

## MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE

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**ABSTRACT:** *Despite a considerable amount of research into the pivotal role of masjid in urban place as an image and identity of a community, there remains a divergence between the available space/place and users' needs. The predominant architectural and planning perspective is more focused on the architectural design and planning of masjid rather than the users. In order to deliver better community places appropriate to the needs of contemporary users it is imperative to gain the perspective of users. The purpose of this research was to explore and understand the phenomenon: physical and psychological values that users associate with masjid as a community place in giving character/identity to the community place, which gives identity to the urban place. An exploratory qualitative case study design was used and data were collected by semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed according to content analysis. It was found that the Singapore Muslim community is proud of the new image of their new masjid to the effect that it projects or 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 as a community place. The new image of masjid disseminates better Muslim community identity to the urban place which reflects the contemporary urban character of the community.*

**Keywords:** *masjid, community place, community identity, religion identity, place identity, perceptions, meaning*

### Introduction

Place-based theories and research on sense of place, place attachment, and place identity have assembled a critical contribution to the understanding of human being relationships to place. Images of cities are the socio-cognitive product of individuals and social groups. They are inter-subjective, can be evaluated and contain emotional and meaning-related aspects. A city image is constituted by three different components; identity (the distinctiveness of a place, the qualities that distinguish it from any other

## MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE

place), structure (the mental representation, spatially outlined) and meaning (subjective feelings attached to physically distinctive locales). According to Relph (1978), '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.

Within the urban spaces, religious places can be included as significant places. For a Muslim community the significant religious place which is an icon to the community is the *masjid*. It is the purpose of this paper to present the preliminary findings of Muslim community's significant place and icon; the *masjid*, and its role in fostering Muslim community identity to the urban place.

### The Issue

*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 discusses 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 (Abdelhamid, 2001; Abu, et al, nd; Gulzar, 1998; Roberson, 2004, Mohamad Tajuddin, 2000). And ever since, many Muslim countries are facing an architectural crisis with the coming of latest technological advances and globalization of architectural design in designing *masjid*.

A Pakistani-Canadian architect, Syed Gulzar Haidar, in his design of Islamic Society of North America headquarters in Plainfield, Indiana (including a *masjid*) sought to convey a mystical dimension of Islam using space and forms rather than familiar architectural designs and motifs. The center devoids of iconic references to traditional Islamic architecture, hoping to communicate with the inner spirit of Islamic contemplation and seeking to express its Islamic identity through new forms and symbols. He argued that "....Islamic architecture should be understandable to all.....to indigenous Muslims it should represent a linkage with Muslims from other parts of the world and should

underscore the universality and unity of Islam. To the new Muslims this architecture should invoke confidence in their new belief. To non-Muslims, it should take the form of clearly identifiable buildings which are inviting and open, or at least not secretive, closed or forbidding." (Abdelhamid, 2001; Gulzar, 1996, Omar, nd). Zahir-ud Deen Khwaja (1978) said, "we have to aim at a modern interpretation of the basic spirit of Islamic architecture, reflecting the principles which were adopted by the Muslim builders rather than the outer forms and symbols...the spirit, rather than the substance."

In 2003 the government of Singapore in consultation with representatives of all the major faiths and the general public, adopted a Declaration on Religious Harmony to affirm the values seen as necessary for maintaining good relations between the country's religious communities. This is followed by strains in racial harmony in the country following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States of America and the arrest of members of the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network in Singapore in December 2001. The declaration is a basis for Singaporeans to reflect on religious harmony.

The effect of the said strains has also played a significant impact on the physical image of religious buildings in Singapore. The physical architecture avoids connotation of religious in nature and more universal. For instance, some users commented on the new image of Assyafaah's design which won an Architecture Plus Award in 2004 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."

However, there remains a divergence between researches on available place and understanding users' psychological needs. Most architectural researches are short of any considerable analysis of behavior and experiences of the people who uses and visit these places. Hence, recognizing the mentioned issues, this paper focuses on the aspiration of contemporary mosque as a community place. It aims to explore users'

## MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE

perceptions of the meaning, physical and psychological values of a contemporary *masjid* as the Muslim community place, which gives identity to the urban place.

