The Architectural Language of Park51
Understanding Cultural and Historical Connections

Honors Thesis
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PASS WITH DISTINCTION

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TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As thesis advisor for Samantha Sudy,

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Précis

The 2010 proposal of the Park51 Community Center has sparked debate concerning the prospect of building an Islamic community center two blocks from the Ground Zero site in New York City. The debate seems to have polarized into two camps: those who are opposed to the construction of Park51 on the grounds of cultural insensitivity, and others who support its construction for cultural unification. Much of the press attention suggests that the painful memories associated with the September 11th, 2001 attacks have formed barriers of intolerance amongst many Americans in accepting the erection of this Islamic center.¹ For some, Park51 might serve as too strong a reminder of the devastation caused by terrorism. And yet, if Park51 is built in such close proximity to Ground Zero, it could also symbolize an American gesture of tolerance towards Islam, embracing it in an area just blocks from where practitioners of Islam have been accused of acts of religious extremism.²

In the shadow of these debates, what has been largely overlooked is the design of the proposed building – that is, the architecture of Park51 itself. The importance of the design and, in particular, the aesthetics of the façade, which likely will be the most publicly visible characteristic, should not be underestimated. The built environment holds meaning long after controversies dwindle; meanings initially intended by the architect may be interpreted differently by others. Some observers, for example, may have long-standing experiences with certain motifs, materials, colors, or forms, while others may make specific historical associations that allow them to interpret the design in radically different ways. In the case of Park51, the historical, cultural, political, and local contexts of the proposed design raise issues that could be

understood as equally controversial, although such issues were either buried or non-existent in the face of the cultural controversy that surrounded its proposed construction in the fall of 2010. This thesis sets out to explore some of these contexts surrounding the controversial issues dealing with Park51. Should the center be completed, architectural form will ultimately remain as the most lasting, physical reminder of a crucial period in American history. A contextual study of Park51 might reveal that its architecture will hold importance well beyond the rhetoric that initially surrounded its proposed construction.
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Introduction

Too often we want to understand everything. The complexity of thought, the complexity in layers of meaning is overwhelming and we shouldn't shy away from it in architecture. As wondrous as architecture is, it cannot be reduced to a kind of simplification that we have often come to admire. Architecture is complex.

- Daniel Libeskind

Since September 11th, 2001, Ground Zero has emerged as a tension filled site toiling with controversy. This atmosphere emanating from Ground Zero has expanded to encompass the Islamic community center known as Park51. With the center only a few blocks from Ground Zero, not only is the controversy that surrounds Park51 complicated, but the complexity behind its design could serve to establish new perspectives about the center – and also a better understanding of Islamic culture.

On May 5th, 2001, Park51 was publicly presented to Manhattan's Community Board One by the Cordoba Initiative and the American Society for Muslim Advancement.3 Cordoba Initiative chairman Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and his wife, American Society for Muslim Advancement director Daisy Khan, teamed up with Soho Properties CEO Sharif El-Gamal, a major property developer. El-Gamal became a member of Imam Rauf's Islamic congregation in the Tribeca area shortly after September 11th.4 After Soho Properties purchased a mid-nineteenth century warehouse at 45-47 Park Place in New York City's Tribeca neighborhood – once home to the Burlington Coat Factory – Imam Rauf suggested it as the location for a new Islamic mosque.5

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4 The Cordoba Initiative is a multinational, plural faith organization that promotes harmony and better relations between the Islamic culture and the Western world. See Basharat Peer, “Zero Tolerance and Cordoba House,” Financial Times Magazine (13 Aug. 2010), http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/bf1110d8-a5b0-11df-a5b7-00144feabdc0.html.
5 Peer, “Zero Tolerance;”
However, some New Yorkers questioned whether the old warehouse deserved landmark status; they argued that its Italian palazzo style fit within the context of Soho’s Cast-Iron District nearby. The Italian palazzo style—characterized by a Renaissance revival of projecting pediments, repetitious row windows, and symmetrical facades—was a prevalent architectural expression adapted for American retail establishments in the mid-nineteenth century. Another reason why the Park Place warehouse might be preserved was offered by an FDNY firefighter, backed by a Washington conservative group. This group filed a lawsuit arguing that the warehouse might merit some historical importance due to the airplane landing gear parts that fell through its roof on September 11th, 2001. Despite the building’s potential historical significance, New York City’s Landmark Preservation Commission denied it landmark status in August of 2010. This legally cleared the way for demolition of 45-47 Park Place and construction of Park51.

Originally, Soho Properties intended to hold a design competition for Park51. However, due to the controversy surrounding the center, the New York developer recognized the urgent need to provide preliminary visual representations to diffuse public concern. While an official design firm has yet to be decided as of October 2011, a relatively young New York-based firm, SOMA Architects, was chosen to serve as an architecture consultant and asked to offer renderings of Park51 in the fall of 2010. Shortly thereafter an *ENR New York* magazine journalist, Alex Padalka, interviewed SOMA’s principal architect, Michel Abboud, about the Park51 project.

