

# The Multicultural City and the Politics of Religious Architecture: Urban Planning, Mosques and Meaning-making in Birmingham, UK

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*A corollary of the development of Muslim communities in Britain has been a steady growth in the quantitative and aesthetic presence of mosques within British urban landscapes. Applications to develop these buildings have frequently given rise to forms of aesthetic contestation that are embedded in processes of identity construction amongst non-Muslims. However, only cursory reference has been made in academic studies to the role played by urban planning in framing this contestation. Taking three mosque proposals in Birmingham as case studies, this paper assesses the extent to which urban planning processes condense and mediate the relations between social groups. In addition, the paper explores the changing emphases of the City Council's planning policies relating to places of worship, as these have shifted from restriction to multicultural 'celebration'.*

Mosque buildings constitute an increasingly important feature of British urban landscapes. This is confirmed by the statistics on officially registered places of worship, which indicate that whilst in 1964 there were only nine officially registered mosques in England and Wales, by 1998 the number had increased to 614 (Peach, 2000). Many of these mosques are in converted buildings, such as houses, factories and warehouses, but others have been purposely constructed, incorporating architectural features that draw upon conceptions of tradition in Islamic architecture. Such designs have often been publicly contested, in terms that construct them as symbols of 'alien' cultural presences (see for example Naylor and Ryan, 2002).

There is now growing sociological and geographical literature documenting contestation over sites of worship, in which the semi-

otic role played by such buildings in the articulation of opposing social identities constitutes a central theme (see for example, Eade, 1993, 1996; Gale and Naylor, 2002; Naylor and Ryan, 2002). The present paper complements this literature by exploring the place of urban planning procedures in setting the parameters for such contestation, an issue that is receiving increasing academic attention (see for example, Gale, 1999; Dunn, 2001; Nye, 2001; Gale and Naylor, 2002; Isin and Siemiatycki, 2002). Moreover, the paper extends this theme by moving beyond the concern with aesthetic contestation *per se*. It attempts to show that urban planning mediates processes of social boundary construction that coalesce around mosque designs and becomes in turn a nexus in which some of the meanings and associations that accrue to such sites are articulated.

There are two reasons that make this focus on the interface between planning and religious organizations a fruitful avenue for inquiry. Firstly, it enables empirical investigation of the ways in which social relations and institutionalized forms of power interact to produce changes within the built environment. Concomitantly, it enables research into how opposing symbolic constructions of (religious) space are contested and shaped within the deliberative processes of urban planning. The second reason, following on closely from the first, is that this approach allows one to examine the agency of religious groups who, through their engagement with planning procedures, have influenced the processes through which the built environment is materially (re)configured.

Taking three mosques in Birmingham as case studies, the paper aims to show that Muslim groups have been important agents of local institutional, as well as physical, environmental change. The paper is divided into three sections, each of which presents a case study of a specific purpose-built mosque in Birmingham. These case studies are ordered historically, to facilitate a concluding discussion of the changing emphases of the City Council's planning policies relating to

places of worship. Throughout the paper, use is made of conceptual terminology derived from Henri Lefebvre's work, *The Production of Space* (1991). Specifically, the paper employs Lefebvre's concepts of 'representation of space', referring to institutionalized conceptions of space inscribed within urban planning procedure; and 'representational space', which denotes physical spaces to which social meanings have been imputed, and which, in this context, have been contested by Muslim and non-Muslim urban residents (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38–46 and *passim*). The paper thus explores the ways in which urban planning's 'representations of space' intersect with the meanings ascribed to physical space by different social groups.

We turn now to the first case study, the Birmingham Central Mosque in Highgate, which was planned during the late 1950s and opened in 1975, making it the oldest purpose-built mosque in the city.

#### **A Landmark for the City (1): The Birmingham Central Mosque**

Referring to the relationship maintained between Birmingham City Council and the committee of the Birmingham Central



Figure 1. A Landmark for the city: the Birmingham Central Mosque.

Mosque, the President of the mosque commented in an interview upon the role the building fulfilled as a visible symbol of the city's multicultural composition (see figure 1). He remarked that:

The City Council was very co-operative. It gave them [the local Muslim community] a prime piece of land, and the idea was to build a landmark for the city. That is why it is on the route from the city centre to the airport [see figure 2], so there's a lot of traffic, and that was the intention, that everybody have a look at the multicultural status of this city.