### Idea of a Community

"People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning and a referent of their identity" (Cohen, 1985). According to Azim (2003) we could construct communities in two ways. The place as well as the design may be conserved or rehabilitated, or new structures which reconsider a heritage may be innovated.

The idea of 'community' can be termed in various ways and very flexible. For the purpose of this paper, 'community' has been looked into three different ways: place, interest and communion (Willmott, 1986; Crow and Allen, 1995).

1. Community of a place can be seen where people have something in common, and this shared element is understood geographically. Another way of naming this as 'locality'.
2. Community of an interest where people share a common characteristic other than place. They are linked together by factors such as religious belief, occupation or ethnic origin,
3. Community of a communion where sense of attachment to a place, group or idea or where there is a 'spirit of community'.

Surah Al-Baqarah : 62 rules out the concept of community for any given group; the Muslims together with other religious groups.

*Those who believe [in the Qur'an], and those who follow the Jewish [scriptures], and the Christians, and Sabians – whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right – shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret*

Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah(2): 62

The Islamic concept of harmonious community living between Muslims and non-Muslims can be traced to the first Islamic government of Medina. Prophet Muhammad wrote and disseminated Medina Charter to encourage cooperation and solidarity

among Muslims, Christians, Jews and other citizen of the city state of Medina in 622 A.D. The charter which was put in writing ensured complete freedom, including the freedom of worship, equality and justice for all. The charter consists of 47 clauses, disseminated for a plural society, giving equal rights and responsibilities to every citizen or *ummah* of Medina. According to the charter, not only did the Prophet vowed to turn the Ansar and Muhajirin into "an *ummah* distinct from all other people of the world", but he also referred to the Jewish clans who allied themselves to him, as "an *ummah* along with the Believers", even though each continued to practice its own faith. The accommodative attitude displayed by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), his successors and their followers, towards non-Muslims living in their midst was so remarkable that Muslim societies came to be regarded as outstanding models of inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony and amity.

And verse 13, Surah Al-Hujurat translated thus, "O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise one another). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is he who is most righteous of you".

### Place and Identity

How do we describe an identity? Could it be from the physical? Or could it be from how people feel i.e. the psychology of users?

Ted Relph's work on Place and Placelessness has been credited as the pioneering work in the phenomenology of place. "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).

On the other hand, Harries (nd) describes 'place' as "to name some bounded part of space, occupied by persons and things, where our understanding of these boundaries, and therefore of what we want to call a place will change with our concerns and

*MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE*

interests." He explains that every place has relatively established identity, and those who would use such a place must understand the place identity. "The identity can be read off facts related to the site structure and landscape, demography, and typology, economic, social, and political issues" (Harries, nd).

Sime (1995) 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). 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.

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) 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) 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) 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.

Breakwell (1988) recommends that identity develops through a person's accommodation, assimilation and evaluation of the social world. Four principles govern the selection of information for a person to accommodate, assimilate and evaluate the social world. They are distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

The first principle of identity is the desire to maintain uniqueness. A community has certain aspirations about how its identity should be reflected in the built environment. The most obvious impression of a community is attributed to its physical characteristics. Hummon (1986) defines a place identity as "an interpretation of the self that uses place – significant, symbolic locale – as a sign or locus of identity". He considers places as environmental contexts with real consequences for people and lays a great deal of stress on ties between the place and the people. While Proshansky (1978) discussed place identity refers to conscious and unconscious ties between the community and its residents as these develop over time. Steele (1981) states that "a setting that has some consistent themes to its forms, materials, items, arrangements and symbolism will be more likely to produce positive place experience" and thus gives a sense of identity.

Breakwell (1986) recommends that an aspiration to preserve continuity of the self-concept is the second principle of identity. It is defined as continuity over time and situation between past and present self-concepts. Czikszenmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Graumann (1983), Korpela (1989), Giuliani (1991) and Lalli (1992) show that places act as referents to past selves and actions and that for some people, maintenance of a link with that place provides a sense of continuity to their identity. The term 'place-referent continuity' refers to how a physical environment is conceptualized as a reference for past action and experience.