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6 Peer, “Zero Tolerance.”
9 Peer, “Zero Tolerance.”
10 Peer, “Zero Tolerance.”
11 At the time of this writing, in October 2011, construction has yet to begin.
Abboud was questioned as to why his firm was chosen by Soho Properties. During the interview, he responded, “Yes, we’re young, and, yes, we haven’t built as many buildings as Skidmore, Owings and Merrill – but we’ve been involved with the developer for a long time, so they trust us.”12 The handful of renderings presented by SOMA are the only images of the community center circulating the public arena; thus they serve as branding images for Park51 – although SOMA’s particular design is still in progress. SOMA plans on collaborating with a larger, more corporate office for future development phases.13

The initial inspiration for Imam Rauf was to create a community center that embraced religious plurality through interfaith workshops, while working to “bridge the relationship between this country, the United States, and the global Muslim world.”14 Ultimately, Imam Rauf’s intent was to help distinguish between the “violent, extremist [Islamic] minority and the moderate majority that condemns terrorism.”15 In order to voice Imam Rauf’s goals through an architectural language for Park51, SOMA looked to a wooden screen, known as a mashrabiya in Islamic architecture, for design inspiration.16 The mashrabiya dates back to the thirteenth century, developed by Muslim builders living in the Mamluk period of Cairo.17 As of 2011, SOMA is attempting to modernize this concept of the mashrabiya in de vising an abstracted large-scale, latticed façade for the community center, intending to serve the purposes of dealing with structure and defining interior spaces of the center. Abboud explained that his abstract use

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13 Abboud, “Designer.”
15 Peer, “Zero Tolerance.”
16 Abboud, “Designer.”
of the *mashrabiya* in the design intends to convey to the American public what makes Islamic architecture recognizable. However, contemporary interpretations of this historically Islamic feature may create impressions that Abboud cannot predict.

The *mashrabiya* has many other cultural meanings that could affect how people view Park51. For example, it has traditionally been used as a dividing membrane in Islamic architecture to separate residential interiors (usually dominated by women) from public exteriors (typically the domain of men). As a result, the screen may be interpreted as a motif symbolic of the restriction of Muslim women, along with aspects of concealment and secrecy. There may be burdens for progressive American Muslims to use architectural motifs with such heavy historical and contextual meanings when applying them to contemporary design – particularly for such a significant location. On the other hand, SOMA’s proposed design for Park51 may be an appropriate solution to mitigate some of the controversy because the *mashrabiya* is traditionally an ambiguous architectural feature. The underlying ambiguity behind the design may serve to alleviate some of the tension surrounding Park51.

There are to be many programmatic functions within the façade of Park51. According to its website, the proposed design will include recreational spaces such as a pool, basketball court, and fitness gym; a 500-person capacity auditorium; a restaurant; education program spaces; a library; a childcare facility; art studios; and a September 11th public memorial space. Along with all of these amenities, there are plans to designate the bottom two floors of a sub ground basement, roughly ten percent of the complex, as an Islamic prayer hall, or *musalla*. Although

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18 Abboud, “Designer.”
many Muslims who worship in *musallas* often refer to the space as a mosque or *masjid*, a *musalla* serves as a place for Islamic prayer, but technically does not meet the necessities for sanctifying it as an Islamic mosque.\(^\text{21}\) This could add confusion to the controversy already in place about whether Park51 is in fact an Islamic mosque.\(^\text{22}\) There is also speculation over Park51's projected cost of 140 million dollars because investors have not yet been identified.\(^\text{23}\)

Another debate emerged regarding the naming of the community center. The facility was originally titled the “Cordoba House,” alluding to interfaith tolerance demonstrated by Muslims to Christians in the city of Cordoba in Spain.\(^\text{24}\) Yet the reference to Cordoba may also be interpreted as exemplifying the dominance of the Islamic faith over others.\(^\text{25}\) A millennia ago, the city of Cordoba was conquered by *jihad*, or holy war, when Muslims were victorious over the Christian Spaniards. During that time, Islam dominated the city both politically and religiously.\(^\text{26}\) Perhaps, to some, the name “Cordoba House” represented a renewal of this history. After the public unrest arose with respect to the naming of the center, the Cordoba House was renamed the “Park51 Community Center” in reference to the site's address “in order to downplay any religious connotations,” according to *Imam* Rauf.\(^\text{27}\)

The events of September 11th have become intertwined with American consciousness in the twenty-first century, and for that reason the culture clashes and debates over Park51’s proposal remain. However, long after the debate swirling in the wake of September 11th has subsided, New York City may be faced with a dominant, out-of-scale building that many may see as

\(^{21}\) Barnard, “First Look.”
\(^{22}\) Barnard, “First Look.”
\(^{23}\) Barnard, “First Look.”
\(^{24}\) Lusthaus, “Revisiting Ground Zero.”
\(^{25}\) Vega, “Cordoba Initiative Mosque.”
\(^{27}\) Lusthaus, “Revisiting Ground Zero.”
reflective of Islamic oppression in America. A deeper investigation into the design of Park51 is needed to discern between subjective opinions and substantiated interpretations as they relate to general contexts. Could the complexities of Park51’s be read as emblematic of the complexities in Islamic culture – ultimately rendering impossible a single interpretation for the center’s design?

Methodology

This study evolved out of an interest in the controversy surrounding Park51. However, opinions regarding its proposed design seemed to be overshadowed by the cultural debate. This prompted an investigation into multiple meanings based upon exploring the design’s various contexts – physical, social, economic, spiritual, and political. Because its design has yet to be finalized, the study was based on a constantly evolving topic, with research limitations induced by the current, topical nature of Park51. Although little has been written specifically about the proposed design either in the newspaper or online, contexts surrounding Park51’s proposed architectural features were readily available through books, journal articles, or architectural critiques and as such formed the groundwork for my architectural study.

Initially it seemed any proposed Islamic design on such a flash-point site would encourage public rejection. However, upon further examination, contextual accounts have painted Park51 in a different light. This discovery shifted the scope of my investigation from supporting existing connotations to uncovering obscure implications concerning Park51. While culture clashes and debates continually influenced preliminary findings, my emphasis quickly progressed into determining implications from contextual research. In order to generate
supplementary interpretations to the ones already accepted, I established four main contexts: historical, cultural, political, and local. I subdivided these contexts into research topics that included the development of the mashrabiya; the difficulty of defining the veil, the history of Cordoba, Spain; and the juxtaposition between New York's cast-iron neighborhood and the contemporary architectural scene in New York City.