The notion that the mosque performs an important symbolic role for the city, and that the City Council has actively promoted this role, is confirmed by planning documentation pertaining to the site. In 1991, an application to develop a Muslim girls' school in association with the mosque was approved on the grounds that the development would not only 'enhance the facilities available for the Muslim community', but also 'further promote the significance of the Central Mosque'. In addition, it was argued that:

High quality design in such a prominent location will enhance the role of the mosque as a landmark and provide a gateway approach to the city core from the Middle Ring Road.<sup>1</sup>

Similar priorities were reflected in a proposal during the same year to grant the Central Mosque £46,000 in Inner City aid, to assist with repairs to the fabric of the building and to provide additional parking space. Whilst these proposals met with strong opposition from Conservative members of the City Council, they were defended by a spokesman for the Council's urban renewal team, who claimed that they were 'enhancing the city's image'. This was also cited as the 'grounds on which the Central Mosque has already been given quite a lot of money for floodlighting' (*Evening Mail*, 15 January 1991, no page). It is also apparent from the statement of the President of the mosque that the promotion of the Central Mosque as a signifier of the city's social diversity does not only extend from the priorities of the local

authority, but is endorsed by representatives of the mosque.

However, the aesthetic appropriation of the mosque as a symbol of Birmingham's social and multicultural diversity is a recent phenomenon. It has occurred subsequent to a series of planning disputes in which attitudes towards the mosque have been more ambivalent.

The plan to construct the Central Mosque emerged in the late 1950s, a time when the areas of Balsall Heath and Highgate in which the building stands were primary foci for the settlement of migrants from South Asia, including Muslims from Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh (Dahya, 1974). The then City Council was approached in 1956 by a group then known as the Muslim Association (*Jamiat ul-Muslimin*), with a view to establishing a mosque that would 'serve not merely this area but the city as a whole', (quoted from a report submitted to the Public Works Committee, entitled 'Gooch Street Redevelopment Area – zoning layout', 2 February 1956). However, the area was also the subject of a major redevelopment scheme of the City Council, involving the compulsory purchase and demolition of approximately 4,000 houses, consisting mostly of nineteenth-century terraces. The objectives of the scheme, as stated in the same planning report, were to construct lower-density housing – including several high-rise apartment blocks – a shopping precinct and a section of the city's inner ring-road. Accordingly, the scheme was to have important consequences for the mosque. Firstly, when put into practice, it resulted in the displacement of Muslim and other post-migration settlers in the area to other parts of the city. As a former treasurer of the Central Mosque recalled during an interview:

At that time in the 1960s the majority of the Muslims were in the Balsall Heath area, and so the people who purchased, who were thinking to build up the mosque, were thinking of that area. But they did not know – the planners should have told them – that after about 10, 15 years, we, the

Muslim population won't be living near there, because the houses would be demolished and rebuilt and the Council would not necessarily give them back to those who were living there.

This change in the composition of the population became a significant factor in the symbolic construction of the mosque in subsequent planning debates, in that a majority of those who took up residence in the area following the redevelopment were non-Muslims.

The second consequence was that the plan to construct the Central Mosque became integral to the City Council's deliberations concerning the redevelopment of the area. Thus, from its inception, the design of the mosque was subject to the Council's 'representation of space', in terms of what they conceived to be integrated urban regeneration.

In records of the original planning of the site in the 1950s and 1960s, one does not find references to the symbolism of the building, but expressions of concern by planning officers over the size and ambitiousness of the proposal, and its perceived conflict with other elements of the Council's redevelopment scheme. The original proposal for the mosque also included eighteen shops, a lecture hall, residential accommodation and a library. In a report submitted to the Public Works Committee, entitled 'Highgate site, Belgrave Road for Moslem Mosque' (15 June 1961), it was noted by the agents acting on behalf of the Muslim Association that it was 'of some importance to the scheme that some portion of the building should be available to produce an income which would enable the proper maintenance of the structure'. However, with regard to the shops, the Council argued that these would not be sustainable in view of the thirty to forty shops it had already proposed as part of the redevelopment. Moreover, the report noted that the shops associated with the mosque would have 'direct access to the principal traffic route, whereas the proposed neighbourhood centre is in the form of a pedestrian precinct at right angles

to the road'. It was accordingly resolved by the Committee 'that the Muslim authorities be informed that this Committee are unable to agree to the proposals submitted for the development of the site in Belgrave Road . . . and that the City Surveyor be authorized to negotiate with them in respect of a smaller site to be developed by the erection of a mosque only'. No mention was made of the intrinsic importance of these other features of the mosque proposal to the sustainability of the building.