The third principle of identity is self-esteem; an optimistic belief of oneself or the cluster with which one associates. That is a person's feeling of worth or social value. Korpela (1989) suggests that preferred environments can support self-esteem, in which the positive qualities of the place can boost one's self-esteem.

Finally, the fourth principle of identity is self-efficacy; one's belief in their capabilities to effectively perform a responsibility. Leibkind (1992) regards self-efficacy as important for psychological well-being. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) suggest that an environment that facilitates one's daily activities makes a person feels self-efficacious. According to Lynch (1972), and Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff (1983), place identity is important for the human well-being.

Within environmental psychological literature, there has been a baffling compilation of terms used to define a range of relationships between the physical environment

and identity. There has been no such apparent theory on the relationship between place and identity despite studies using the concepts of place identity (e.g. Lalli, 1992; Proshansky et al, 1983) and place attachment (Giuliani, 1991; Altman & Low, 1992) within the field of environmental psychology.

According to Twigger-Ross (1996), place has been related to identity in two modes; place identifications and place identity (a construct promoted by Proshansky et al, 1983, 1987). Place identification refers to a person's expressed identification with a place. Place identification would express membership of a group of people who are defined by location.

Place identity as promoted by Proshansky et al. (1983, 1987) is another mode of identity comparable to social identity that describes the person's socialization with the physical world. Place identity may be conceived as 'a substructure of self-identity which consists of...cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives' (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 59). Hence, the processes operating between place and identity are similar between groups and identity. At the core of the physical world, cognitions is 'the environmental past' of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces, and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person's biological, psychological, social and cultural needs.' (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 59) Satisfaction is a dimension of place belongingness or attachment. Much has been written about place attachment or to which extend individual values or identifies with a particular place (Altman & Low, 1992).

Steele (1981) another aspect of identity is the difference in perception of the place by the residents and those visiting it. The visitors are normally restricted to public places so for them visual image may be more important. The residents, on the other hand, have a deeper sense of belonging to the place therefore aspects other than image are significant for them. We can shape settings so that they will have a strong spirit of place through their sharp identity, human vitality, rich symbolic messages that stimulate fantasies and memories, structures that shape people's experiences in certain patterns or sequences, and special opportunities.

Al-Hathloul (1996) points out that the traditional city developed incrementally on the basis of certain "rules of conduct" backed by a body of legal theory, which in turn was based on themes and principles derived from religious and cultural ideals. Hence there



was strong reliance on socio-religious beliefs that ensured wider acceptance of rules and provided continuity of tradition. The imposition of western model of master plan along with zoning regulations was in total disregard to the long established traditions. The blind application of western approach has created a contemporary city devoid of traditions, styles and identity.

Urban populations are going through a phase of transition from a traditional to a modern way of life. People who succeed from diverse sub-cultures are looking for new identity in an urban setting. Hasan-Uddin (2002) suggested that in the contemporary world, especially where Muslims are minority, there has been an emergence of "pan-Islamic model". A standard mosque architectural vocabulary i.e the use of domes and minaret is increasingly read everywhere by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as Muslim places of worship. The normative architectural vocabulary is often used in eclectic ways for which the use is insignificant solutions to design but impose challenges to maintain them. The traditional mosque icons are mainly used for the purpose of symbolic readability.

According to Abu H. Imamuddin (nd), urban populations "require a common language to communicate and a common place to interact within the community. Here religion provides the common language and the mosque is the common place. The community mosque is, therefore, much more than a place of worship. In the process of religious activities the community feelings, goals, desires and aspirations are expressed which eventually help to shape the community by specifying the parameter of socio-religious control and order and by defining the code of conduct and behaviour.....the growth and the physical transformation of the community mosque have a dynamic relationship with the growth pattern and development of the community."

Korpela (1989) argues on the basis of empirical findings that place identity is part of the individual's on-going processes of emotion- and self-regulation that may most involve one's sense of self. In other words, place identity can help to provide a sense of stability and continuity, it helps to construct and preserve one's identity.

