

Mosques

The Muslim Community of Edinburgh and Their Central Mosque

Edinburgh - Kakay Li

Muslims have been migrating to the British Isles for many decades. After the Second World War, the government encouraged migration as part of the country's reconstruction process, and it was particularly during the 1950s and 1970s that Muslim immigrants arrived here. They came from many different parts of the world and large communities eventually developed where labour were required.

Muslims migrated for a variety of reasons, not simply economic, some came as students or through forced migration, others due to famine or war in their own countries of origin. As citizens of the country they have settled well and contributed enormously to the local and national economy. Practicing Muslims have also forged a moral lifestyle for themselves in the structure of a religious built form – the mosque.

Islam is not just a religion but should also be considered as an embodiment of a lifestyle. This can be seen with the keeping of Islamic ideals regarding prayer and other lifestyle indicators relating to dress and diet. Thus, in a non-Muslim society, the mosque is important not only for prayer but for functional requirements so that it also becomes a community centre for its local

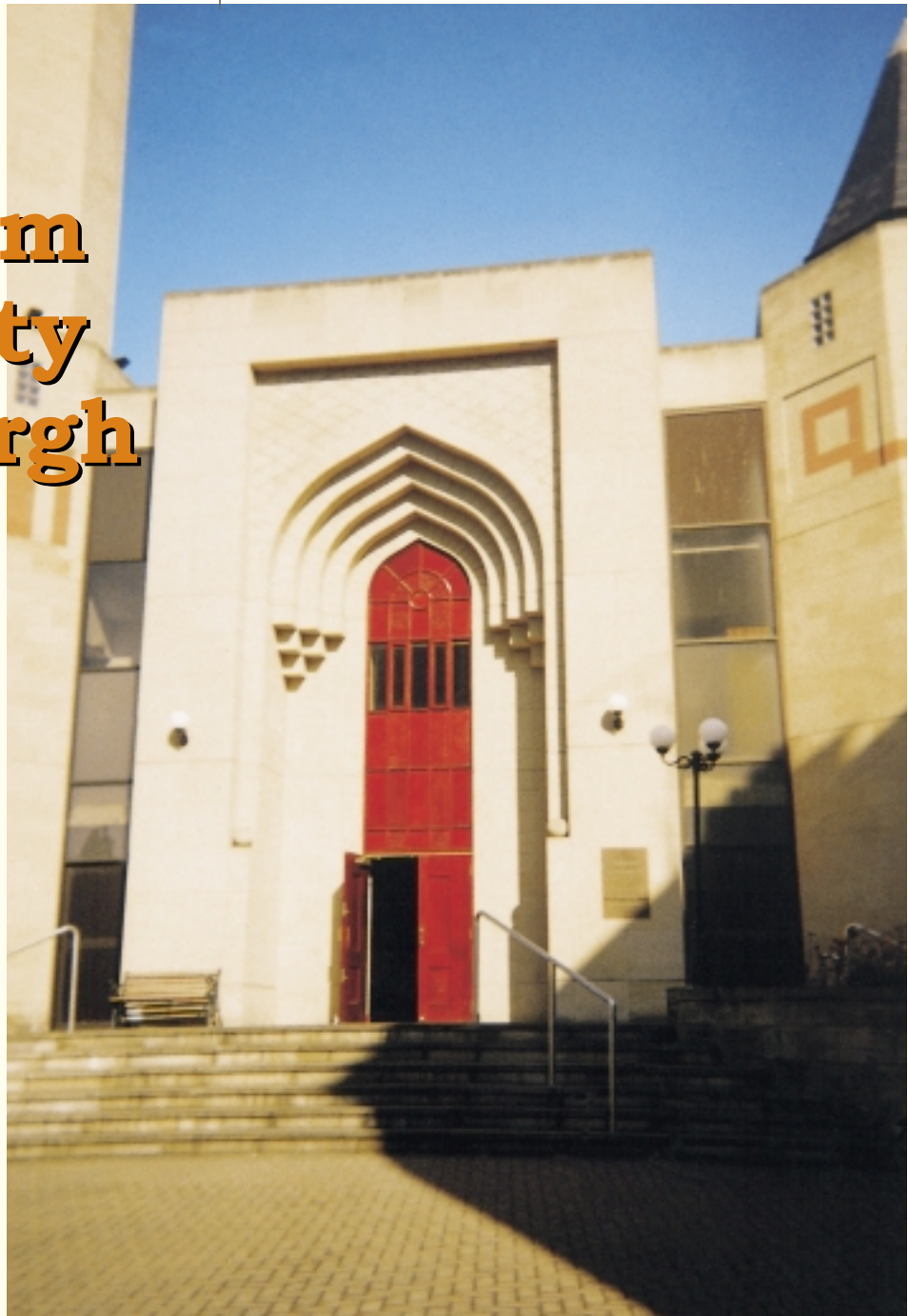
members, an important building for not only practicing one's faith but socialising with fellow believers as well. In an area where Islam is a minority religion, the architecture of the mosque provides symbols to be identified with and embodied for the Muslim in the West.