I examined a variety of sources to understand how the design might be interpreted. Secondary sources examining the Mamluk period of the thirteenth century helped to clarify the development of the mashrabiya and its physical demonstration of the customary segregation of women from direct contact with public life. Subsequently, this transitioned into my examination of the Islamic veil. Researching Cordoba, Spain provided insights as to why Park51's initial title "The Cordoba House" may have suggested Islamic dominance from some perspectives, but also how these same connotations might be in direct contrast to the display of Islam's tolerance towards thirteenth century cultures in Cordoba. Exploring the historic cast-iron façade of the building to be replaced provided a better understanding of Park51's impending relationship with Lower Manhattan's physical context. Although this exploration emphasized the juxtaposition between two architectural styles, it helped to reveal Park51's relationship with New York's contemporary architectural Zeitgeist.

Overall, I studied connections between Park51 and other architectural examples—both traditional and modern—not only because they demonstrated a precedent for current interpretations of Park51; but also because they suggested newfound understandings about its architectural language. These understandings have become an integral part of my study because they could serve as catalysts for impending interpretations of Park51—interpretations formed not
from bias, but from tangible evidence. Ultimately, my evaluation serves as a foundation for the theoretical framework behind the discussion of Park51’s architectural language.

Results and Discussion

The Design

Before exploring the contexts surrounding Park51, it is important to first understand the proposed design. The current renderings in circulation were produced by the New York-based firm SOMA Architects. Although there are only a handful of renderings readily available to the public, they have generated considerable discussion. Ed Pilkington, an architecture critic from the Guardian (U.K.), described his initial impression of SOMA’s design as a “lattice of interlocking geometric shapes.” The renderings show that the design will be dominated by a white, abstracted façade, composed of crisscrossing beams creating irregularly-shaped windows. SOMA abstracted an age-old Islamic screen, known as a mashrabiya, in order to serve as a bridge between the conventional and the contemporary. The geometries used in the façade seem to allude to an Arabic design, one that practices a modern recycling of traditional features. By reworking an older architectural form, the modern materials and glass panels comprising the perforated façade

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give the impression that SOMA’s design is making attempts towards current architectural
conventions.\textsuperscript{29} SOMA’s design may also be interpreted as taking a progressive approach
towards traditional architectural features. In this way, the design also fits within a contemporary
architectural context.

However, Park51’s façade serves more than just decorative and stylistic purposes. Abboud explained that SOMA’s design intentions suggest not solely a “decorative interface,”
but that the façade may act as a “free-standing structural exoskeleton,” whose
varying densities allow a “play on notions of privacy and openness.”\textsuperscript{30} In this way, the
façade’s density responds to the building’s interior functions, becoming more porous for public spaces and denser for more private spaces. These transitions of changing densities allow Park51 to be lit with natural light, with the façade casting intricate shadows throughout the interior spaces (See Figure 2).

\textit{Historical, Cultural and Political Contexts}

The main inspiration for SOMA’s design, the \textit{mashrabiya}, has a history as intricate as the shadows it creates, which further contributes to its complexity. For example, there is no evidence to suggest when the first \textit{mashrabiya} was developed. Some of the earliest forms of this architectural element seem to have been fashioned as early as the Mamluk period towards the


\textsuperscript{30} Kennicott, “Enlightened Building.”
end of the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{31} They were originally purposed as mashrabiya-faced alcoves used to conceal cisterns, which held water for the sabil, or public drinking fountain and water dispensary.\textsuperscript{32} Sometimes mashrabiyas were extended from walls to form small enclosures in order to hold water jars.\textsuperscript{33} According to journalist Caroline Williams, who surveyed hundreds of buildings and monuments in Cairo, "the projecting alcoves, where porous earthenware jugs were placed to cool by evaporation, are what give these lattice windows their name: literally, 'drinking-place thing.'"\textsuperscript{34} This concept eventually evolved into lattice grilles covering projecting windows. Perhaps it is this history of the mashrabiya that serves as a base for connecting ideas of seclusion and secrecy with such a prominent architectural feature. Relating this to Park51, a façade reminiscent of a mashrabiya on a cultural center in New York may convey the building is attempting to conceal something from the public. Consequently, it is conceivable to understand how this interpretation of secrecy could lead to biases against the Islamic cultural center.

In addition to functions of concealment, wooden mashrabiyas were commonly seen as a decorative Islamic craft, specifically in Cairo. Wood being a rare commodity, due to the arid landscape, mashrabiyas were highly valued. Despite the scarcity of wood in Cairo, wooden mashrabiyas proved to be very durable in the dry air of the region, some of which have survived over hundreds of years, such as the Mosque of Altinbugha al-Maridani built in 1339 (see Figure 3).\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} Williams and Parker, \textit{Islamic Monuments in Cairo}, 98.
\textsuperscript{33} Williams and Parker, \textit{Islamic Monuments in Cairo}, 61.
\textsuperscript{34} Williams and Parker, \textit{Islamic Monuments in Cairo}, 90.
\textsuperscript{35} Williams and Parker, \textit{Islamic Monuments in Cairo}, 98.
The mashrabiyas — as cherished works of art — brought respect to the craftsmen, who spent considerable time and effort to create the intricate geometrical patterns. Although the basic principle of crafting a mashrabiya is straightforward — turned oval shapes joined together by short turned and ribbed links to construct a lattice form — the intricacies behind the patterns created by these wooden screens ultimately serve as a fundamental display of Islam's nonfigurative philosophy. Many Muslims believe Qur'an teachings suggested that figurative representation went against "Divine Will." According to the Qur'an, reproducing an image of a living being could be considered a form of counterfeiting the work of God, who created all living beings first, according to scripture. It followed that most Islamic regions abandoned figurative art in favor of geometric patterns, which in turn took over the representation of heavenly topics and values in a more arbitrary manner. In this way, Park51's façade could serve as a representation of the constraints on Islamic art, as well as a spiritually correct — in relation to Islam — architectural feature with underlying religious meanings.

