, bush-land, or countryside. The highlights of the year were the celebrations for Eid ul-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan (the month of fasting), and Eid ul-Adha, two months later. On festival days, there was no loneliness as they lounged around, feasting and enjoying each other’s company. Further evidence of the strong desire by cameleers and hawkers to maintain an Islamic identity is revealed in their efforts to persuade the Australian Government to permit Imams and Sheikhs to enter the country to serve their religious needs (Deen 2007).

The End of an Era
The camel era ended with the advance of railways, improved roads and motor transport. Some early cameleers returned to their ‘home country’ to die. Those who remained in Australia mostly clung to the margins of the white society, living humble and poor lives. They lived the rest of their lives quietly in Ghantowns and old city mosques. Their last years were spent in tiny rooms inside mosque courtyards. In the nineteen twenties, the number of Afghans and Muslim migrants in general declined with the end of the camel transport industry and the restrictive effects of the White Australia immigration policy (Deen 2007). The White Australia policy comprised several historical policies that were designed to favor white migrants from Europe, and strongly discourage non-white migrants from Asia. It came into effect with the Australian Federation in nineteen hundred and one, and was gradually abolished between nineteen forty nine and nineteen seventy three (ADIC Website).

Background of Muslims’ Built Forms: Early Mosques in Australia
According to Deen (2007), early Australian Muslims felt an overwhelming need to build their own mosques to fulfill their Islamic obligations. At first, a special room set aside in someone’s house served as a place of prayer. In the more remote areas like Maree and Coolgardie, simple mud and tin-roofed mosques were initially constructed by the Afghan cameleers.

Few of these remote mosques still exist today, but archive photographs of archetypal buildings in the Ghantowns such as Farina and Marree indicate a considerable and practical use of corrugated iron sheeting and other industrial building materials that the cameleers were regularly transporting into the outback in combination with more conventional techniques of clay, wood and stone construction (Figures 3 & 4).
In addition to their humble and practical houses, each of the Ghantowns had some form of mosque. These were often quite temporary structures of sun-dried mud construction, typical of self-built vernacular buildings in Northern India, but corrugated iron was also used in some of these structures. These mosques provided a center for the social life of these settlements, meeting points in the cultural landscape of the cameleers as they travelled from one remote Ghantown to the next (Scriver 2004).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, community leaders in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane made great efforts to secure land and raise funds for the purpose of building permanent mosques. A relatively large masonry mosque was built in Adelaide collectively by the Muslim cameleers’ community with their combined life savings. The mosque is located in a distant and unfamiliar urban locale of the capital city, on the edge of the sea (Scriver 2004, 29). It was maintained in its early years by an infrequent mosque leader (Imam), from the Australian Afghan community.

The Adelaide Mosque functioned as a common point of gathering and connecting the geographically isolated members of the Afghan community operating throughout the central and eastern interior of the continent. The Afghan cameleers visited the urban mosque occasionally due to the distance, usually as a place of rest and retreat from their routine journeys, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan when the camel transport business closes down (Scriver 2004, 29).
The Adelaide Mosque was built just two generations after the foundation of the South Australian Colony within the limited sacred places of the inner Adelaide city in eighteen eighty eight. Scriver (2004) considers the Adelaide Mosque as one of the remarkable icons of diversity of the urban fabric of colonial Adelaide (Figures 5).

In eighteen ninety five, Perth Muslim leaders lobbied the state government for a land grant in line with the grants given to churches and synagogues. When this approach failed, they looked to their own resources, inspired by the construction of the Adelaide Mosque. Muslim leaders started planning the Perth Mosque (Figures 6). Its foundation stone was laid and the mosque was opened in nineteen hundred and six (Culture and Religion, ICWA).

Contemporary Muslims in Australia: The Start of a New Era

After World War II, the restrictive Australian immigration policy eased in the nineteen sixties and seventies (as it was unsustainable as trade with Asia grew); consequently, more Muslims started migration to Australia. They were comprised of various ethnic groups, including Africans, Arabs, Turks, Yugoslavs, Malays, Indians, Pakistanis, Afghans and Burmese (Cleland 2001).

