

14-Year Watch

**Islamic Cultural Center of
New York, by Skidmore,
Owings & Merrill; Swanke
Hayden Connell, 1991
By Fred Bernstein**

The Islamic Cultural Center, one of the largest religious buildings in Manhattan, is also one of the most intimidating, thanks to a high metal fence surrounding its site on the northeast corner of Third Avenue and 96th Street. I have visited the building half a dozen times, curious about this apparition – a square, domed mosque, angled sharply from the Manhattan street grid to ensure that worshipers face Mecca, and its accompanying, 15-story-high minaret.

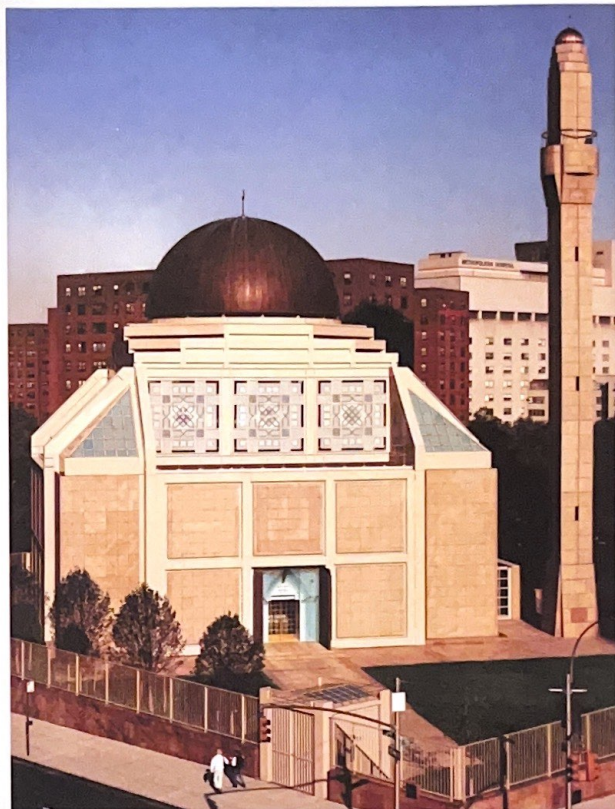
The mosque, completed in 1991, is the work of Michael McCarthy, FAIA, and Mustafa Abadan, AIA, of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The firm was well known to the building's sponsors, the Saudi and Kuwaiti governments, for such Middle Eastern projects as the Hajj pavilion at King Abdul Aziz Airport in Jeddah. In New York, an architecture advisory committee spent years debating how traditional the building ought to be before settling on a domed, Ottoman-style mosque that used the materials and methods of the late 20th century.

Fritted glass panels replace the *mashrabiyas* (carved wooden screens) common to Islamic architecture, and large panels of pinkish granite are hung from concealed steel supports. The building is impressive, yet oddly awkward in places – the angled, greenhouse-like corners below the dome are pedestrian. And so little is done with the lawn (and there is so little connection between indoors and out) that one wonders if a building that filled the entire lot wouldn't have been a better solution for Manhattan.

Although the minaret wasn't in the original scheme, David Rockefeller eventually put up \$1.5 million for that symbolic element, and Swanke Hayden Connell Architects was brought in to design it. Alton Gürsel, Assoc. AIA, a Turkish-American architect, succeeded in creating a classy mini-skyscraper. For much of its height, the minaret – which culminates in a tiny copper dome – appears to be a four-square stack of granite blocks, which gives it a geometric simplicity that the mosque itself lacks. An Islamic school was partly constructed next door to the mosque, but remained unfinished for years. The site was recently leased for 99 years to The Related Companies, which is building a 42-story, 475-unit apartment building there. (Called One Carnegie Hill, it will have a lobby and other amenities, including a dog-grooming room, by David Rockwell.) Space for the Islamic Cultural Center in the building's base will have a separate entrance.

The mosque itself has a new entrance, since security concerns after 9/11 led to the closing of the Third Avenue gate. Instead of walking through giant bronze portals toward the prayer wall facing east, as McCarthy (who died in 2002) intended, one arrives via a basement door on 97th Street. Upstairs, the sanctuary, now entered from one side, is surprisingly clean-lined. After 14 years, the room has picked up none of the expected encrustations – signage, mismatched furniture – that so often diminish religious buildings.

Echoing the geometry of the dome, lighting is provided by dozens



Islamic Cultural Center of New York

of small fixtures hanging from long poles to form a circle. The carpet, boldly geometric and colorful, is a key feature, since there are no pews or seats of any kind. (The Arabic word *masjid*, from which mosque derives, means "the place where one prostrates oneself in worship.")

On Friday, when men are commanded to pray communally, the room can be quite crowded. (Women occupy a separate balcony.) Many of the worshipers drive cabs, which fill the streets around the buildings. Had they designed this 20th-century mosque, there might not have been a minaret, but surely there would have been parking.

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