Figure 6: Mashrabiya in the Mosque of Altimbugha al-Maridani in Cairo, Egypt

36 Williams and Parker, Islamic Monuments in Cairo, 98.
38 Clévenot and Degeorge, Splendors of Islam, 125.
As a consequence of the transition into abstract art forms, Islam had a strong hand in the conception of mathematical trigonometry. Complex geometric patterns offered endless mathematical combinations and possibilities, which fascinated Muslim artists throughout the Islamic world and from past to present. Muslims artisans favored hexagons. These shapes, based on the natural form of a honeycomb, were commonly used in geometric variations and from which stemmed six-pointed stars, with the simple addition of triangles to the outside edges of hexagons. Well-known Islamic building complexes such as Fatehpur Sikri in India have long demonstrated the use of mixed geometries, such as polygons and stars, in similar patterns that are displayed in Park51's design (See Figure 4). The Islamic view on geometrical patterns was that of perfection achieved through arbitrary forms. Furthermore, abstracted natural forms created perfection as a tribute to "Divine Intelligence." Many of these interpretations on Islamic geometry remain conjectural. Another viewpoint considers that geometric ornamentation served as a flexible art form, downplaying intrinsic significance because it was open to many possible interpretations. By using geometries as a substitute for figurative representations, Muslims were able to avoid suggestive imagery. This same avoidance of suggestion parallels the goal for an arbitrary façade in Park51, in which SOMA is trying to

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39 Clevenot and Degeorge, Splendors of Islam, 148.
42 Clevenot and Degeorge, Splendors of Islam, 148.
43 Clevenot and Degeorge, Splendors of Islam, 148.
appeal to a general aesthetic sensibility, avoiding any ties to politics, contemporary debates, and particular religious connotations.

These geometries also seem to satisfy the need in Islamic culture to cover surfaces. Articulated surfaces on facades, like the one proposed for Park51, produce an ambiguous relationship between surface ornamentation and underlying architectural structure – a dynamic between ornamentation and construction. One way a decorative façade might trick the eye into assuming it is not structural is through contrasts of light and dark, which are incorporated through changing densities in a façade’s overall pattern, a concept also displayed in the façade of Park51. This stark contrast causes a vibrating phenomenon due to the viewer’s eyes oscillating back and forth between light and dark regions in the pattern. The lines created by this contrast form a series of networks in the piece. These networks take this form of art from material reality to a conceptual display of perceptions. Multiple levels of perception are created because, as a closer look is taken, more detail is revealed, drawing a spectator in closer to witness the level of detail. Juxtaposing densities fits within an Islamic philosophy of manipulating perception because perception changes at different distances from a piece. Perhaps this fascination with perception can better serve to explain the Islamic desire for the ornamental covering of surfaces. Because Muslims worked to eliminate any notion of a background through geometric surfaces, it can be justified that Islamic buildings were seen in terms of their respective external envelopes, or facades. Perhaps Park51 mimics this emphasis on an external envelope and in turn better relates to Islamic cultural roots.

44 Clevenot and Degeorge, Splendors of Islam, 168.
45 Clevenot and Degeorge, Splendors of Islam, 147.
46 Clevenot and Degeorge, Splendors of Islam, 185.
Facades in Islamic architecture held significant meaning in the culture. Though many of the remaining *mashrabiya*s of the Mamluk period are retained on mosques, they originated as architectural indicators of wealthy, upper-class residential dwellings. When these residences were converted to mosques, *mashrabiya*s became decorative elements for both secular and sacred spaces and eventually went on to serve similar purposes for many other Middle Eastern buildings.⁴⁷ The *mashrabiya*’s defining feature of protruding upper-story windows and strong, square lines ultimately became a signifying characteristic of many Mamluk buildings, which in turn became a culture-wide architectural phenomenon that can still be witnessed in the Middle East today.⁴⁸ This same decorative feature now characterizes Park51, which – when understood within this historical context – could symbolize a merging of secular and sacred for the New York cultural center.

Although the *mashrabiya* is well known for its aesthetics, it also provided functional purposes. The *mashrabiya* covered projecting alcoves – aiding in the shade of public streets often bordering residential dwellings – reducing the extreme solar heat and glare or acting as a screen to minimize the dust in the air.⁴⁹ Additionally, *mashrabiya*s offered another practical function: concealment and privacy. According to Islamic art historian Oleg Grabar, many buildings in medieval Cairo included a series of shared characteristics, one of which dealt with

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the concept of privacy between the private interior and public exterior.⁵⁰ This privacy was achieved, in part, through the use of mashrabiyas. These perforated wooden screens obstructed a complete view to the interior spaces to the point where a relatively small interior could seem endless from the outside.⁵¹ In this manner, not only did spaces seem larger from the outside, but views to the outside through this intricate screen created the illusion that the rooms were larger from the interior as well.

