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# USERS' PLACE EXPERIENCE OF A CONTEMPORARY *MASJID* TOWARDS URBAN PLACE-MAKING IN SINGAPORE

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Masjid as a gathering place can create a lively urban place apart from its pivotal roles as an image and identity of a Muslim community. The qualities and values of a place or surrounding would be impacted by the architecture of the masjid. A traditional masjid architecture would convey a different quality if compared to a contemporary masjid architecture. In Singapore, many of the masjids are situated in urban surroundings and they have a very significant contribution or added qualities to the quality of the urban place. The new masjids, the contemporary Muslim community place, are contemporary in architecture to assimilate the urban place-making of Singapore. The purpose of this paper is to explore and understand users' place experience of a contemporary urban masjid in Singapore. It aims to explore users' experiences and perceptions of the meaning, physical and psychological values of a contemporary masjid as the urban Muslim community's gathering place. An exploratory qualitative case study design was used and data were collected by semi-structured interviews and behavioural observations and mapping. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed according to contextual analysis. It was found that the process of place-making, from the inception of the masjid design until these days, has successfully infused the contemporary architecture together with creative activities of its users. It contributes to a very lively urban place. The Singapore Muslim community is proud of their new contemporary masjid to the effect that it manifests a contemporary cultural, social and religious identity in the context of a contemporary urban setting. A number of themes of physical and psychological values were generated from the analysis to explain users' views about their masjid in urban place-making in Singapore. The new image of masjid conveys better Muslim community identity to the urban place which reflects the contemporary urban character of the community.*

**Keywords:** *contemporary masjid, community place, place experience, urban place-making*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*to be human, is to live in a world that is filled with significant places, Relph (1976)*

Masjid has been built anywhere there is a Muslim population. Muslims around the world are proud of the contributions made by the landmark architecture. As such, a considerable amount of researches, talks, discussions, conferences etc has been going on debating the pivotal role of masjid in urban places as an image and identity of a community. Many of them discuss on the solutions of architectural designs and styles of contemporary masjid in urban centers which have been fundamentally affected by Western culture and technology and where widespread economic benefits from development would preclude any major reversal of the trend (Ihsan Fathi, nd; Abdelhamid, 2001; Abu, et al, nd; Gulzar, 1996; Roberson, 2004, Mohamad Tajuddin, 2000). Hence, many Muslim countries are facing an architectural crisis with the coming of latest technological advances and globalization of architectural design in designing masjid.

Singapore is developing its' environment into urban settings, and masjids in Singapore have been designed in the image of contemporary architecture. The typical traditional masjid is losing its presence. The development of new masjid, designed with modern styles, which leaves masjid without the conventional domes and minarets. The space planning and masjid activities have been designed to suit current needs of its contemporary urban users. Furthermore, the contemporary masjids have been designed to comply with urban image of Singapore. The physical architecture avoids connotation of religious in nature and more universal. For instance, on the new image of Assyafaah's design which won an Architecture Plus Award in 2004 some users commented that the masjid does not look like a masjid just because that it does not have an Islamic identity. The architect Tan Kok Hiang clarifies the masjid's deviation from design norms: "Singapore is a cosmopolitan city, and we want to imbue and reflect that essence in our mosques. Our mosques can be ultra-modern or traditional....Given that we live in a multi-religious and multiethnic society, there should be plenty of room for creativity that does not compromise functionality...the primary objective was that the architecture should provide as few barriers as possible to the community at large....the mosque's design had to sit comfortably in a multiracial, multi-religious country; and yet it had to retain its identity as a mosque in order to appeal to the Muslim community."

Despite a plethora of research emphasising the importance of masjid to the Muslim community, there is a relative dearth of research about users' experience of masjid as a community. Users' place experience is increasingly recognised as a vital tool in providing effective support by design professionals in extending masjid as a community place. As such, it is important to explore this phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it. Hence, recognizing the mentioned issues, this paper is a discussion of findings of users' place experience of a contemporary community place [i.e. masjid], which has realized the urban place-making spirit in Singapore.