### **Masjid as a Community Place and Community Identity**

In the Islamic culture, the *masjid* is an integrated and active element in shaping and maintaining the Muslim society. The *masjid* played a strong political and social role in

## MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE

the early Islamic community. For more than fourteen centuries, the *masjid* has been an object of landmarks, social space in urban spatial context. There is an increase in the emphasis on the sanctity of the mosque and all mosques are commonly regarded as bayt-Allah or 'House of God'.

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.

There are two main reasons (truths) for the need of *masjid* as a community place for the Muslim ummah (Spahic, 2002). As stated by Spahic Omer (2002), "...first, the very nature of man which is destined to deify its Creator and Lord never separating from His will and words of guidance; and second, man's insatiable tendency towards socializing and interacting so as to procure benefits and ward off injuries for the perfection of his welfare in this world and the next." God created men as social beings, from one origin, with the same mission and destination. Men were then divided into nations and tribes so that we learn from each other, explore the universe and make human existence meaningful. Hence, the need for the *masjid* where men could worship collectively and perform other ibadah activities was 'as old as man on earth' (Spahic, 2002). "...Islam, the only religion before Allah, be He exalted, and portrayed as a natural, rational and pragmatic worldview, neither disregards nor tries to annul any aspect of these two truths. Rather, it views the whole thing in the same way as it is cherishing the qualities and actually recognizing them as man's major asset for his rightly balanced spiritual and material progress....Islam carefully strikes a balance between its precepts and values meant for the personal and family realm, on the one hand, and such as meant for the whole society (human-kind), on the other." (Spahic, 2002)

A *masjid* is an icon in a 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. *Masjid* has become the nucleus of the Muslim believers' existence where it has been a designated place for collective worship (*'ibadah*) and coordination of various affairs. 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.

The most sacred and iconic *masjid* to the world of Muslim communities, with their historical role and position, are the Masjid al-Haram and Masjid al-Aqsa. They were the first and second *masjid* built ever since the first prophet, Adam, had descended on earth, as reported by one hadith (the Prophet's tradition) by Abu Dharr:

"Which masjid was built first on earth?" the Prophet (peace be upon him), answered: "The Masjid al-Haram." Then I asked: "And which one thereafter?" He said: "The Masjid al-Aqsa.". Then I asked: "What was the interval separating the two?" The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: "Forty years."

Al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 3172

As explained by Spahic Omer (2002), 'Mosques are constructed by people and for people. Thus, at any period of time, their performances, as well as the magnitude of their impact on reality, are determined by people themselves. The way in which the mosque functions is, as a matter of fact, the true reflection of their overall conduct. The more they regard it as the House of their Creator and Provider, plus the meeting site for His genuine servants, the more prominent and esteemed its position in society is; the more they are attached to the normative teachings of Islam in carrying out their daily practices, the larger the sway it holds over their lives. In short, the functionality of the mosque is distinctly proportionate to the fidelity and uprightness of those who fall heir to the onus of its utilization and management.' As Allah says:

MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A  
CONTEMPORARY IMAGE

*"remember We made the House a place of assembly for men and a place of safety; and take ye the Station of Abraham as a place of prayer; and We covenanted with Abraham and Isma'il, that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer)."*

Al-Baqarah: 125

The following Qur'anic verses extensively summarize the concept of managing the mission of *masjid* where the keyword is 'amara, ya'muru meaning to establish and enliven the *masjid* for the purpose to attain divine:

*"It is not for such join gods with Allah, to maintain the mosques of Allah while they witness against their own souls to infidelity. The works of such bear no fruit: in Fire shall they dwell. The mosques of Allah shall be visited and maintained by such as believe in Allah and the Last Day, establish regular prayers, and pay Zakat, and fear none (at all) except Allah. It is they who are expected to be on true guidance."*

Al-Tawbah: 17-18

According to Relph (1978), '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.

Obviously the *masjid* is to serve as the icon of the Muslim *ummah*'s religious and social life, with its physical prominence as a landmark, which has been, ever since the descendent of the Prophet Adam a.s. onto earth. As described by Harries (nd) a place would need to be understood by users of its elements and use for the place to

have a place identity. Same goes with a *masjid*, when the community understands its elements and use then a *masjid* is a community place and community identity which then will develop as an identity to the local place.