There are over 10,000 Muslims in Edinburgh comprising of families and students that live in the city and not including those that come on business and those who are tourists.

The existence of the mosque has influenced Muslim students to study in Edinburgh. Although the vast majority of students do not believe that Edinburgh presently, as a city, has a strong Muslim presence, there exists a healthy Muslim population around the mosque. In the streets around Edinburgh there are mini food markets and kebab takeaways,

restaurants, halal butchers and delicatessens all owned by local Muslims who attend the mosque. The location and the presence of the Central Mosque appears to be an influential factor in deciding where to study.

The building has an open inner city location, in the main university area, beside a busy road and opposite a large ground level car park. It reflects a modern look to the already diverse array of architecture that has slowly contributed to the area through the decades, appearing in harmony with the newest additional building of the National Scottish History Museum nearby, for example. These buildings are similar in their use of stone, colouring and geometric shapes and curves. Both buildings are strong indicators of Edinburgh's progressing, increasingly contemporary architecture. But what is ➤



Mosques



striking is their indirect loyalty to neighbouring architecture, while the architecture of the mosque remains true to symbolic Islamic styles.

The Central Mosque, unlike the Islamic Cultural Centre, in London, for example, stands freely in the middle of a small courtyard. The arched doorway, the minaret, the dome and the symmetry of the geometric shapes clear to the passing public. While the mosque is connected to the street where hundreds of people walk past each day in such close proximity, it is separated by gates that only Muslims, invited visitors or curious others can view.

Non-Muslims I have spoken to who walk past the mosque think it is very striking but appear quite daunted by it and say they would never cross the gates if they had no reason to be there. The mosque's trustees are aware that this is a common perception of a lot of local people. They have tried to be as open as possible, and with a welcoming attitude will gladly show around those interested in a guided tour of the building accompanied by a general talk on Islam. Many visits are from local schools. They also provide talks and tours. Another way the mosque pays particular attention to education is by the existence of a permanent

exhibition, open to the public, in the old mansion to the back of the main courtyard. Before the existence of the Central Mosque building, Muslims prayed in a small flat. But in the 1980s, a plot of land was bought from the city council, on the condition that the existing building there, which was over two hundred years old, should remain and be utilised. To this day, the old city mansion within the courtyard of the mosque is used for an exhibition on the basics of Islam and has a room for the breaking of fast during the holy fasting month of Ramadhan. With the total cost of finishing the mosque project over £3m, the final design was deemed a success, producing an aesthetically pleasing building that both accommodates aspects of local architecture and the symbolic and functional requirements of a mosque. First attempts at designing the mosque were refused by Edinburgh city council planners. One such refusal was for a higher minaret, refused on the grounds that it would disturb the existing Edinburgh skyline. This can be seen as an example of the constraints on Muslim self-expression. In Islam, the minaret of a mosque should be the highest building in the area so that it overlooks the Muslim space and that Muslims within the area can look up and know instantly where the Mosque is.

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Inside the Mosque

داخل المسجد

The realisation and practice of Islam is crucial to mosque architecture for beliefs can shape the size, direction and contents of a mosque. For example, the mihrab niche is the direction that the hall would face. For Muslims, certain characteristics of a built form may be seen as symbolic markers for ritual transcendence from individual reality to a 'collective state of total unity'.

The mosque is also accessible for marriage ceremonies and blessings, in times of mourning, for educational purposes, breaking the fast and festivals.

Aesthetic decoration may be a symbolic reminder to Muslims of the sacred spaces of Mecca and her environs. Symbolic architectural features of the mosque have come to be unconsciously embodied and so become a part of everyday life. This is especially so for the mihrab.

The Central Mosque was a design conceptualised by a Muslim man who had lived his life and received his architectural training in both the West and the Middle East. Basil Bayati was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1946, and began his career in Iraq where he studied architecture at the University of Baghdad and continued his studies in London. By the 1980s, after obtaining British nationality, he chose to remain in the UK to practice architecture in London.

Bayati emphasised hybrid ideas, and his designs as an architect are not just products of Western practice tacked onto Middle Eastern ideas. The Central Mosque can be seen as his interpretation of this hybridity. The Central Mosque is still a relatively new mosque but has already made a mark in architectural circles not only for the city of Edinburgh but also amongst the Muslim population. For those that use the mosque, a good-sized functional building has been provided for them, it is quiet and clean and peaceful on the inside but strikingly influential on the outside. ■