More recently, according to the Australian Census (2011), there have been about half a million Muslims living in Australia, comprising 2.25 percent of the total population. The Australian state New South Wales has the highest Muslim population, 50 percent of Muslim Australians, and the state of Victoria has the second highest Muslim population, 33 percent of the Muslim Australians (Figure 7).
Signs of Challenges for the Muslim Communities in Australia

International terrorist attacks have resulted in retaliation through the torching of mosques and Islamic schools in some Australian capital cities and labeling of people with Middle Eastern appearance as ‘terrorists’. These are signs of troubled relations between Muslims and non-Muslim Australians (McGavin 2008, 6). Moreover, since the ‘Cronulla riots’ in November two thousand and five, a lot of attention has been placed on Arabs and Muslims, especially young people and women. McGavin (2008) believes that the Australian and Western media have also played a role in the generation of some social tension affecting some Muslim communities.

Another sign of challenges facing Australian Muslims is the strong opposition of the wider community for building new mosques or Muslim community centers (especially amongst metropolitan councils that have rapid and significant growth in their Muslim population), which may also create a public outcry.

In fact, there have already been a number of cases within Perth and other Australian cities such as Canberra and Sydney, where development proposals for mosques and Muslim community centers were rejected as a result of fierce public opposition (Maginn 2012).

Challenges Facing Muslim Women and Youth in Australia

Muslim women, old and young, were often the specific focus of discrimination, with prejudice taking a range of forms from offensive remarks to physical violence (Ismae-Listen 2004, 47), primarily due to their dress and appearance. For young women, this is likely to affect their self-esteem and potential to fulfill their ambitions in education and career.

Many migrants in Australia have lost their culture and identity; other migrants have had to rapidly learn the Australian culture and value system with great difficulty. Furthermore, many Muslim communities have been left helpless to struggle on their own, trying to understand, learn, adapt as well as integrate into the Australian society. Migrants have faced many barriers that have been passed on to their children. Nowadays, there is a higher exposure to...
dangerous substances, such as drugs and alcohol, which can negatively impact the Muslim youth and the younger Australian generation in general (Moosa GIYC website).

In addition to the issues faced by young people generally, Muslim youth are exposed to pressure from their parents, families and communities to uphold their Islamic values and heritage. Omar, W. and Allen (1996) explain that young Muslims are influenced by a combination of mainstream Australian society, Islamic culture and their ethnic background. As a result, some young Muslims decide to turn away from their Islamic culture and assimilate to the wider Australian society, and some may be living a ‘double life’ in which they practice as a Muslim at home but not in the public realm. There are also young Muslims who are inclined to classical Islam and yet others may be more liberal in their approach to living in a non-Muslim society.

Moosa (GIYC website) indicates that Muslims living in the West constantly face challenges of having to prove to their fellow Australians that they have nothing to fear and that they can be trusted and become assets to the Australian community as well as living in peace and harmony with their neighbors. Moosa believes that the challenges facing the Muslim community are only part of the problem. He claims that Muslims can only ever really become a part of another society once they have faith in themselves, by understanding their own religion, their own history and be comfortable with their own identity.

The Importance of Islamic Centers to Muslim Families in the West

The following sections discuss both the meaning and sense of a community, with an attempt to explain the relationship between the sense of community, place and socio-cultural participation. It also highlights the role and importance of community centers to Muslim families in the West.

1. Human Needs and Architecture

In regard to design and associated human needs, Salama (1998, 4 & 5) explains that all humans have the same basic needs; psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a concept known as ‘Hierarchy of Human Needs’ (1971; as cited in Salama 1998, 4). Maslow’s hierarchy or pyramid categorizes the most fundamental human needs that must be satisfied before a person can focus and pay attention on the context level.

Maslow classifies the most basic set of needs as physiological, which are necessary for the proper functioning of the body and mind. His theory suggests that human beings start to be concerned about the next level after the essential ones are satisfied. Then people will turn their attention to those needs that are not strictly essential to body function. The same transition is theorized at each level of Maslow’s hierarchy; accordingly, they will be concerned with security needs after physiological needs have been satisfied.
Salama’s interpretation identifies the general types of physical, psychological and social needs, according to Maslow’s hierarchy. On the left of the diagram (Figure 8) is the hierarchy of six levels of human needs whilst on the right and center are the ways these needs are expressed and manifested in the built environment.

It is noticed that many of the examples extend to more than one category; if security is guaranteed, then human beings turn their attention to higher needs, such as belonging to a group or a community; these are referred to as psychological needs.

2. Socio-cultural Needs and Architecture

The term “socio-cultural” means ‘values referring to the attitudes and dispositions that influence a person’s thinking, comprehension and perception that are learnt from the social and cultural groups to which the person belongs’, according to the Education Department of Victoria.