## **THE CONCEPT OF PLACE-MAKING AND PLACE EXPERIENCE**

The concept of place is found to be analogous among several literatures. It is the basic component that shapes our experience of the world. Relph (1976) describes that places are experienced through the interactions of people with the setting, landscape, other people and personal experiences. Similarly, Canter (1977) defines place as a result of relationship between conceptions, activities and physical attributes that refers geographical, architectural and social characters. Ted Relph's work on Place and Placelessness has been credited as the pioneering work in the phenomenology of place (Seamon, 1987 in Stefanovic, 1998). "Place is more than mere physical or spatial location, capable of being translated into neatly bounded, compartmentalizing definitions" (Stefanovic, 1998). According to Relph (1976), 'there is no discernable limit to the diversity of place, and every identifiable place has unique content and patterns of relationships that are expressed and endure in the spirit of that place'. Symbols and landmarks in the built environment and the culture of place are meant to enhance the memory of place identities and localities (Yuen, 2005). Sime (1995: pp.28) as cited in T.M. Abu Ghazze (1999) identified a distinct approach to the concept of place. He explains that 'the term 'place' as opposed to space, implies a strong emotional tie, temporary or more long-lasting, between a person and a particular physical location'. This phenomenological perspective of place is developed by theorists in both architecture and humanistic geography (Relph, 1976, 1981;

Tuan, 1977; Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; Seamon, 1982). In architecture the dominant figure in this development has been Norberg-Schultz (1979) who espoused a theory of place, which emphasizes the quality of a person's existential existence or being in the world. However, the work Norberg-Schultz was criticized by Sime (1995) to lack any substantial analysis of behavior and experiences of the people who inhabit and visit these places. These literatures emphasize that a place accumulates more meaning over time as the layers of time and activities change and progress.

Placemaking is the activity of people, an ecological process, about making places through reinforcing place characters and place elements. The practice highly considers the local people of whom will be affected by the particular place and who are an integral part of the processes of change. It involves retaining the essence of place while giving it new physical and psychological meaning (Schneekloth and Shibley, 1995; Gunn, 1994; Stea and Turan, 1993). This process is aimed at creating better settings and functioning spaces for the intended users, to provide shelter, sustenance, security and satisfaction, while at the same time sustaining certain identities that belongs to that particular place. Placemaking is not just about the relationship of people to their places; it also creates relationships among people in places. According to Stea and Turan, "placemaking is the act of cultural incorporation, broadly conceived, into built form, relating culture to architecture and urban design, often with planning framework and within an overall context termed "ecological"...thus the concepts of architectural and cultural dimensions...always interact in an integrated manner". It is best made communally within its own social and political context, and to include external insights and suggestions.

All places have their distinctive qualities and characters and one's place experience depends on the sense of place of the setting. Original characters of a place hold a very significant value, whereby a place can never be detached from location, landscape, time, community, and physical or symbolic quality. Settings can be enhanced by identifying the place qualities that are lacking. Place qualities that are present and can be sensed by the users who experience it produce a better and a more enjoyable place. Time is just one of the many components that affects the changes in place characters. The conceptions of people also change, if not daily but over time, and this greatly shapes their perception of places, which can totally give a whole new meaning to any place. Abu Ghazze (1999) describes 'Place' as a very rich psychological concept, supporting Canter's (1977) idea of 'place' in his book entitled 'The Psychology of Place'. In the book Canter pulled together a number of recent psychological studies under the heading of 'place'. According to Canter (1977, pp. 9 or 158 to check), 'place' is an experiential unity referring to specific physical settings and having three main components: 'activities, evaluative conceptualizations and physical properties'. Sime (1995) as cited in Abu Ghazze (1999) had pointed out that the emotional bond to place, which is central to the phenomenologists' and designers' use of the term 'sense of place', does not figure as an essential component to Canter's model. Nevertheless, Sime (1995) (as cited in Abu Ghazze, 1999) recognizes that Canter's contribution to the development of a model of place is that he always emphasizes the necessity of understanding the perspective of users. Groat (1984) as cited in Abu Ghazze (1999) has pointed out that the concept of place as outlined by Canter may serve to integrate both the phenomenological and empirical approaches in environmental psychology. Also, findings of this study support Canter's model of place and his contention that actions or behavior are an essential component of place, and therefore place-meaning.