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. Throughout history and until present day, *masjid* has developed distinctive architectural icons such as "hypostyle", the "four-iwan" or Iranian gateway, the "domed central space", the "pavilion" and the "three-domed".

Zahir-ud Deen Khwaja (1978) emphasizes "that it would be unfair to assume that the architecture of the Muslims merely consisted of the dome, the pointed arch, the minaret or other similar features. Although the Muslims used these forms freely and with telling effect, they were no more than solutions to architectural problems which faced them at the time. A study of their past work would reveal flexibility in the approach of the Muslims in treating the same subject indifferent countries, and sometimes even in the same country." Mohamed Tajuddin (2006) describes "the present mosque vocabulary of Middle Eastern eclecticism presents the idea of Islam as a regressive and dogmatic belief system", "a serious case of Middle Eastern inferiority complex."

In Singapore the image of a typical traditional *masjid* is reducing in numbers. The development of new *masjid*, designed with modern styles, which leaves *masjid* without the typical domes and minarets have occurred. Hence, it is the purpose of this paper to explore and understand the values that users of a contemporary *masjid* associate the *masjid* as a community place and community identity; how the new image affects them as users of a community place that is an identity to the Muslim community.

## Research Methods

The design of this research involves exploratory qualitative descriptive research and case study applications. The approach taken is to combine professional design and social theories to create a transactional framework to facilitate greater understanding of physical and psychological values. It was developed through a literature review on relevant findings from various fields of thought; community psychology, environmental

## **MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE**

psychology, urban design, sense of place theories, design professional publications, human behavioral research studies.

The researcher interviewed users 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 *masjid* as a community place and community identity. The interviews were carried out until the saturation point is achieved. The saturation point was determined when the same answers were obtained. The researcher also visited and observed the mosque to obtain information on the *masjid* structure and facilities (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.

### ***Masjid* Development in 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). Islam is practiced by about 15-16% of Singapore's 4.2 million populations. It is mainly practiced by the Malay minority, who constitute about 14% of Singapore's population. The other Muslim ethnics are Indian, Pakistani, Arab Muslim, Chinese and Eurasian. Muslims in Singapore constitute a minority living in an environment that experiences extensive changes. Despite being the minority, the *masjid* remains as 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]***

Singapore Muslim Religious Council (MUIS) plays imperative roles in the regulation of Islamic affairs and Muslim community. It was appointed as the body responsible for all the *masjid* in Singapore after the institutionalization of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) in 1988.

Between 1970s – 1980s, massive redevelopment took place in Singapore, and many *masjid* were removed, and the supporting communities were scattered over new housing estates. MUIS has assisted the government in reorganizing the *masjid* system after redevelopment of Singapore in which in consultation with the government, they have decided to build large central *masjid*.

### ***MBF (Mosque Building Fund)***

*Masjid* in Singapore have been built entirely from money donated by the community through Mosque Building Fund (MBF), a voluntary contribution collected along with the Central Provident Fund deduction paid by all Muslim employees, which has been in place since 1975. New central *masjid* could accommodate 1000 – 2000 *jemaah* and to provide services such as kindergartens, religious classes, family counseling, leadership and community development classes, tuition and remedial instruction for school children, and Arabic language instruction. To date the money collected has successfully built 22 multifunctional *masjid* all over Singapore.

**Table 1:** The number of new generation *masjids* built in Singapore using MBF.  
(Source: MUIS, 2007)

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Period	1976-1980	1980-1995	1996-2005	2006-2010
No. of Mosques Built	6	10	6	2
Average Site Area (sq m)	2738	3522	2500	2500
Average GFA (Sq m)	3374	3151	3000	3500
Average cost (Land = Building) \$5 000 000	1.56	4.44	7.69	10.5

### Typology of New "Generation" Masjid

The construction of new "generation" *masjid* was initiated by MUIS, financed by voluntary institutionalized contributions from Muslims (MBF), built on land purchased from the state for a 99-year lease, larger, better equipped and multi-functional. They are equipped with conference rooms, classroom, halls and auditoriums. Members refer to the new "generation" *masjid* as centers of excellence, catering a wide range of activities to meet the need of Muslims of all ages, backgrounds and interests; a center for worship, education, and other Islamic activities. They are different from the old "generation" *masjid*. Thus a large *masjid* is built for each new town and housing estate. The larger population base of the new *masjid* generates various economies of scale. These are reflected in both the variety of programmes offered and the high participation rates.