The term ‘Culture’ has been defined by the anthropologist Herskovitz as the man-made part of the human environment (Herskovitz 1952; as cited in Salama 1998, 7).

For the purpose of the relationship between culture and the architecture, Salama (1998) discusses some essential factors (based on Altman and Chemers 1981); he explains that the term ‘culture’ refers to beliefs and perceptions, values and norms, traditions and behaviors of a group of society. It includes what people believe to be true of the world, their lives and the environment. It also includes their values or what they hold to be good or bad, acceptable and unacceptable.

The term ‘Culture’ includes a set of rules and beliefs about how to behave or do things. It indicates that cognitions, feelings, and behaviors are shared among a group of people in a consensual way. Moreover, it involves that people must agree with or without verbalizing their agreement that there are common ways to view the world and to behave.

More importantly, the term ‘culture’ indicates that the shared beliefs, values and styles of behavior are passed into others along with socialization and education of new members, which help preserve consensus from one generation to the next.
Salama (1998, 7-8) claims that culture appears in objects and in the physical environment such as home designs, community facilities, and public buildings, which often explicitly reflect the values and beliefs of a community. He explains that culture appears in buildings and their architectural features.

Therefore, when the architectural design fulfils its important roles and satisfies human needs, requirements and values, it creates a meaningful architecture and responsive solutions that support and enhance all kinds of human activities.

3. Relationship between Socio-cultural Needs and Muslim Community Centers

In order to derive an architectural program of a building, it is important to understand the needs of its users. The Islamic socio-cultural center is designed mainly to serve the Muslim community; thus, it is important to know what their needs and requirements are (Rasdi 1998, 245). Muslims socio-cultural needs can be translated into architectural zones, spaces and forms and developed into design programs, which can accordingly be built as functional community cultural centers.

The idea that an architectural function is to construct and reproduce social structures has deep implications, not only for architectural practice but also on architectural research. Social knowledge is most often tacit and incorporated in the accepted behaviors and norms of a society (Penn 2008).

4. Muslims in the West and the Need for Socio-cultural Community Centers:

In the context of Muslim socio-cultural needs and the architecture, Nasser (2005, 61) claims that Muslims in the West have typically experienced cultural displacement, and thus opt to seek creative cultural expressions and explicit practices as a form of self-identity. Muslims’ architecture has reflected meaningful expressions of this identity from architectural perspective. Therefore, Western Muslims have developed a culturally distinct architecture, which expresses architectural differentiation, adaptations and transformations of space as a result of the interaction between the Muslim communities and the Western built forms.

Maussen (2005, 3) explains that European policy makers in Rotterdam, Strasbourg and Marseilles tried to encourage Mosque committees to develop “Cultural centers” that would be opened to a non-Muslim audience.

According to East London Mosque (Abbey Mills, LMC), ‘the Muslim community center is considered as a place where Muslims and non-Muslims can meet and promote a greater understanding between ideology, faith and humanity’.

The London Muslim Center also defines socio-cultural activities of the center as a range of services that enable Muslims, especially women and young people, to actively engage in programs of learning and recreation in a positive and safe environment, which provide choice and empower sections of the Muslim community who may feel isolated from mainstream services.

However, Onderwater’s (2010) research finds that Western governments should acknowledge the fact that building of a mosque is not only about building a place of worship for Muslims. It is also a sign of their presence in society and through the process of building a mosque in the West; Muslims develop their citizenship by occupying space and participating in the
future direction of the space. She claims that this meaning of mosque building is quite the opposite of the interpretation by some in that mosque building is resisting integration.

5. The Need for Socio-cultural Muslim Community Centers in Australia

Some social and recreational activities in Australia are not always entirely inclusive, particularly for people from culturally and linguistically diverse groups such as Muslims. McGavin (2008, 4) believes that physical, cultural, social, economic and religious barriers may limit Muslims, especially women, participating in social and recreational activities. These kinds of limitations or exclusion for Muslims’ participation highlight the need for Muslim community centers that cater for their socio-cultural and recreational needs taking into consideration Muslims religious obligations.

Therefore, mosque and Islamic center projects in the West, as Azar (1999) explains, tend to be more than just places of worship but rather extend to cater to a broader community need. Such needs can be formulated in the project’s program to include spaces for prayer, meditation, counseling, learning, social functions, bazaars, recreational and funeral activities; Azar refers to this kind of mosques as community centers.