## **THE CONCEPT OF MASJID AS A COMMUNITY PLACE**

In the Islamic culture, the masjid is an integrated and active element in shaping and maintaining the life quality of Muslim society. The masjid played a strong political and social role in the early Islamic community. For more than fourteen centuries, the masjid has been an object of landmarks, social space in urban spatial context. Hasan-Uddin, author of *The Mosque and the Modern World* (1997) describes the masjid as an "emblematic building type in Islam", which is distinguished as a "social" place rather than a "sacred" space. Theoretically a masjid marks the direction of prayer i.e. toward Makkah.

In Arabic, masjid means a place where one prostrate oneself in front of Allah (may He be exalted), a place where individuals or groups conduct activities for the sake of pleasing God. The Arabic word al-jami' or assembly, is often used with the word masjid where the masjid is big and Jum'ah prayers are performed, indicating its communal importance (Spahic, 2002; Mohammad Tajuddin, 1991, 1999, 2000). During the period of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the masjid had served as a meeting place for the non-Muslim and Muslim ummah, for congregational prayers, a place for celebration, as an education center, a temporary accommodation, a courthouse, an administrative center, a military camp and also where he built his residence.

A masjid is an icon and the nucleus of Muslim society where the collective meeting to worship and conduct ibadah activities can be performed. It is the masjid where religious as well as various community activities are being conducted ever since the first prophet, Adam, had descended on earth. During the period of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the masjid was a community place with a variety of activities that took place; catering spiritual, social and political needs of the expanding community. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "the earth has been created for me as a masjid and a place of purity, and whatever man from my Ummah finds himself in need of prayer, let him pray" (anywhere). A devoted Muslim does not require a defined space or structure for divine worship since the whole earth is his prayer house. However, masjid has been set up wherever there exists a Muslim community as the landmark of the Islamic life to perform congregational prayers, socio-cultural activities, apart as a symbol of identity, strength, peace and justice.

According to Relph (1976), 'to be human, is to live in a world that is filled with significant places'. Hence, significant places can be an important component of a person's or community's identity. The masjid becomes an integral aspect of the community's identity, serving as its physical and spiritual center. The masjid is an important emblem to Muslim community. Masjid and other places of gathering could extend ethnic and family identity, meeting places where relationships can be grounded, maintained, and nurtured. They are identity markers and permeability for Muslims and the others. Muslims manifest their presence and power in the form of building masjid or congregational centers where religious, social, and cultural identity can be expressed.

## **METHODS**

The design of this research involves exploratory qualitative descriptive research and case study applications. The approach taken is to describe and evaluate as precisely as possible one or more characteristics and their relations in a particular context. The researcher interviewed 37 users, whose ages range from 6 to 78 years old, using the purposive sampling method in order to understand the particular case in great detail. The research participants were chosen to give the researcher the greatest possible insight into the topic. A set of semi-structured interview questions were prepared to explore the physical and psychological values that users associate with the contemporary masjid as a community place. The interviews were carried out until the answers were becoming predictably consistent. The researcher also visited and observed the masjid to obtain information on the masjid's structure, facilities and activities (Esterberg, 2001).

The analysis will aim to determine the various subjective physical and psychological values users associate with the contemporary masjid as a community place, and how these values have determined the masjid with a contemporary image disseminates better Muslim community identity to the urban place which reflects the contemporary urban character of the community.