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 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. Facilities are separated 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. Each *masjid* is patronized throughout the day by Muslims of all ages. Adult religious classes are usually held after the fajr prayers and at night. Kindergarten and madrasah classes are also held for children. Welfare service include marriage counseling, free meals for breaking of fast, exhibitions and talks and marriage solemnization.

The new "generation" *masjid* are outstanding for their activities and their out-of-the-ordinary architecture which transforms them immediately into landmarks in the housing estates. Whether the design displays local influences or herald the avant-garde future, they are the concrete symbols of the strength and soul of the community.



Currently there are four typologies of MBF *masjid* built in Singapore. The typologies are distributed according to the four phases of masjid development in Singapore as shown in Figure 1-5 (Source: MUIS, 2007); Phase 1 (1976-1980), Phase 2 (1980-1995), Phase 3 (1996-2005) and Phase 4 (2006-2010).

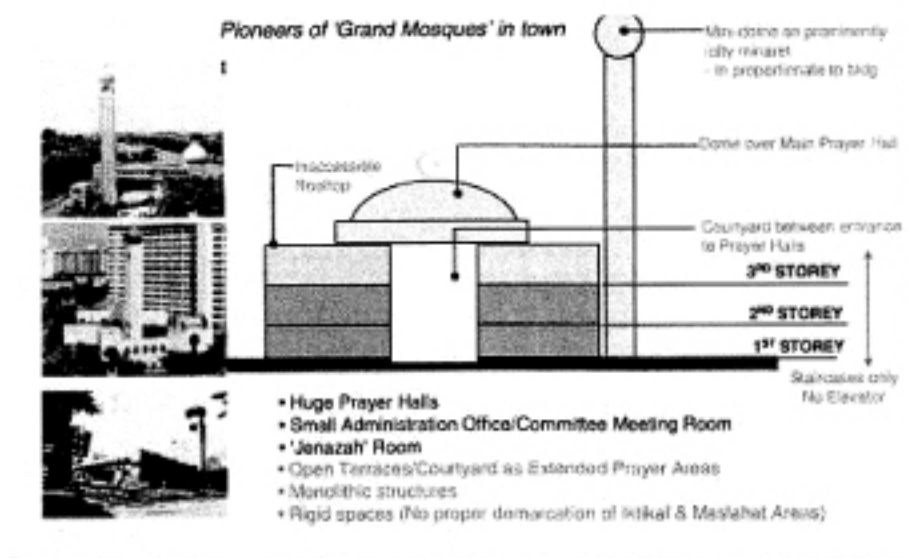


Figure 1: Typology of Phase 1 Mosques, 1976-1980 (Source: MUIS, 2007)