A Muslim community center’s design tends to create an innovative social environment appropriate to the size of the community, while also reflecting the character of the locale. In addition, it would provide a variety of uses and flexibility, allowing for future expansion to accommodate the rapid growth of the Muslim communities in the West (Kahera, Abdulmalik and Anz 2009).

Challenges in Building Mosques and Islamic Centers in Contemporary Australia

In her comparative analysis of mosques and Islamic centers building in five Western countries, “Mosques in the West: A Warm Welcome, or a Cold Shoulder?” Onderwater (2010) argues that there have been problems for Muslim organizations in Australia to get building approvals.

Furthermore, Johns and Saeed (2002) point out that approval for mosques building has not always been easy to obtain, because of local residents objections and complaints to local authorities (Johns and Saeed 2002, as cited in Onderwater 2010).

In his research on mosque and Islamic centers development in Sydney, Dunn (2001 & 2005) claims that the general image was that of a large opposition amongst Sydney residents against the building of mosques. He argues that the opposition is based on the stereotype and the negative image about Muslims seen as fanatical believers; this image was converted into planning issues such as traffic, parking congestion and noise emission. Remarkably, the opponents used the image to stress that a mosque was completely different to a Christian church, “because of this ‘fanatical’ usage’. This was to enable different planning treatment”. Bankstown City Council, for instance, argued before the Land and Environment Court that a mosque should be treated differently from a church in urban planning, because of its different prayer pattern. Consequently, the court ruled that the ‘Bangladeshi Muslim community center’ could not function in a former Presbyterian Church (Dunn 2001).

Onderwater (2010) claims that, in other Western countries, religious buildings are treated similarly, which makes it easier for mosque organizations to buy land or convert a vacant
building to a prayer place. Some other reasons for the rejection of development approval accepted by Sydney councils were the fear of cultural transformation of a neighborhood plus the perception that building and alteration of mosques were ‘not in the public interest’. As in other Western countries, design amendments that made a mosque look less Islamic were more appreciated, and mosques that were called cultural centers and did not look like mosques ‘were deemed more acceptable to the local cultural palate’.

According to Dunn (2005, as cited in Onderwater 2010), debates about mosque building in Sydney were among the most prominent of the political tensions surrounding cultural diversity and land-use change in Australia. They find that all of the thirty proposed mosques and Muslim community centers within Sydney, since the 1980s, have run into community opposition and problems from municipal authorities. Based on Dunn’s research, Onderwater (2010) concludes that town planning in Australia is unfavorable for the development of purpose-built mosques. Although Dunn’s research is limited to Sydney, it still reflects the general trend, since Sydney is the largest city in the country and does have the largest Muslim population in Australia. Onderwater (2010) recommends that acceptance of mosques and Muslim community centers in Australia noticeably need to be researched further; overall she finds that the existing facts point to unfavorable planning policies (Onderwater 2010, 59-61).

Mourad (2006) claims that the high growth rates of Australian Muslims caused a significant rise in the number of applications seeking approval for the development of mosques and Islamic centers. However, he finds on many occasions that mosque proponents have been met with strong opposition. In his research “The Development and Land Use Impacts of Local Mosques”, Mourad explores the land use impacts of this type of development in Sydney. He selects three local government’s areas (LGA) in Sydney as case studies, based on the number of Muslims population in the LGA and the existence of an established mosque that provides services to the people.

In his study, Mourad (2006) aims to develop recommendations that accommodate the land use in a responsive manner while providing positive planning outcomes. Such outcomes can be implemented in the decision making process by local councils in dealing with the multitude of opposing factors that confront the town planning discipline.

In his in-depth research “Mosques and Muslims Settlement in Australia”, Bouma (1994) studies Australian Muslim groups from the perspective of being “religious settlements”. Bouma suggests two main aspects for investigation concerning such settlement; firstly, how a religious group must build a new identity that is compatible with the new society in which it lives while still maintaining traditions; secondly, how a religious organization establishes places of worship, such as mosques and Muslim community centers, without any pre-established assistance from the new society. His study aimed to generate ideas for future public policy.