Because Islamic culture designated the ground floors for men and confined women to the upper floors, mashrabiyas served as partitions throughout interior spaces as well as facades to keep gender groups segregated. This established privacy between the lower men’s quarters and upper women’s harem. Juxtaposing its partition-like qualities, the mashrabiya offered Muslim women freedoms by enclosing protruding balconies overlooking the street – permitting them to witness the public life below without being seen.⁵² As Caroline Williams has argued, women could be “revealed without revealing.”⁵³ This created a privacy barrier not only between private and public, but also between women and men. In this way, the mashrabiya acts similar to a veil, affording women the privacy their gender requires as well as the freedom to witness activities from afar.

The mashrabiya also could be understood as providing visual and physical acceptance of gender inequity in Islamic culture. Through the use of architectural elements, this modification of space separation may thus appear as a form of female subjugation and imprisonment. In this way, the veil-like quality of the mashrabiya could be construed as sheltering Muslim women – hiding them from public view – in a similar way a fabric veil conceals their face and hair. If

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Park51’s architectural language is conveying Islamic historical ties to female oppression, could it then be interpreted as sharing the same implications as the mashrabiya?

From another perspective, SOMA’s proposed façade could be seen as resembling the Islamic veil, or hijab, historically the subject of much speculation in Islam and the rest of the world. Oleg Grabar defines the hijab as “that which separates not only the female from the male, but also the private from the public, the interior from the exterior and the invisible from the visible.” The origins of the veil, which predate Islam, are unknown. However, by the seventh century, Islam adopted local veiling practices. Today, definitions of the veil vary greatly within the American Muslim community; they are constantly revised as history and individual preference evolves, paralleling fashion changes in Western culture. In further comparison to Western attire, such as bridal veils and nuns’ cornettes that are not criticized as openly as their Islamic counterpart, opinions projected onto the veil and those wearing it can seem hypocritical. In this way, perhaps viewing Park51’s façade as a metaphor of female oppression could be just as narrow-minded.

Nevertheless, the viewers’ opinions, as opposed to wearers of the veil, seem to comprise the dominant, more accepted definitions of the garment. Even early interpretations of the veil were

54 Cleenot and Degeorge, Splendors of Islam, 203.
57 Sanders, “Interpreting Veils.”
made primarily by men, who had more authority to interpret the rules of Islam than the women wearing the veils. 58 Although many Muslims are definitive about their opinions regarding the veil, the Qur’an – Islam’s holy manuscript – lacks any clear specifications as to precisely how much of the female body ought to be covered. 59 Today, Muslim societies – predominantly fundamentalists and conservatives – continue to insist that women don the veil; not only is it the norm for many Islamic communities, but some countries require a veil to be worn by women. 60 This requirement might seem oppressive, yet some women feel it provides freedoms from male advances. By concealing their hair – an attributable feminine trait occasionally associated with sexual innuendos – wearers feel it places them on equal footing with men in the workforce, allowing them to be judged based more on behavior rather than appearance. 61

Even so, continuing disagreements regarding the Islamic veil vary greatly within the Muslim community: from women’s opportunities in the work field, to statements of fashion versus piety, to attracting male partners. 62 Despite the lack of reconcilable differences amongst the community, perhaps the inscrutability of the veil is an indication of the cultural complexity of Islam, and that Park51’s reference to the veil further conveys this conflict.

The intricacies of Islam are further displayed in the history of Cordoba, Spain in which Park51’s initial title “Cordoba House” originated. The eighth century, shortly after Islam adopted the veil, marked the beginnings of Muslim construction of the Great Mosque in Cordoba – one of the most significant architectural Islamic achievements in Spain. 63 This construction served and continues to serve as a physical reminder of Islamic conquest over the Christian community.

58 Sanders, “Interpreting Veils.”
59 Smith, Islam in America, 133.
60 Sanders, “Interpreting Veils.”
61 Smith, Islam in America, 134.
62 Smith, Islam in America, 134.
63 Grabar, Islamic Art, 20.
community in Spain. Oleg Grabar, in his book about the origins of Islamic art, clarifies that Muslim occupation in Spain occurred for the most part without physical destruction or imposing change to current and local traditions. As a result, it can be assumed that the vast majority of secular life continued without much adjustment because the art and material culture of the pre-Islamic world continued with the functions, purposes, and associations that it had before. Muslims used what developments existed in the regions they were conquering – instead of relinquishing all sense of local culture – thus amassing a complex set of collective memories, legends, and myths. Islamic art and architecture developed in conjunction with Muslim conquerors’ adaptation to the developed culture of invaded regions. This same process of incorporating local culture could then be related to the program in which Park51 is attempting to merge Islamic tradition into contemporary New York.

In the similar way Park51 is repurposing a coat factory, Muslims altered Cordoba’s church to convert it into a place of worship suitable for the practice of Islam. Muslim authorities expanded the mosque of Cordoba to establish it as a masjid al-jami’, or mosque of collectivity, requiring a vast capacity to house the whole Muslim population in its given city. Therefore, Muslims based their modifications on Cordoba’s increasing population. Likewise, Imam Rauf’s intentions of opening up an Islamic center in New York in order to service the area’s entire Muslim community parallels the justification for expansion made by Muslims in Cordoba.

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64 Grabar, Islamic Art, 43.
65 Grabar, Islamic Art, 44.
66 Grabar, Islamic Art, 112.
The mosque of Cordoba was seen by the local Islamic community as a constantly changing entity that evolved to the needs of an expanding and contracting population, rather than a finalized reflection of an ideal composition. Until Islamic alterations ceased in the late tenth century, all additions made to the mosque of Cordoba followed the same architectural arrangement of columns and arches established in the building before Muslim rule, supporting ideas of reuse and preservation of stylistic unity in the mosque. This confirms that the mosque of Cordoba was not intentionally altered to represent a statement of control during Muslim rule. Instead, Cordoba can be recognized as a conscious attempt made by Islam at self-definition and an effort to maintain its identity within the parameters of an existing indigenous culture.