### Typology of Phase 2 Mosques ('80 - '95)

*In search of local identity ('Southeast Asian' - Nusantara)*

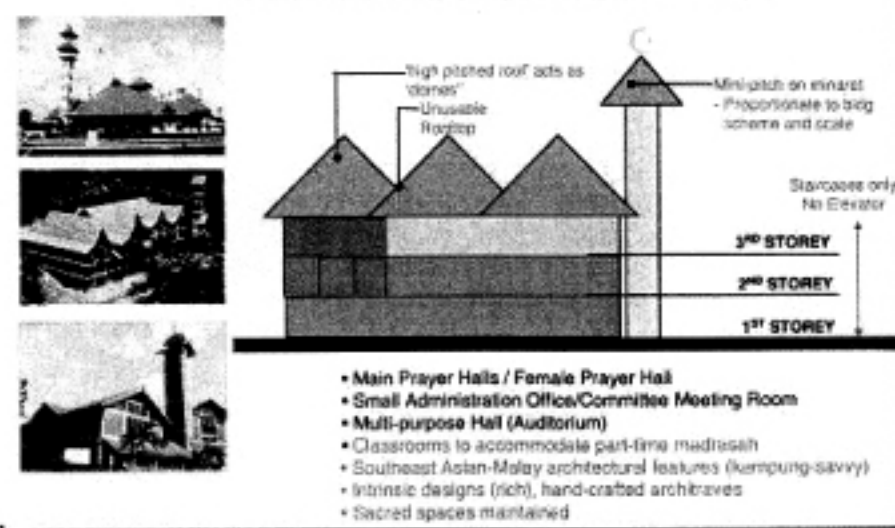


Figure 2: Typology of Phase 2 Mosques, 1980-1995 (Source: MUIS, 2007)

**MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE**

**Typology of Phase 3 Mosques ('96 – '05)**

*Compact Urban Mosques – Contemporary Singapore Model*

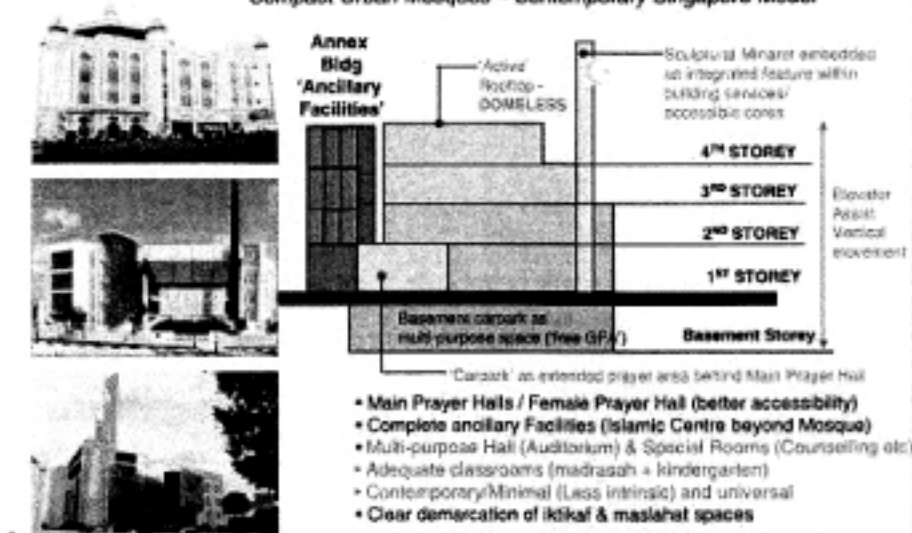


Figure 3: Typology of Phase 3 Mosques, 1996-2005 (Source: MUIS, 2007)