Bouma’s (1994) research findings and recommendations include education programs that emphasize the presence of religious diversity in Australia as well as the valuable socio-cultural contributions made by these different Muslim groups. For example, he proposes that Australian Muslims can provide authorities with expertise in dealing and trading with other Muslim nations. Bouma suggests that such a curriculum is required in schools and for adults through the government and business enterprises. He also suggests that Muslim organizations consider offering courses to familiarize their members within the larger Australian society (Figures 9 & 10).
In addition to policy issues, Bouma’s research discusses some other scholarly aspects. He claims that the presence of a mosque becomes both the symbolic and the functional focus of a given sub-culture of Muslim communities: “Australia is not a home for Muslims until there are mosques in which to pray, until there are Islamic symbols atop buildings, until there are communities in which halal food can be obtained and Islamic education is available for their children. [...] The Islamic symbols cut across ethnicity and provide the basis for a kind of trans-ethnic unity grounded in religious identity” (Bouma 1994, 66).

In his review of Bouma’s research, Bloch (1996) explains that by making use of demographic, organizational, and micro-level data, Bouma explores these mosque-centered settlements across numerous key dimensions. These dimensions include: how Muslims have built a population base; daily life concerns such as housing, employment, education, and use of English; the specific role of religious belief (as expressed within the mosque) in these settlements; and accommodation and prejudice (Bloch 1996, 374-375).

In his research, Scriver (2004) presents a critical interpretation of the most short-lived traces of Afghan built forms in Australia and their representation in the evenly scarce documentary archive. He tackles the subject from the particular points of view of architectural and settlement history. Moreover, he reveals a broader phenomenon of insightful change, ‘a change in the sense of space that the perceived ‘directions and distances’ of the Afghans represented in the collective imagination of the emerging Australian nation’.

As a contribution to the architectural historiography of Australia, Scriver’s (2004) research tries to interpret in a more interdisciplinary perspective the interlinks of architectural, urban and landscape investigation together with the complex fabric or ‘cultural landscape’ they might illustrate. He explains how the settlement history of the early cameleers in Australia, transient as it was, articulates a challenging fascination in recent thoughts within the field of architecture with the relationships between ‘place’ and ‘space’ on the one hand, and ‘place’ and ‘culture’ on the other.

However, Scriver believes that mosques along with other non-Christian religious buildings are becoming more and more normal characteristic of the growing suburbs of the multicultural Australia of the twenty first century (Scriver 2004, 19-22).
In a British magazine article, Bayudi and Nabulsi (2010) (two Australian Muslim architects and members of ‘Desypher’, an architectural firm based in Melbourne) discuss their architectural concepts and innovative perceptions for contemporary Muslim community centers’ design. They introduce their ‘later rejected proposal’ for the new Canberra Islamic Center CIC’s project. Desypher’s architects proposed a master-plan that had been open and welcoming, addressed the role of Muslim minorities in a post ‘Nine Eleven’ world, and invited participation and involvement with the wider society. They intended to promote CIC’s major asset, the National Islamic Library as well.

Bayudi and Nabulsi (2010, 36) claim that “Muslim community centers should not be limited to facilitating prayer, nor should they be monumental edifices erected to compensate for a perceived inferiority. They should be opportunities for engagement and for respectful discourse that leads to deeper understanding of mankind and the universe”.

The Importance of Islamic Centers and Opportunities for Social Inclusion

The Muslim Community Reference Group (MCRG) was formed and funded by the Australian Federal Government in two thousand and five. MCRG’s report (2006, 22) recommends that a greater engagement between Muslim and non-Muslim communities will help strengthen interaction, foster understanding and promote better relationships. The group believes in the importance of projects and initiatives flowing from the ‘National Action Plan’ and suggests that, in order to ‘build on social cohesion, harmony and security, the following action plan is needed (as a part of many other proposals):

- Organizing open days and other activities at “Muslim centers”;
- Promoting the process of understanding and integration between all Australians,
- Encouraging Muslims participation in organized sports, with a particular emphasis on women,
- Establishing emphasis on connectedness, interdependence, regard, commitment, love and empathy between all society groups,
- Encouraging community development workers to support Muslim communities,
- Learning from other communities (interaction and cross-cultural activities).