Today, Muslims are facing a comparable situation in America. After September 11th, Muslims were forced out of anonymity and into the spotlight as terrorism brought about a new focus on Islam. Author Jane Smith, in *Islam in America* describes this paradigm shift: “the essentially public nature of Islam is no longer hidden, but is publicly affirmed.” Polls as recent as 2008 prove that many Americans show a continued discomfort towards the presence of

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69 Juxtaposing the arguments made earlier in his book, Grabar does agree that some of the lavish decorations in the mosque of Cordoba could be suggested as images of domination and victory: “for it was the cultural weakness of Christian Spain and a number of accidents in early Islamic history that transformed this faraway province into a major Muslim center;” Grabar, *Islamic Art*, 113.
70 Sanders, “Interpreting Veils.”
Muslims in America.\textsuperscript{72} Propaganda on the internet continues to foster a negative image of Islam. American Muslim mosques and buildings have even been targeted by crime and vandalism since the aftermath of September 11\textsuperscript{th}.\textsuperscript{73} Because of this, Muslim communities are under intense scrutiny and aware of the looming constraints that can come with the spotlight; meanwhile, the restructuring of their cultural identity is causing a wave of conservative approaches.\textsuperscript{74} The increase in anti-Muslim prejudice—also known as \textit{Islamophobia}, an English term coined in the early twenty-first century—has encouraged this paradigm shift and in turn has reinvigorated the need of religious awareness and responsibility.\textsuperscript{75}

Many American Muslims agree with \textit{Imam} Rauf in that they strongly disavow extremist ways, "(that) true Islam has been hijacked by those who do violence in the name of the faith."\textsuperscript{76} In order to rectify the negative image of Islam spurred by the September 11\textsuperscript{th} terrorist attacks, members of Muslim communities have to be honest about internal differences that could instigate additional strain and tension. At the same time, exploiting connections that promote clarity and commonality work in favor of the Islamic community by sustaining a sense of unity at a time when their culture is suffering constant judgment. Encouraged by the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Muslim community is framing itself as a "reasonable religious community working for the betterment of American society" to combat anti-Muslim prejudice.\textsuperscript{77} Muslims are increasingly supporting interfaith dialogue initiatives in hopes of creating and solidifying bonds with other religious communities, while working to promote coexistence, tolerance, and understanding. Some mosques are holding annual open-houses to aid in the education of non-

\textsuperscript{72} Smith, \textit{Islam in America}, 188.  
\textsuperscript{73} Smith, \textit{Islam in America}, 189.  
\textsuperscript{74} Sanders, "Interpreting Veils."  
\textsuperscript{75} Smith, \textit{Islam in America}, 193.  
\textsuperscript{76} Smith, \textit{Islam in America}, 188, 193.  
\textsuperscript{77} Smith, \textit{Islam in America}, 192.
Muslims about Islamic culture and religion. Because America is known as a land of religious freedom, Muslims recognize the opportunity for a true, redefined Islam to be realized. Furthermore, a search for an American UMMA, defined as the community of all of those confirmed Islam, is high on the Muslim community’s agenda. Muslims are looking for a viable future in the American context, in which Park51 is attempting to fulfill by establishing an abstraction of traditional Islamic architecture within the local context of New York.

Local Architectural Contexts

Since the nineteenth century, metal-faced and metal-framed structures have characterized the city of New York. This public allure of exploiting new uses for metal resulted from the unique dynamics of the city itself. In the mid-1850’s, the United States was accepting hundreds of thousands of immigrants annually, many of whom traveled across the water to Manhattan, which is still New York’s most densely-populated borough to date. The influx of workers created a surge in productivity in an area already known as “the principal western terminus of transatlantic traffic.” This exponential increase in immigrant workers provided cheap labor, which helped to define Manhattan as the top-manufacturing powerhouse in the country. Benefiting from the growth of commerce along the city’s waterfront, the iron industry boomed in response to New York’s need for factories, specifically along the East and Hudson River waterfronts, where ironworks expanded not only their buildings, but employment rolls as well.

78 Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, A History of Islam in America: from the New World to the New World Order (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 362.  
79 Smith, Islam in America, 131.  
80 Smith, Islam in America, 202.  
81 Smith, Islam in America, 194.  
82 Ric Burns, James Sanders, and Lisa Ades, New York: An Illustrated History (Knopf, 2003), 137.  
83 Burns, Sanders, and Ades, New York, 137.  
84 Burns, Sanders, and Ades, New York, 136.
Aiding in the expanding demand for iron, James Bogardus, an American inventor, developed a method for the mass production of cast-iron buildings and began to popularize the aesthetic of cast-iron facades on factory warehouses.\textsuperscript{85} This method, patented in the mid-nineteenth century, involved a prefabrication process that allowed structural elements such as columns, beams, and panels to be shipped to construction sites for easy and swift installation. Cast-iron frames were not concealed, but celebrated through grid-like facades to reveal a sense of functionalism. However, the simplicity of cast-iron was obscured in favor of emulating Renaissance forms. Inspired by Renaissance architecture, cast-iron architecture was shaped to resemble classical elements. Used as a tool for enticing New York's public to accept the materialistic shift from brick to cast-iron construction, cast-iron facades were covered through an illusory use of paint and crushed stone to imitate rusticated masonry in order to ground the new material in tradition.\textsuperscript{86} This innovative construction process also led to drawbacks. Rapid construction leading to a higher concentration of commercial businesses in an increasingly crowded borough with escalating property prices drove many large industries north of Manhattan or across the East River.\textsuperscript{87}