## **CASE STUDY: MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE**

There are currently 69 masjid in Singapore; 23 masjid on freehold wakaf land, 22 new MBF masjid, 11 old and redeveloped masjid on 99-year lease and 13 old masjid on TOL land (MUIS, 2007). Muslims in Singapore constitute a minority living in an environment that experiences extensive changes. Despite being the minority, the masjid remains an important bulwark of Muslim identity and community integration. Masjid plays vital and meaningful roles as centers of

religious practices, religious education and learning and social development. Singapore Muslim Religious Council (MUIS) is the body responsible for all the masjids in Singapore after the institutionalization of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) in 1968. Masjids in Singapore have been built entirely from money donated by the community through MBF Mosque Building Fund (MBF). New central masjid could accommodate 1000 2000 jemaah and to provide services such as kindergartens, religious classes, family counseling, leadership and community development classes, tuitions and remedial instructions for school children, and Arabic language instructions. The new “generation” masjids are larger, better equipped and multi-functional with a wide range of activities. Their eccentric architecture transforms them into landmarks in the housing estates.

In 2005 a Mosque Convention was held and among the objectives is to remodel masjids in Singapore, to play a more active role in shaping religious life and forging the Singaporean Muslim identity, making the masjid more youth-, elderly- and family-friendly to ensure they address the needs of 21st century Muslim community. Multi-functionality of the new “generation” masjid brought about the idea of having two major types of spaces in the masjid i.e. iktikaf and maslahat zones. The iktikaf zone of the masjid is where the prayer area is, and it is a sacred space which has to be kept in a state of purity. According to Singapore Mufti Syed Isa Mohd Semait, “the Arabic term maslahat essentially means for the greater good of society. In the context of Singapore’s multicultural society, the concept of masjid’s maslahat is also meant to promote inclusiveness among the multicultural people of Singapore because non-Muslims have a chance to visit masjid and understand more about Muslims and Islam.” (Greene, 2007). The maslahat area is an ancillary or non-prayer area which is accessible to public. The design also takes into account the increasing role of women in society by separating facilities from the praying space to allow women, who play a significant role in the management of masjid, to work and participate in its activities throughout the year.



Photo 1: Masjid An-Nahdhah, Bishan, Singapore  
(Source: Researcher, 2007)

An-Nahdhah was the final masjid built under phase three (3) of MBF mosques development. It is a new “generation” masjid which was launched in 2006 serving the religious and spiritual needs of the Muslim community. It is located in the heartland of Singapore and readily accessible via public transport.

An-Nahdhah, designed to cater for an estimated 4,000 jemaah, is an important landmark in the chronicle of MBF mosques. Programmes and activities that would take place in the masjid were considered even before the masjid was built, and these

considerations were incorporated into the design. Such customizations ensure that masjid programmes will be able to run smoothly since the infrastructure provides for them. As described by Zaini Osman, assistant head of the Mosque Development Strategic Unit of MUIS, “that plan of the programmes will actually influence the design.” Among the facilities one can find in An-Nahdhah are: the main prayer hall, extended prayer halls, women’s galleries, male and female ablutions, an outdoor ablution, a management and reception office, a theatrette, multipurpose rooms, madrasah classrooms, a teacher’s room, kindergarten’s classrooms, a foyer, pantries, a handicap toilet, a store room, a basement carpark, exhibition galleries and a lift. The masjid is designed so that most areas can be used as extensions to the praying area. A section of An-Nahdhah is assigned to be an interfaith harmony center, suitable for National Education Learning Journey programme and for public to understand and know more about Islam.

In line with the concept of a masjid being a multi-functional institution with the prime role of facilitating the creation of an excellent Muslim community, the design approach goes beyond the traditional notion and expectations of a masjid. Conceptually, the masjid reflects the Muslim community's support towards multi racial integration and co-existence with the community at large. Masjid An-Nahdhah adopts an open and interactive approach, more 'commercial' looking, domeless, unique and blends well with the surroundings. It projects a positive image of Islam, contemporary and outward looking that promotes racial awareness within the larger Singapore.

The extensive use of glass curtain wall façade expresses dynamism signifying modern day relevance. The minaret is distinctive and fashionable, symbolizes unification of the five pillars of Islam. The exterior of the prayer hall is essentially a black cubic building, which resembles the Kaaba in Makkah, the direction to which all Muslims turn in prayer. An-Nahdhah's look, while unconventional for a masjid, fits comfortably with the neighbourhood it is in. It is flanked by a sports stadium and swimming complex on one side, and a sprawling tertiary educational institution on the other.