Socio-cultural Muslim centers have an important role in promoting mutual understanding and harmony among all Australians irrespective of faith or color. Some Islamic socio-cultural centers’ designs are positive and welcoming to non-Muslims; an example for that is the ‘MAQAM Islamic cultural center in London’ founded by Yusuf Islam (aka British singer Cat Stevens). Yusuf aims that his center presents the modern face of British/Western Muslims. His architect Robert O’Hara claims that the ‘bright, optimistic’ design would challenge negative views of Islam. “The idea is to present a modern view of British Muslims to show they’re not all interested in pastiche onion domes,” he explains that his client, Yusuf Islam, “wants to present a more ecumenical view of the world and get rid of the awful image that Islam has had put upon it”. The building features exhibitions of Islamic arts, crafts and drama, serve Middle Eastern food and drink, and will host concerts by singer Yusuf Islam and his band (Building Design 2007).
Research Methods and Focus Groups

The field work of this research comprises six focus groups with Australian Muslim and non-Muslim community members from diverse cultural backgrounds and ethnic groups.

Data collected from the six conducted focus groups were inserted into specially designed Excel worksheets, developed by the author of this study, to process and analyze data; the framework and analysis of the focus groups were designed by the author based on Kumar (2011) and Muir (2011).

To define the socio-cultural needs of the Australian Muslims, qualitative group interviews/focus groups have been conducted with community members. The data collection has embraced as a diverse range of views as possible, including respondents of different ethnicities, age groups and economic background.

The topics covered in the focus groups for participants have included, but not limited to, the following:

- The most common ways of Muslims getting together in Australia,
- The ways of preserving their Islamic identities,
- The significance of Islamic institutions to the society,
- The variety of services that mosques and Muslim community centers can provide,
- The socio-cultural needs of Muslim communities in Australia,
- The main challenges that Muslims face in Australia and the west in general,
- The importance of Muslim community centers in developing and integrating Muslims into the Australian society as whole,
- The most important activities that Muslims should have in a community center.

The topics covered in the focus groups for non-Muslim participants have included, but not limited to, the following:

- Their previous experience visiting a mosque or a Muslim community center,
- The kind of events they would like to find in a Muslim community center,
- The kind of activities they would like to participate with Muslims in a community center,
- The aspects that community centers could help Muslims developing and integrating in the Australian society,
- The architectural style of mosque/Muslim community center that they would like to visit in Australia.

Research Findings and Outcomes of Focus Groups Analysis

The outcomes of the focus groups conducted for this research will be useful to architects and leaders of Muslim organizations to identify and understand the needs and requirements of the Australian Muslim community as well as their fellow non-Muslim residents. These outcomes would be taken into consideration when designing a new mosque or Muslim community center in Australia and will also be useful in any Western country as they all share the same circumstances.
Outcomes of Focus Groups with Muslim Participants

Interpretation of the focus groups analysis has found that majority of the Muslim participants (86 percent) believe that Islamic institutions in Australia are very significant for their potential to provide numerous cultural and entertaining services that are currently not available such as female-only swimming facilities and free Islamic environment for women wearing hijab as well as venues for special Muslim celebrations (marriage, parties, etc.). Islamic institutions would also enable Muslims to fulfill their spiritual and social needs. They would help them to keep connected and informed of special events and news that concern Muslims. They would also help Muslims preserve their identities and they would provide support and assistance to the Australian Muslim community.

Moreover, Islamic institutions can provide venues to invite non-Muslims and initiate events that help Muslims to integrate with the wider Australian community.

Concerning socio-cultural needs of the Muslim community in Australia, the participants find that ‘Muslims gathering’ comes as their top priority, ‘learning Islamic values’ comes as second priority, ‘socializing with non-Muslims’ comes as third priority, ‘fitness and sports’ comes as fourth priority, ‘learning Arabic language’ comes as fifth priority, ‘learning Australian culture’ comes as sixth priority, and finally ‘learning English language’ comes as seventh priority’. The above socio-cultural needs would give architects and Muslim organizations leaders some guidelines and directions for the design requirements of a mosque or an Islamic community center.

The following architectural requirements have been deduced from the Focus Group responses.

Services that should be provided by a Socio-cultural Muslim Community Center

Adequate spaces for Muslims gathering, such as large multipurpose halls that could accommodate social and cultural activities, which should be inviting to non-Muslims as well.

Fitness and sports spaces and facilities such as gymnasium (for both genders), indoor swimming pool as well as indoor and outdoor activities.

Sufficient lectures halls and classrooms that could accommodate cultural seminars, workshops and classes for teaching Arabic and English languages as well as Islamic and Australian cultures.