Owing to financial constraints experienced by the mosque committee, much of the surrounding area was redeveloped before work on the mosque commenced. As a result, when construction finally got underway in 1970, the mosque was made subject to a condition by the City Council concerning the building materials that should be used, in order that it should harmonize with the surrounding landscape. Whereas the original design had envisaged the building being finished in white stucco, the planning authority now requested that the major part of the building be finished in brick, 'to match the new development in the vicinity'. It was argued by the Council that 'this will be more satisfactory than the original proposal as the building will now blend in with the adjoining development of the Gooch Street shopping centre and adjoining flats'. Accordingly, on its completion in 1975, the building became a stylistic hybrid, signifying simultaneously its relation to its local context and to traditions of mosque architecture. Moreover, there is an apparent tension here between the requirement that the mosque should 'blend in' with nearby development and the statement of the President of the mosque that it was consciously sited and designed to form a 'landmark' for the city.

The financial difficulties experienced by the mosque committee strained relations with the City Council, to the extent that it was intimated in 1969 that the offer of land for the building would be retracted if progress had not been made by the beginning of the

following year. Accordingly, when some time later the mosque committee applied for permission to establish an 'Islamic evening school' (*madrassa*) in association with the mosque, the application was initially refused by the planning committee on the grounds that there had been insufficient information provided regarding the 'phasing and implementation of the development'. One planning officer commented to the architect upon what he termed 'the deplorable history of the construction of the mosque'. However, the mosque committee persisted in the face of this perception of the mosque's history, requesting that the application be reconsidered. This persistence was successful, and in June 1980, the application gained approval.

The first explicit reference in planning discourse to the aesthetic contribution of the mosque to its surroundings emerged in the early 1980s, as a result of an application to surmount the building with a minaret. The application was approved with the encomium that the design was 'elegant and well proportioned', that it formed 'a good foil/contrast with the main domed building', and that it was 'visible over [a] wide area along Belgrave Road/Lee Bank Middleway and across Balsall Heath'. However, this approval was subject to a condition that 'no sound reproduction or amplification equipment shall be installed or used on any part of the said minaret at any time'. The comment of a planning officer at the time reveals how this condition abstracted the form of the minaret from its religious associations. He stated that in his understanding, 'such minarets were symbolic and that planning consents usually carried a condition to prevent such equipment being installed'. Thus, whilst the minaret was assimilated into public space as an 'interesting addition to the skyline', its customary use for the call to prayer (*azan*) was explicitly proscribed.

As with the application to establish a *madrassa*, the committee of the mosque challenged this restriction on broadcasting the *azan* from the minaret. Applications to

broadcast the *azan* were made on two separate occasions. On the first of these, in 1982/1983, the mosque committee withdrew the application when it was perceived that it was to be refused by the City Council. However, they re-submitted the application in 1986, as a result of which the City Council agreed to a trial period of one month, during which the midday (*salāt al-zuhr*) and afternoon (*salāt al-'asr*) prayers were called from the minaret. Bearing in mind the observation above that a large proportion of the population surrounding the mosque were non-Muslims, reactions to the application were frequently hostile, with respondents opposing the application by asserting the 'alien-ness' of the Muslim religion to the English national context. One opponent, in a letter that was fairly typical in content and tone, inquired of the City Council, 'since when has a foreign language and culture been allowed to override the wishes of the indigenous people of this country?'. However, the application was ultimately approved, with the calls being strictly limited in terms of their number and duration.

The conclusion of the public debate over the use of the minaret to broadcast the *azan* in 1986 brings us approximately to the time of the planning and funding decisions with which this case study began, which showed that by the 1990s, the mosque had been reinterpreted as a landmark. We thus observe a change in the perception of the mosque, considered initially as a controversial element of a regeneration scheme, and subsequently as a celebrated landscape 'icon'. At a general level, these shifts in the representation of the Central Mosque within planning discourse have coincided with the changing priorities of Birmingham City Council: the Council has recognized increasingly the contributions made to the economy and civic administration by different sectors of its ethnically and religiously diverse population.

Two further observations can be made regarding this history of interactions between the planning authority and the mosque. The

first is that planning decisions are related reciprocally to the way in which space is represented within planning discourse. Thus, the signification of the mosque did not simply emerge at the time of the building's completion, but was also played out within the deliberative framework of urban planning, with observable consequences for the configuration of the mosque as an architectural space. The second point is the converse of the first, in the sense that the mosque was able to pass through the various vicissitudes that have marked its history because of the commitments that have been made to it by its committee, and by Muslims throughout Birmingham. This is exemplified by the fact that the financial difficulties experienced by the mosque during the 1960s and 1970s were overcome through the collection of donations from Birmingham's Muslim residents, identified by using the local electoral roll. Subsequently, as we have seen, the interactions of the mosque committee with the planning authority tested and redefined the limits to tolerance imposed upon the development and use of the site by the operations of planning procedure. In a

real sense, therefore, the extent to which the mosque now forms an appropriable symbol for the city has been made possible by the practical commitment to (and investment of meaning in) the building by the committee of the mosque and the city's Muslim population.