Despite the fact that many of the big manufacturers eventually abandoned their warehouses after relocating to other parts of New York City, Soho still has the greatest concentration of cast-

\textsuperscript{85} Reynolds, \textit{The Architecture of New York City}, 128.
\textsuperscript{86} Reynolds, \textit{The Architecture of New York City}, 131.
\textsuperscript{87} Burns, Sanders, and Ades, \textit{New York}, 137.
iron buildings in the world." Park Place is located south of Soho in the neighborhood known as Tribeca. Originally an area dominated by commerce due to its location by New York City’s waterfront, Tribeca’s commercial centers were soon abandoned towards the second half of the nineteenth century – and shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War – as New Yorkers made their way uptown. By the 1960s, local artists saw advantages in the “large, inexpensive, and unobstructed spaces” that could be used to house their work. Today, Tribeca is a mixed-use neighborhood; although some buildings remain as existing factories, some have been converted into facilities with gallery spaces below and high-end residential lofts above.

Because Tribeca is situated just south of Soho, Park51 can be seen not only in Tribeca’s context of converted warehouses, but also in this overall context of the cast-iron tradition in Lower Manhattan. However, if the façade of Park51 seems designed in a disregard to this historical architecture, could this mean it is also choosing to ignore this context?

Perhaps Park51 is sacrificing the acknowledgment of one context in favor of addressing another: Manhattan’s contemporary architectural scene. Manhattan buildings such as SANAA’s New Contemporary Art Museum; Norman Foster’s Sperone Westwater Gallery; Jean Nouvel’s Apartment Building in Chelsea; Renzo Piano’s New York Times Building, Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill’s One World Trade Center; and Thom Mayne’s 41 Cooper Square are defining New York City’s cutting edge trends. The strategies and values represented in these buildings are markedly similar to the ones displayed through Park51’s design language. In connecting Park51 to all six Manhattan buildings considered above – besides the obvious physical similarities – a

88 Soho is an acronym for South of Houston Street. See Sanna Feirstein, Naming New York: Manhattan Places and How They Got Their Names (New York University Press, 2001), 68.
89 Tribeca, also stylized TriBeCa, became an acronym for the Triangle Below Canal street in the mid-1970’s; Feirstein, Naming New York, 42.
90 Burns, Sanders, and Ades, New York, 145.
91 Feirstein, Naming New York, 43.
92 Feirstein, Naming New York, 43.
sense of pluralism remains as an underlying attribute that connects all of these projects together. In turn, this principle of reiterating complexities behind multiple views and interpretations can serve as a defining characteristic of Manhattan’s contemporary Zeitgeist, in which Park51 and the others belong.

Contemporary architects seem to be addressing the fact that New York City is a collaboration of cultures – a collection of differences – and in turn celebrate this characteristic by embracing innovation. This innovation includes the manipulation of natural light to create translucent façades both for aesthetic reasons and practical efficiencies. Yet the architecture also exudes the spirit of current times, which embraces ambiguity through innovation. By trying to accomplish something new, it could be argued that Park51 is displaying a similar design language in order to fit in with the Zeitgeist of contemporary architecture in Manhattan.

Interpreting the Design

So what does this all mean in terms of deciphering Park51’s proposed design? A contextual investigation demonstrates that deeper understandings of Park51 can be formed. It is clear that the complex histories of Islam’s mashrabiya and the veil have a profound impact on concluding that the design language of Park51, in acting as a metaphor to these strong Islamic symbols, is concurrently multifaceted in its interpretations. In relation to both its initial naming as “The Cordoba House,” as well as the impacts of September 11th on American Muslims, Park51 can be interpreted as part of an ethos movement to redefine Islam’s cultural identity through the support of new interfaith dialogues. In working towards a more concrete Islamic identity, Park51 also addresses the need to solidify the relationship between the Muslim world and America – at the same time conforming to a regional architectural Zeitgeist within New York City. Park51’s
design is working to mediate two contexts, the old and new, by fitting in to the contemporary context of Manhattan, while at the same time displaying a sense of Islamic tradition.

The idea that Park51’s design might seem insensitive may have nothing to do with the architecture at all, but may be tied more closely to the moral and cultural aspects of what the center represents rather than its physical depiction – demonstrating the difficulty for a design to represent a healing process. Perhaps, in this case, the design of Park51 may be too jarring to be seen as an effort to memorialize victims of September 11th, with its references to a mashrabiya and non-representational Islamic design. Or perhaps SOMA Architects might have intentionally seen their modem representation of the mashrabiya as a progression away from its historical context; a motif that works to discard what might have been formerly regarded as a discriminating symbol. Furthermore, the opposition to Park51’s design might be seen as an affront to an enlightened Islamic-American community to whom a mashrabiya represents an age-old Islamic practice to which they no longer subscribe. In this way, investigating the proposed design of Park51 reveals juxtapositions that portray its credible insensitivities, but at the same time uncovers obscure corroboration as to its sympathetic responsiveness through an ambiguous design.

Conclusion

Until now, it seems as if the local debate over Park51 has centered around its location, in close proximity to the World Trade Center, and what that means to those who were affected by the events of September 11th. With the completion of the September 11th Memorial, could this alter the direction of the controversy surrounding Park51 – either enlivening the debate or putting
It to rest? This investigation has established a framework for understanding the importance of examining meaning in architecture — ultimately providing direction for further research.