The research has found that the Muslim community in Australia face many challenges such as lack of understanding from the wider community to who Muslims really are and what they believe in. In this context, the respondents indicated that the media has a significant negative influence on how Australians perceive Muslims. Some respondents feel that they are not accepted by non-Muslim Australians. Other participants find it hard to preserve their Islamic culture, raise their Muslim children in a Western society, and change the negative image and sentiments towards Muslims. Some Muslim participants find some conflict between the Australian culture and Islamic traditions, while others point to disunity amongst Muslims.

Other challenges are summarized as Muslims’ feeling of being excluded; pressure on Muslims to prove themselves within workplaces and other institutions; underlying discrimination against Muslim minority; lack of sense of belonging; and finally the absence of strong and positive Muslim leadership.
The abovementioned challenges reflect the feeling of insecurity of the Muslim communities as a minority in non-Muslim environments, which increase the need for a platform or a medium that can help bridging the gaps between Muslims and non-Muslims and bring tolerance and harmony in multi-faiths and multicultural societies in a Western country such as Australia.

In respect to activities provided by mosques or Muslim community centers in Australia, the participants have indicated that the majority of the centers provide religious activities but much less active in socio-cultural and recreational activities. This underlines the need for more Islamic socio-cultural centers to fulfill the growing needs of the Muslim community in Australia and tackle the lack in social, cultural and recreational services available for Australian Muslims, especially for women and youth.

Regarding to the importance of socio-cultural Muslim community centers to Muslims in Australia and their role in developing and integrating them, the majority of the Focus Group participants find that Muslim community centers are very important in developing and integrating Australian Muslims (76 percent), while the rest of the respondents find them just important. The participants find that the most important roles of socio-cultural Muslim community centers in developing and integrating Australian Muslims are (in order): promoting harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims, promoting harmony between Muslims from different backgrounds, and finally helping Muslims to adapt to Australian society, promoting good citizenship.

Analysis of the Focus Group responses has found that the most important activities to the Australian Muslims in a Muslim community center are 1) the religious activities, 2) the educational activities, 3) the socio-cultural activities, 4) the recreational activities, and 5) sports activities.

The analysis has also found that the top facilities needed in an Muslim community center for the Australian Muslims are in the order of a prayer hall a recreation multipurpose hall, a library, teaching classrooms, a gymnasium, a conference room, a playground, a restaurant, a bookshop and finally a Muslim clothing shop.

**Conclusion**

This research paper finds that Muslims in a Western society such as Australia face many challenges and needs, which can create various opportunities. Such needs and challenges can be fulfilled and met by developing and building socio-cultural Muslim community centers, which would make a suitable medium that bring Muslims and non-Muslims together. They would also provide a positive environment for dialogues and social interactions during open days, seminars and workshops, which would create a feeling of inclusion and security to both parties.

Cultural community centers would also offer the Muslims in the West a seemly place for gathering on social and religious occasions, classes and seminars, which would give them a sense of unity and belonging.

An Islamic socio-cultural center can play an important role in building and maintaining a cohesive, tolerant, religious, social, cultural and educational institution that serves the Muslims needs, as well as the broader Australian community. An ideal functional Muslim
community center facilitates religious, social and multicultural events that promote unity and harmony. In addition, it can provide various women events, social family gathering, Islamic culture seminars, youth forums, art and cultural exhibitions, sports and recreational events. Moreover, the center can organize open days with non-Muslims to encourage and promote interfaith dialogue.

The socio-cultural activities of a Muslim community center should also include a range of services that enable Muslims, especially women and young people, to actively engage in programs of learning and recreation in a positive and safe environment that provide choices and opportunities to sections of the Muslim community who may feel isolated from mainstream services.

Contemporary Muslim societies would be better served if their mosques and Islamic centers are designed (or redesigned) as community development centers that include (in addition to the main prayer hall) classes, libraries, multipurpose halls, lecture rooms, restaurants, kitchens, gymnasiums, childcare/crèche, guest-rooms, clinics/first aid, mini-markets and workshops.

The abovementioned examples demonstrate the importance of the Muslim centers and their role as community centers that help promote and develop Muslim communities in all aspects of life. In this sense, the Muslim center model tends to provide the necessary programs and activities that help facilitate a variety of educational, socio-cultural, economic and spiritual programs, which would fulfill Muslims’ needs, especially women and youth, and build on social cohesion, harmony and security with the broader Australian community.
References


Islamic Council of Western Australia (ICWA). www.icwa.net.au (accessed November 02, 2010).