Many of the issues raised in relation to the Birmingham Central Mosque are also relevant to the next case study, the Jame Masjid in Handsworth.

### Sign and Context: The Jame Masjid in Handsworth

There are various points of comparison that can be made between the Central Mosque and the Jame Masjid (formerly known as the President Saddam Hussein Mosque) in Handsworth, which lies to the north of Birmingham's central district. The first is that both mosques incorporate domes and arched windows that are intended to signify mosque architectural traditions (see figure 3). Secondly, both buildings stand on sites that were allocated by the City Council. Thirdly, the analogy between these buildings extends to the morphology of the surroundings; the Jame Masjid is also immediately juxtaposed to a major arterial route, which – from the main road at least – makes the building visually prominent (see map in figure 2).

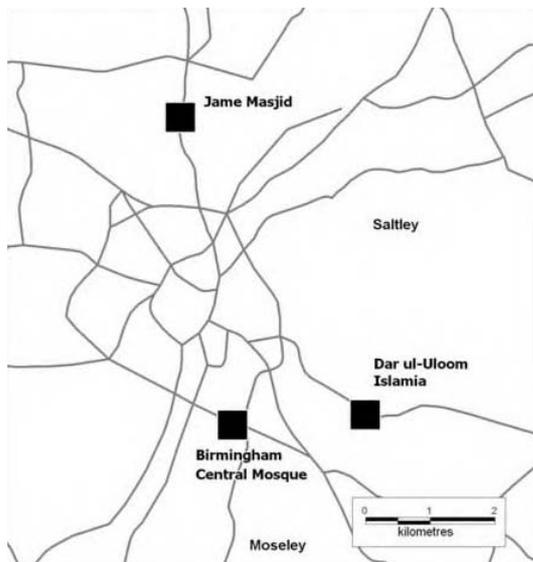


Figure 2. Map showing the proximity of the three mosques to major roads.



Figure 3. The Jame Masjid in Handsworth, incorporating domes and arched windows that signify mosque architectural traditions.

With regard to the first and third of these points, in an interview with the author, a senior planning officer of Birmingham City Council made a comparison between the two mosques, indicating that if a place of worship is to be sited near a major thoroughfare, it was appropriate that its style should signify its religious associations:

If you are developing a site on the ring-road, on one of the main radial routes, so the Central Mosque, Saddam Hussein, then why shouldn't its architecture reflect its use?

Although this statement reflects a personal view, it also gives rise to a fourth point of comparison between these buildings, which is that both have had assigned to them sets of contemporary meanings and associations that were not prevalent at the time of their planning and construction.

The planning process surrounding the Jame Masjid began in 1976, and received the active support of the City Council. However, planning records suggest that part of the reason for their support was their wish to impose a particular spatial order upon an

area of the city that was undergoing social change. As noted by Rex and Tomlinson (1979, pp. 74-75), whilst the area to the south and south-east of the city centre had provided the primary areas of South Asian settlement, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number began to settle in wards on the north side of the city, including Handsworth, Soho and Aston. Whilst many were Sikhs and Hindus, sizeable numbers were Muslims. Correspondingly, in the residential area surrounding the site allocated for the Jame Masjid, several mosques had been established in houses, without having been granted planning permission (see figure 4). As Henry Hodgins (1981) has shown, the use of houses as mosques and *madrasas* was of considerable concern to the City Council at this time, giving rise to concerns over 'noise' and 'disturbance' caused to neighbouring residents. The construction of a purpose-built mosque in this area was conceived as a way of counteracting the diffusion of smaller mosques across the residential area, as it was believed this would concentrate the activities associated with such 'unofficial' sites into a