This was a study of potential interpretations rather than a declaration of meaning. Park51 is a complex project; its complexity lends itself to being perceived in multiple and conflicting ways. Perhaps Park51’s complexity even reflects the diversity and complexity of Muslims in America. The analysis of architecture will always be a potentially complex endeavor because architecture in itself is a complex art form — a composition of various elements. The option of arbitrary and complex choices in architecture makes it inherently difficult to unravel; numerous interpretations of Park51 reveal the impossibility of understanding all aspects of the design. Interpretations, no matter how substantiated, are conjectures determined by past experiences and may be deeply rooted in cultural biases. Although they can be based on factual histories, interpretations are still what we construe. On the other hand, looking into contexts that surround architectural designs help give meaning to open understandings. Exploring historical and current contexts reveal the multi-layered way architectural form and patterns can be understood. If historical and cultural contexts are employed as a substitute for common prejudices, interpretations formed in this way will likely serve as more intellectually validated comprehensions of our world.

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93 The memorial opened to the public September 11th, 2011, on the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks.
Appendix

Six Manhattan Works

1. New Contemporary Art Museum (2007), SANAA, Manhattan: Bowery

The New Contemporary Art Museum’s façade plays a key part in its proposed role to represent a light and clean structure for Manhattan’s cityscape. Natural light reflects into interior offices through an anodized aluminum mesh facade, which covers the museum’s vertical white façade. Steel perimeter walls carry the load of the building, leaving the interior spaces free of column supports. The conceptual stacking of boxes produced in this design was an abstract take on Manhattan’s local context of rectilinear street blocks and buildings in an attempt to house new contemporary art to New York’s public.

Figure 9: New Contemporary Art Museum, SANAA

2. Sperone Westwater Gallery (2010), Norman Foster, Manhattan: Bowery

With an adjustable moving gallery space as the centerpiece to this project, Sperone Westwater Gallery generates spatial and structural innovations with an elevator gallery in order to reinvent how the public engages with art in a gallery setting. Furthermore, its glass façade provides insulation from the negative effects of outside temperatures and city acoustics, while at the same time embracing a sense of verticality that relates to the urban context of Manhattan.

Figure 10: Sperone Westwater Gallery, Norman Foster

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3. Apartment Building (2009), Jean Nouvel, Manhattan: Chelsea

Jean Nouvel – who served as inspiration according to El-Gamal Abboud – believes that architecture was made to inform the public of conflicts that shape the urban environment, not conceal them. His apartment complex’s ragged edges suggest an intention to tear down the boundary between public street life and private interiors of the building. As glittering glass wraps around the curved façade of a blackened, brick building, this apartment building attempts to fulfill deeper roles than purely aesthetics or function.


The New York Times Building’s roof has been described as lace-like due to the curtain wall that extends up in a parapet fashion. However, its second façade of ceramic tubes, which reduces the amount of direct sunlight that enters interior spaces, an innovation unmatched by any other building in the United States. As the first of its kind, it changes color throughout the day, producing a dramatic architectural display particularly at night. While creating ties between street and sky, it works to satisfy as an architectural space for a variety of functions and to serve as an appropriate addition to New York City’s skyline.

5. One World Trade Center (in construction as of 2011), Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, Manhattan: Tribeca

Formerly known as the Freedom Tower, One World Trade Center was renamed by the Port Authority in order to downplay its manifested role as a civic symbol. However, with a requisite height of 1,776 feet, in relation to the Declaration of Independence’s signing, 1WTC will become the tallest building within the United States; and is intended to serve as a symbol of resolution from the terrorist attacks. While altering geometric perceptions, 1WTC’s façade of prismatic glass will refract light throughout the lower floors in an attempt at effortless transparency, as opposed to bunker-like qualities of solidity, even though safety systems far exceed building code requirements in order to address the controversy that surrounded the structural safety of the Twin Towers. Overall, 1WTC’s main objective responds to a need of filling the void left by terrorist attacks in New York City’s skyline.

6. 41 Cooper Square (2009), Thom Mayne, Manhattan: Cooper Square

The local community originally opposed 41 Cooper Square’s façade, but soon embraced its airy, permeable, and transparent qualities induced by its glass and perforated metal exterior as it morphs and changes according to natural light. Thom Mayne confessed to addressing the contexts surrounding 41 Cooper Square in favor of reaching beyond the building’s physical site: “It’s not a one-idea building. The easy ones are just one big idea – you look at it and get it. This building is much more complicated.” This complexity in turn helps 41 Cooper Square better relate to the spirit of New York as a recognition of cultural differences.

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Glossary

Hijab—an Arabic word meaning to ‘cover’ or ‘screen’

Imam—the Arabic word for a priest or religious leader of an Islamic mosque

Islamophobia—fear or hatred of Muslims or pertaining to Islamic culture, often out of ignorance

Jaliscreen—a perforated stone screen, commonly found in India

Jihad—the Arabic word for ‘holy war’

Mashrabiya—the Arabic word for ‘wooden screens’: traditionally used in Islamic culture, which its origins are difficult to define

Masjid—the Arabic word for ‘mosque’

Masjid al-jami’—the Arabic word for ‘mosque of collectivity’

Musalla—the Arabic word for an Islamic ‘prayer hall’

Sabil—the Arabic word for ‘public drinking fountain’ or ‘water dispensary’

Zeitgeist—the spirit of a particular time
References Cited


Image Credits


Figure 1: "Park51 Community Center." SOMA Architects. <http://www.soma-architects.com/#754873/Park51-Community-Center>.

Figure 2: "Park51 Community Center." SOMA Architects. <http://www.soma-architects.com/#754873/Park51-Community-Center>.

Figure 3: "Mashrabiya screen Mosque of Altinbugha al Maridani (1340)." Flikr. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/helenromberg/3815977933/>.

Figure 4: "Marble Screen, Fatehpur Sikri." Flikr. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/73416633@N00/2411228969/>.


Figure 12: The New York Times Building. <http://newyorktimesbuilding.com/>

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