## **FINDINGS**

A set of lists of physical and psychological place experience and values of Masjid An-Nahdhah as a community place have been developed from the transcribed interviews. The lists have been organized into various categories, mainly divided into accessibility, comfort, activities and sociability.

### **Accessibility**

The location of Masjid An-Nahdhah which is in the centre of Bishan urban neighborhood, surrounded by institutions and situated within a walkable distant, has been considered a successful plan. It has been flooded with users and considered a convenient community place which users could gather at their convenience.

*“Some students here, to kill time and they live nearby, they come in and pray and read the Al-quran and then go back to school again, do you think they have enough time to go back and come back to school again. The nearest they have is the mosque and this is quite central to the area where we have stadiums so close to the ITD, the school board is around here and these students may not be staying around here, maybe they're staying in Yishun and Sembawang and you don't expect them to travel by bus to travel all the way home just for prayers and come back to school again, by then they're tired and that's why in Singapore we encourage them to have mosques in every estate. One is to cater the students and teachers... their job is to teach and sometimes the time for them to pray and places are not appropriate, so our mosque is near.”* (Interviewee 02)

*“Our mosque is very strategic to serve the community's needs...it is in the heart of the community, you can see here in the map where is the MBF masjid and mostly in the heart of the neighbourhood..”* (Interviewee 01)

### **Comfort and image**

Despite the contemporary image of the masjid, some elements that remind users of their community place identity are comforting to users. Some users consider the masjid their second home and try to make the masjid as comfortable as possible to others.

*“The black box is like a symbol for the Kaabah, actually inside this box is the designated area for our iktikaf area or the masjid area. When you come to the mosque nowadays in Singapore, there's two areas..one is the masjid area which is the praying area and the common area for other community activities for community engagement, multipurpose all...”* (Interviewee 01)

*“When I'm here I feel that I'm in God's home even though I've been to a bigger one in Medina but I'm lucky as His guest. To me, I take the visitors as God's guests and we try to give them the best way, as our responsibilities, .... this is a second home for me. Alhamdulillah, my husband let me*



*to be involved with all this after 37 years working in the government sector. I'm retired and I concentrate here, it's my passion I can do charity for women and I make sure that if I want the comfort, I make this place comfortable enough, I bring in a chair and what's dirty I wash them up. I always make sure that the praying attire is clean for others to use it.” (Interviewee 04)*

### **Uses and activities**

Activities are the basic building blocks of a place. Users of Masjid An-Nahdhah find that the masjid has been very active to provide all interesting activities, ranging from religious to social to cultural activities catering all groups of users throughout the year.

*“What do we do more importantly are not just spaces, the program we do must be community friendly..the community functions, which you must see..probably this is a masjid and this is where all the community activities to be held...that's why our masjid is the centre of excellence for Islamic learning and social development...this is the part where we provide Islamic learning, we also lead community functions and within this space we can also find auditorium and plaza but the masjid area is well kept...no one can disturb the sacredity of the masjid...” (Interviewee 01)*

*“Sometimes we have netball games, we form a team and we have a family day and we do fun fair and we will call all the jemaah to bring donations and if they have any things that they don't use, we'll do a jumble sale just like our Maulud celebration on the 12 of Rabiulawal...we have lot's of activities here, we have Zanji recitation, the kindergarten have their activities...drawing competition, forums and health check up for free.” (Interviewee 04)*

### **Sociability**

Users' of Masjid An-Nahdhah feel comfortable interacting with members. They tend to feel a sense of place and attachment to their community. Meetings in various activities held in the masjid have brought about strong community ties among members. From users' accounts a number of sub-themes emerged; friendliness and cooperation, volunteerism, stewardship, diversity and welcoming.