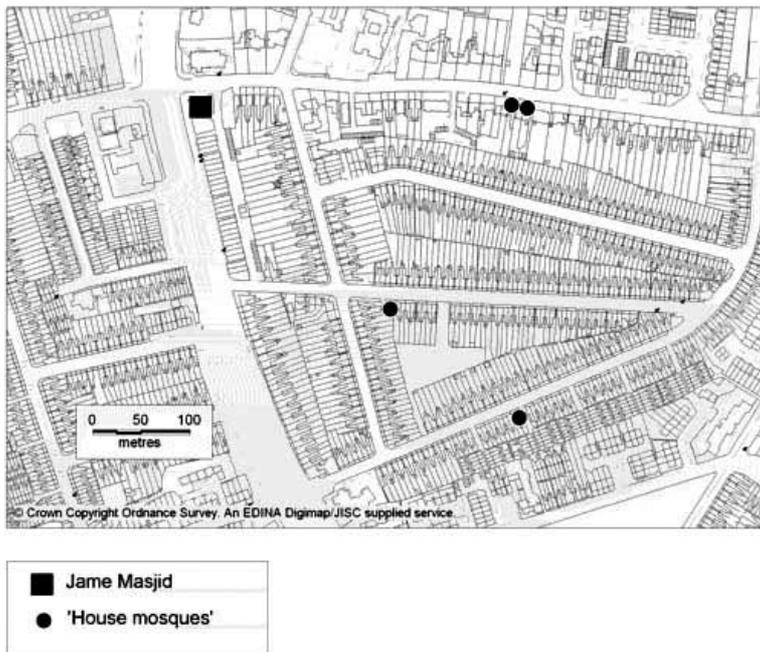


Figure 4. Map showing the location of the Jame Masjid relative to 'unofficial' house mosques in the area at the time of the planning application.

single designated facility. Consequently, the establishment of the Jame Masjid was conceived as a means of exercising spatial control over Muslim communities. As was stated in the original planning reports:<sup>2</sup>

At the present time, the group are meeting in a private house in Arden Road, and it is hoped that, should alternative premises become available, there would be a certain amount of amalgamation of other prayer-house groups in the area.

And:

... there are a number of dwelling houses in this area for which enforcement action is in force, and it is felt that this development would overcome the problem of unlawful uses.

At this stage, therefore, a part of the significance attached to the mosque by the local authority resulted from the perception that it provided a functional means to overcome a 'problem'.

A further factor that made the location of the site favourable to the City Council was its proximity to the main road. However,

as in the case of the Central Mosque, there is no historical evidence that this resulted from a determination to accord the building aesthetic prominence. Indeed, whilst the planning report cited above remarked that the building would be 'a traditional mosque design', it also noted that:

There is a traffic fly-over immediately opposite the Birchfield Road frontage, which *effectively screens the site* from the opposite side of the road. [emphasis added]

As such, the decision to juxtapose the mosque with the road was made with knowledge of the fact that the existing morphology of the location would mask the building from view (see figure 5). This location was also considered favourable by the planning authority on account of specific functional criteria. Thus, it was commented in the planning report that:

Although many objections have been received from local residents, it is considered that the use of this site as a mosque would be appropriate.



Figure 5. The Jame Masjid 'screened' by an adjacent flyover.

Birchfield Road is heavily trafficked and any disturbance caused by the religious activity should be considered in this context.

On one hand, this statement appears politically progressive, in that the proximity of the site to the main road provided grounds on which to state that claims of local residents concerning the 'noise' and 'disturbance' caused by the mosque were exaggerated. On the other hand, it is still the case that the heavy traffic of the main road was offered as a reason why the use of the site to construct a mosque would be 'appropriate'.

Whilst the initial planning reports were largely silent over the design of the mosque, aesthetic contestation over the building became pronounced as the detailed plans were negotiated. These negotiations indicate again the extent to which meanings invested in (religious) architectural designs can be relational to the interactions between individuals and groups, constituted and managed in this context within the institutional framework of urban planning.

The detailed plans of the building, which included a dome and minaret, were due to be reviewed by the planning committee in December 1978. However, despite outline permission having been granted for the mosque, the proposal met with strong resistance from the owners of the adjacent property, who alleged that the land allocated for the mosque had been pledged to them by the City Council some years earlier. Although this claim was made at an advanced stage in the planning process and without corroborating evidence, the planning committee deferred their decision pertaining to the plans for the building to allow the planning officers time to investigate. The claim was subsequently shown to be spurious. Nevertheless, it set in train a series of departures within the planning process, which led the dome and minaret to become contested features of the mosque's design.

Of interest here is the reaction of the Muslim group, who sought to resolve the tension surrounding the application by

emphasizing that the group's requirements were concordant with the City Council's priorities. In a letter addressed to the chairman of the planning committee, a representative of the group stated as follows:

Following the deferment of the decision on the mosque, I would ask you to put forward [to the planning committee] the following observations in support of the application.

1. We wish to point out that a minaret and a dome are not an obligatory condition for building a mosque at the corner of Birchfield Road and Trinity Road.
2. We must point out that this mosque will have the effect of reducing the number of prayer houses in the Fentham Road and Trinity Road areas.
3. All calls to prayer will not be on a loud speaker system from outside, but will be given from inside the mosque.