**Typology of Phase 4 Mosques ('06 – '10)**

*Post Mosque Convention '05 Mosques – Performance-friendly design Urban Mosques*

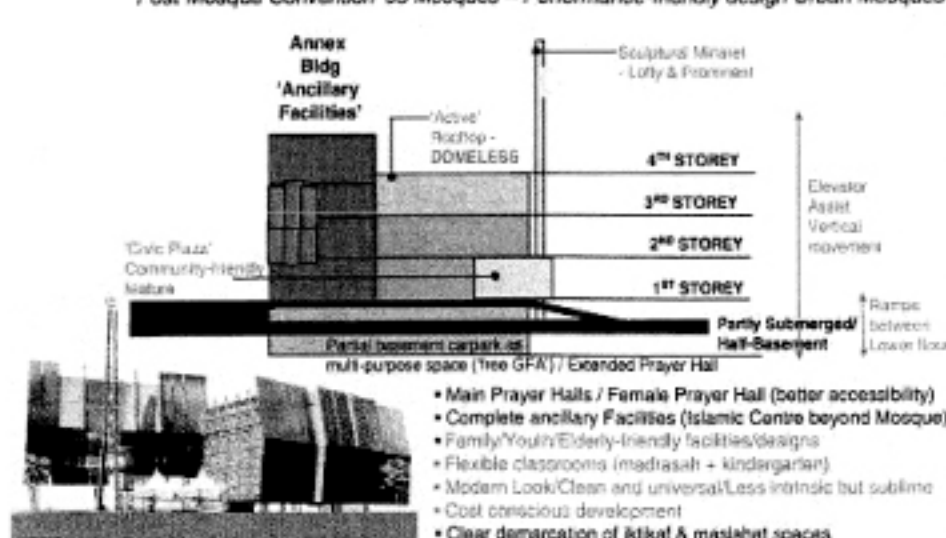


Figure 4: Typology of Phase 4 Mosques, 2006-2010 (Source: MUIS, 2007)

### Mosque Convention 2005: Remodeling Mosques

The agenda for Mosque Convention 2005 is to remodel *masjid* in Singapore in order to play a more active role in shaping religious life and forging the Singaporean Muslim Identity. During the convention *masjid* act on resolutions were passed. These resolutions include making the *masjid* more youth-, elderly- and family-friendly to ensure that they remain relevant and that they address the needs of the Muslim community as it faces the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### *Masjid An-Nahdhah in Bishan*



Figure 5: Masjid An-Nahdhah, Bishan, Singapore

For the purpose of this research, Masjid An-Nahdhah in Bishan was chosen as a case study. 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. It was in this period that far more thought were given to user requirements, programmes and activities. All of this meant that function was now taking priority over form. 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

## MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE

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 period of phase three *masjid* has seen an increased awareness of the need to be more professional and more outgoing in terms of public relations. In order to promote the warmth of welcome that visitors should feel when they enter the *masjid*, reception counters are attached to administrative offices. 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.

## Results and Discussion

Preliminary lists of physical and psychological values and meanings of mosque as community place have been developed from the transcribed interviews. The list has been organized into various categories, mainly divided into meaning, physical values and psychological values.(Table 2)

Table 2: Physical and psychological values of mosques as community space

<b><i>Meanings of Masjid as Community Place</i></b>
Family-friendly mosque
Youth-friendly mosque, youth hub
Convenient for the non-Muslims
Non-Muslims can get involved too
A place that I can pray and do good deeds
We entertain visitors to make them feel comfortable
We make friends here, a lot of Muslim friends, we can meet old and new friends
All races can get involved
House of God
<b><i>Summary of Physical Values</i></b>
Our mosque is very strategic to serve the community's needs
The programs are community -friendly
We strengthen ourselves with these attributes which makes us a very progressive Muslim, that itself is diversity and it is translated in our design and spaces
It's not about a beautiful mosque, now it's modern and it must look modern
We have a lot of programs going on including campings like qiyamullail
We have English khutbah, not only to encourage the Malays in Singapore, we are encouraging the European Muslims to come because there are many Malay Singaporeans married to foreigners

*MASJID AN-NAHDHAH, BISHAN, SINGAPORE: MUSLIM IDENTITY WITH A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE*

Here, we have the lift and the children likes it

In terms of facilities of course this is better, you feel the whole new setting and everything is new but no matter what, a mosque is a mosque....no matter how high tech it is

Gardening activities

Very impressive, and dynamic

Flexible

The mosque is very clean

It attracts other races too

The best part is, the youngsters involvement and they open to non-Muslims so they know what Islam is all about

Aerobic activities

The design is good because the mosque design is not compulsory to have minarets, domes – it's not practical in Singapore

Muslimah activities

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*Summary of Psychological Values*

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I don't see the need for Islamic architecture in Singapore..it's more to the spirit of Islam

For me, this is what I've been waiting for

For me, An-Nahdhah is very special and now we get it

This is my second home for even though I don't live here but I'm here everyday and I spend a few hours everyday and now with Harmony Center, I come here more often

I'm lucky as His guest

The passion to volunteer for the mosque, that's why I'm here to help others

I like my friends here

It feels like home, I really like being here, I learn a lot from being here

We are all family here

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study indicates that despite the devoid connotation of normative architectural *masjid* icons, 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. The new image of *masjid* disseminates better Muslim community identity to the urban place which reflects the contemporary urban character of the community.

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