Photo 2: An activity for muslimah held in one of the many spaces of Masjid An-Nahdhah. (Source: Researcher, 2007)

### **Friendliness and Cooperation**

*“We're all a family here, if we get any functions these people will come automatically and help because they know that this is the house of God. The whole idea is to get the people's attention, some we do voice out and some using flyers. If they have interest in office work, we give them office work, if they have interest in gardening, we give them gardening works and some men they have talent in carpentry. I think this is a point for many other Muslims but how active it is really up to them. There are elderly who comes and helps especially in cooking activity. They're willing to unite.” (Interviewee 02)*



Photo 3: An activity for the children in the multi-functional lobby area of Masjid An-Nahdhah. (Source: Researcher, 2007)

### **Volunteerism**

*“We have a lot of programs going on including the camping like qiyamullail. During this qiyamullail is where we attract these youngsters to come in and at the same time they're learning something new and they can be volunteers in terms of cleaning up the place, do charity works like washing the*

toilets... these are privileges that the mosque should be getting and this is work for God, based on sincerity and they're happy to do it. We also have youth camping and the activity involves learning astronomy, bilal course, azan competition and for young ladies we have \_\_\_\_\_. Here, we have a lot of categories of courses, classes- Arabic class is for jemaah. We have yassin group, marhaban group, tahlil group, silat on Saturday night and from all these activities we link them into voluntary works. Of course you have to voice it out openly and to bring people, it's like networking. Like now, we are recruiting them for admin, getting help with e-findings, photo and printing. We encourage them to come and volunteer but in return we give them a testimonial on the work that they've done. Especially, students from \_\_\_\_\_, we have one from \_\_\_\_\_, they're waiting for their intakes to \_\_\_\_\_, they're also doing some part time job here, so upon completion we give them testimonials." (Interviewee 02)

### **Stewardship**

"These are the names of the people who come in for the health scheme, for example here the husband is with kidney problem and the wife has colon problems and they have small children and both cannot work, we will link them with the organization who can help and how they can survive." (Interviewee 02)

### **Diversity**

"They can be from different races, they could be Chinese and being a Muslim and some of them converted from Chinese, they won't understand. When we have English Khutbah, not only encourage the Malays in Singapore, we are encouraging the European Muslims to come because they're many Singaporean Malays who are married to foreigners. So, it's not fair for them if they go to mosque, they conduct everything in Malay. The good thing in Singapore is the things that we do is not only for Malay, we have Chinese, Indians, Bangladesh and others. To ask here is important to cater for the general needs because besides to be conducted in English so that everyone who comes in here will volunteer. If you go to The Al-Kassim mosque, there's a lot of foreigners, they work in Singapore and they don't converse in Bahasa. The khutbah is catered for general Muslims." (Interviewee 02)

### **Welcoming**

"Students come in normal uniform but some mosques they're very strict about it to come in with covered aurah. Why? If everything you follow is so strict people won't come again because it's not simple. To accept the people no matter what they wear, until time they will have the heart to change what they wear. We have to understand it to their level... this is one of the particular mosque for students to enter without wearing their 'tudung' but they have to wear tudung when they perform prayers. This is individual, by the end of the day, the prayer is for God, if we restrict them not to enter the mosque according to their clothes, that means we are already judging. Of course some mosques have such rules because of certain reasons...but we have no right to question. We have Chinese muslims, we have these group who comes here everyday and follow their friends and wait till they finish their prayers, with God's will, she's now wearing tudung and converted into Muslim, it's amazing. We cannot give so much restriction; she does not enter the mosque area, she waits outside." (Interviewee 02)

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the present study indicates that the urban place-making of Singapore, which has brought about the contemporary image of Muslim community place, is successful in making Masjid An-Nahdhah in Bishan, Singapore, a lively urban place. The local community of Bishan and Singapore at large are comfortable and proud of the new image of their community place, Masjid An-Nahdhah, to represent the contemporary Muslim community identity that it manifests a contemporary cultural, social and religious identity in the context of a contemporary urban setting. The new image of masjid conveys better Muslim community identity to the urban place which reflects the contemporary urban character of the community. The creative urban place-making of Masjid An-Nahdhah and Bishan in Singapore has constructed a positive place experience on users.

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