As these comments suggest, the Muslim group expressed their support for the scheme in terms of the City Council's own criteria for curtailing the impact of mosques upon urban space. This is most apparent in the references to prayer houses and to the call to prayer, which responded to manifest priorities of the City Council. These comments reveal, not merely an internalization, but a tactical use of the City Council's 'representation of space'. However, if the intention had been to propitiate the Council in relation to the proposed mosque, the suggestion that the dome and minaret could be omitted from the design had quite the reverse effect.

At the subsequent meeting of the planning committee in January 1979, the letter from the mosque committee formed the principal subject of discussion. A summary of the committee meeting is given in the planning file:

The chairman opened the discussion by drawing attention to the fact that he had received a letter from the mosque authorities to the effect that they were prepared to delete from their proposals both the minaret and the dome. The chairman suggested that this would make the proposal

*more sympathetic* to the design and architecture of the adjoining shops . . . After further discussion, and with the knowledge that representatives of the mosque authorities were present at the meeting, the committee deferred consideration until further plans [i.e. ones omitting the dome and minaret] were submitted. [emphasis added]

It will be recalled that a similar concern to encourage the architecture of mosques to reflect that of neighbouring buildings had formed part of the deliberations over the Central Mosque. However, the pronouncement in this case reveals more starkly that the 'representations of space' made by urban planning can interleave with the subjective preferences of those responsible for the administration of planning functions. (The contention over the Jame Masjid was by no means an isolated case. For instance, in a report pertaining to what is now the Masjid-e-Noor in Victoria Road, which was planned contemporaneously with the Jame Masjid, the Chief Planning Officer remarked that 'I feel that a building of essentially Oriental design would appear somewhat alien on any site in the area'). Ironically therefore, rather than reinvigorating the planning process, the letter of the mosque committee led to a series of opportunistic deliberations over the building's design on the part of the planning authority.

However, the stance of the planning committee met with resistance from a number of quarters, all of them restating the importance of the dome and minaret to the mosque's design. These included a now defunct Muslim Association, the Council of Birmingham Mosques, who expressed their 'strong support' for the application 'to erect a mosque with dome and minaret in this position, which appears to us to be suitable for it'. Similarly, a representative of the mosque committee attempted to retract the contents of the original letter, stating that 'the Muslim community have been very distressed at the [planning] committee's ruling that the dome and minaret were not to be allowed'. In addition, a local Councillor,

who was also employed by the Community Relations Council, expressed his 'concern' about the matter, stating his view that 'it could be construed as racial prejudice'.

Subsequently, the Chief Planning Officer himself appeared to dissent from the planning committee's position, arguing that, in his view:

A building should postulate the function it performs, and the removal of the minaret and the dome on this Temple [*sic*] is analogous to removing the church spire of a traditional Church of England building. The resulting building would be characterless in this location.

Whilst also expounding a subjective view, this comment constitutes an attempt to reach beyond the vexed relations between the various actors involved in the planning process, through an appeal to the (modernist) concept that the architectural form of a building should follow its function. Moreover, the statement constitutes a significant step forward in terms of the symbolic construction of purpose-built mosques in Birmingham, resonating strongly with the view of the planning officer cited at the beginning of the case study. Under the weight of these expressions of opposition to its decision, the planning committee's position gave way, and the group were invited to submit further plans including the dome – although not the minaret.

These contestations over the mosque's design came full circle when the Muslim group received a substantial grant towards the construction costs from the Iraqi government. According to the architect's submission to the planning committee, this funding was subject to two conditions, one of which was that the mosque should bear the name of the Iraqi President. The other was that the design should be modified to incorporate a minaret. Yet another set of designs was produced, this time including both the dome and minaret (although, as shown in the photograph in figure 3, the minaret has yet to be constructed). The application was finally approved in January

1981, some 5 years after the original land allocation, and the mosque was completed and opened in 1988.

Allowing for the differences in social and architectural contexts, this analysis of the planning and construction of the Jame Masjid is germane to Mazumdar and Mazumdar's (1997) discussion of the domestic spaces of Zoroastrians in Iran: it has likewise shown that architecture can embody the interactions between individuals and groups in a given society, particularly when these interactions occur under sustained relations of power and resistance. As we have seen, the very location of the Jame Masjid reflects the power

of urban planning institutions to represent, and thereafter govern the configuration of urban space. However, as we have also seen, this power is relational to the capacities of different social groups to resist the 'representations of space' made by urban planning. Moreover, the exchanges between the planning authority and the Muslim group with regard to the dome and minaret indicate that these architectural features were invested with considerable social meaning and value – perhaps all the more so for having been contested within the planning process. Examining these interactions thus deepens our perception of the mosque as a meaningful



Figure 6. The Dar ul-Uloom Islamia in Small Heath.

or 'representational space' for the respective Muslim group.

### **A Landmark for the City (2): The Dar ul-Uloom Islamia**

In contrast to the Central Mosque and the Jame Masjid, both of which were developed some time ago, the Dar ul-Uloom Islamia in Small Heath was completed as recently as 1997 (see figure 6). Correspondingly, it presents an example of how the City Council's representation of Birmingham as a 'multicultural city' has conjoined with observable changes in planning practice.

In common with the preceding case studies, the Dar ul-Uloom Islamia is located adjacent to a major road, on a site that was allocated by the City Council (see figure 2). However, the Dar ul-Uloom Islamia is much larger than the other sites, and is also closely associated with a series of social and cultural facilities, housed in buildings that line both sides of a short road behind the mosque.

In further contrast to the preceding case studies, the planning records pertaining to this mosque reveal clearly that, from its inception, the location was chosen by the City Council with the intention of making the building visually prominent. Reports that date to the initial planning stages in the late 1980s and early 1990s comment as follows:<sup>3</sup>

Because the site also fronts the roundabout junction of Golden Hillock Road and Small Heath By-pass, a prominent building is required.

And:

The proposed building is of considerable scale and mass and has been deliberately sited at the south eastern corner of the site to form a landmark adjacent to the Small Heath by-pass.

In addition, the City Council contributed to the scheme by selling the land to the group at a third of its market value.

This is not to suggest that tensions were entirely absent from the planning process surrounding this site. For instance, when asked to describe their relationship with the

planning authority during the development of the mosque, a member of the mosque committee replied that they were 'very good'. However, there had been an extended period during the early construction stages, in which the planning authority held up further progress on the mosque to consider what was perceived by the group to be a minor alteration in the design. To quote the respondent:

We didn't have a balcony originally within the mosque itself, in the main hall, and we introduced a balcony . . . and we put in a planning permission to the City, and it took them nine months to say yes, for whatever reason, whatever the hold-up was . . . And in the meantime . . . we had the steel structure up, and it was standstill, no construction being done at all . . . because we didn't want to build it and then the city would turn round and say 'no, knock it down' sort of thing . . . It took nine months to say yes, for whatever reason, we got no explanation.

Design conditions were also strictly applied. As further commented by the respondent:

We were actually told what colours to use by the planners to blend in, socially, in the surrounding area . . . In our original drawings . . . we sort of had light bricks at the bottom and dark at the top, but they [the City Council] actually said, you know, we've got to do it this way or we don't do it at all!

There also remained a tension in terms of how the building was construed by non-Muslim residents who responded to the planning application. One letter provides a chilling illustration of the theme, addressed throughout this paper, that architectural aesthetics mediate the relations between social groups. It inquired of planners when they were 'going to stop allowing Birmingham being turned into England's own version of Baghdad?', exhorting that mosques should be 'built in modern style so that they fit in with other buildings, instead of sticking out like a sore thumb'. The letter went on:

All of the people I have spoken to can't stand the sight of these buildings, which start to make them resent the people who are responsible for them,

and if that's your idea of improving race relations then carry on, and watch the resentment grow.

However, unlike the planning of the Jame Masjid, the opposition of neighbouring residents in this case did not unduly influence the planning process.

There was thus an explicit connection between the City Council's initial support for the scheme and the semiotic role the building now performs for the local authority. In the words of the representative of the mosque committee cited above, the mosque is a 'stop' for members of the City Council when diplomats visit Birmingham from other countries:

They use this as a model . . . showing other people the way it's integrated within the society . . . you know, [a] multicultural society. They're showing that this is the model, this is how we do it . . . There were some teams from Amsterdam who have got problems there within the ethnic minorities . . . so they came over to actually research to find out how Birmingham has managed and what they have done to accommodate the Muslim community.

In a sense, therefore, the process of meaning-making discussed in relation to the Central Mosque has been inverted. Whereas the Central Mosque's role as a landmark has developed subsequent to its construction, in the case of the Dar ul-Uloom Islamia, a concern with the symbolism of the site was woven into the planning process itself. Expressed in another way, the different symbolic constructions of the site within the planning process corresponded to a manifestly different set of planning decisions pertaining to the site.

Whilst noting the role of planning procedure in setting the parameters within which this change in the symbolism of purpose-built mosques has occurred, it is again important to acknowledge that this change has emerged through the investment of meanings in such buildings and the wider built environment by local Muslims. In this regard, the respondent cited above made the following observation:

If you had known the place, especially this patch from roundabout to roundabout . . . about 20 odd years ago, it was a dump . . . and that has changed. And the people that have changed it is [sic] the Muslim community within the area itself, so that's how it's been changed, the needs, trying to fulfil the needs of the communities, and they've sort of made an effort to change that.

Viewed from this perspective, the City Council's commitment to the Dar ul-Uloom Islamia constitutes a recognition of the changes in the urban fabric that have emerged through the interactions of local Muslims with their surroundings, as well as with the planning process.

### Conclusion

In tracing the planning histories of three purpose-built mosques in Birmingham, this paper has raised several issues of importance to our understanding of how post-migration religious groups have interacted with and changed the spaces in which they reside, as an expression of their religious and cultural needs. In particular, it has shown the necessity for such groups to engage with planning procedures, which continue to be hegemonic in their relation to the processes through which the urban environment is (re)produced. However, the paper has also shown that this hegemony is not absolute but relative, and that the engagement of Muslim and other religious groups with planning procedure can be effective in redefining the constraints that urban planning imposes.

The paper has also shown that urban planning can perform an important role in relation to the designs of purpose-built mosques, not only framing, but also mediating aesthetic contestation. This was most notable in the case of the Jame Masjid, in which opposition from a local property owner provided a precondition for conflict over the mosque's design, which was articulated by the planning process. Similar forms of contestation were also woven into the planning process surrounding applications to broadcast the *azan* from the Central Mosque.

Finally, through a chronological arrangement of the case studies, the paper has shown that the City Council's stance in relation to the construction of mosques alluding to Islamic architectural antecedents has changed over time. In this regard, the paper has noted a transition from an initial ambivalence – and even hostility – towards such buildings, to more recent endorsement, as they have been increasingly celebrated as signifiers of Birmingham's cultural diversity (see Kong, 1993, for an analogous discussion in relation to Singapore). This coupling of the symbolism of religious buildings and the representation of Birmingham as a 'multicultural city' is explicit in the City Council's *Sacred Spaces* document (Birmingham City Council, nd), which comments that 'Ethnic architecture [sic] is now seen in many parts of the City, especially in the inner areas, thus adding to the richness of the City's fabric as well as its social and economic diversity'. In the case of the Birmingham Central Mosque, this change of emphasis has resulted in a gradual transformation of the meanings attached to the same building; in the case of the Dar ul-Uloom Islamia, on the other hand, the perception that the building could form a landmark for the city was integrated into the planning process.

It is important to observe that some salient problems can attend these symbolic processes. For instance, the emphasis given to the semiotics of the built environment may bear little relation (and may even mask) other material realities and spatial processes experienced by religious minorities. Although lying beyond the scope of the present paper, it can be observed here that the increasingly positive treatment of applications to develop purpose-built mosques does not necessarily entail that other types of applications – such as for *madrasas* in residential districts – will meet with a correspondingly greater degree of success. There is also the danger that, in being too closely identified with the buildings of 'minorities', such celebration of difference through architecture does not sufficiently

alter the patterns of marginalization that, in the past, led such buildings to be sited in peripheral areas, or indeed 'screened' by flyovers.

Nevertheless, these tensions should not be over-stated. As Jane M. Jacobs has observed (1998), these patterns of 'aestheticization' do not necessarily dis-empower diaspora or other minority groups, but can intersect in important ways with political processes in which such groups engage. As we have seen in the statements of the President of the Birmingham Central Mosque and the representative of the Dar ul-Uloom Islamia, the local discourse of multiculturalism is not only promoted by the City Council, but is also shared by the members of Muslim organizations. Moreover, it is not fanciful to suggest that changes in the stance of the City Council noted in this paper have emerged, in large part, as a result of the engagement of Muslim groups with planning procedures. This was exemplified most clearly by the applications to broadcast the *azan* from the Central Mosque, and to (re)insert a dome and minaret into the design of the Jame Masjid. It is for this reason that examining the interactions between Muslim groups and planning institutions contributes to our understanding of mosques in British urban settings as contextually meaningful spaces.

#### NOTES

1. Except where stated otherwise, citations of this case are taken from the planning files, PA 23328/1-8, kept by the Planning Department of Birmingham City Council.
2. Except where stated otherwise, citations of this case are taken from the planning file, PA 4689/41 RM.
3. Except where stated otherwise, citations of this case are taken from the planning file, E/01112/90/FUL, kept by the Planning Department of Birmingham City Council.

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