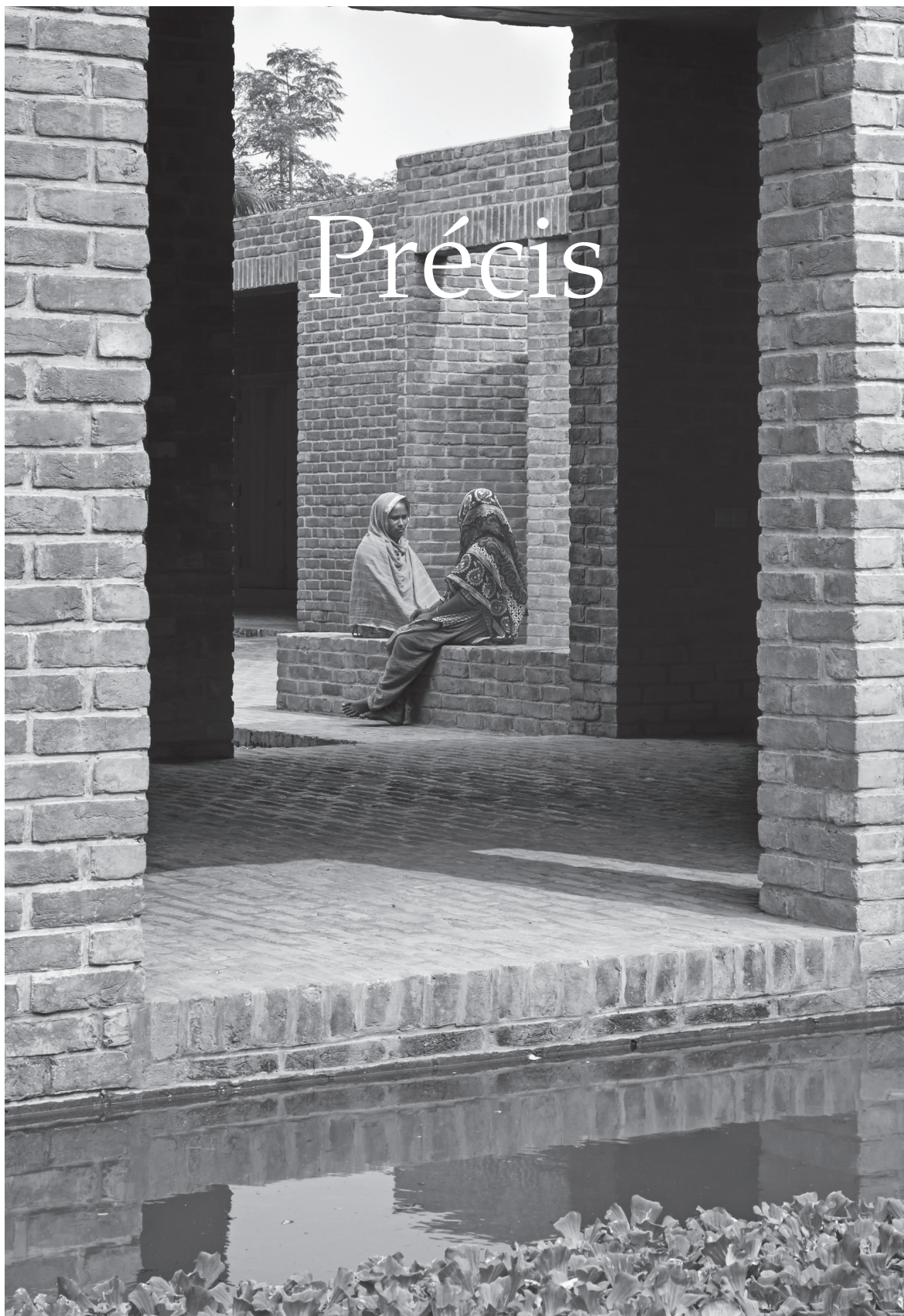


Précis



CONFERENCE PRÉCIS

IJIA's précis serve as records of important exhibitionary events, seminars, conferences, conference panels, roundtables, workshops, or announcements that treat or are relevant to Islamic architecture, design, planning and urbanism and are usually written by a participant in the event.

‘WRITING HISTORIES OF NOW: MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST ART AND ARCHITECTURE’, FORUM TRANSREGIONALE STUDIEN AND DEPARTMENT OF ART AND VISUAL HISTORY (IKB), HUMBOLDT UNIVERSITY, BERLIN, GERMANY, JULY 6–7, 2015

Written by Mohamed Elshahed, American University in Cairo

A major shift is underway internationally with regards to the place of so-called modern and contemporary art of the Middle East within the museum, the academy and the art market. At the same time, increasing numbers of independent and (post)graduate-level research projects focused on twentieth-century artistic and architectural practices in the region are redefining the field, linking histories of the modern to both the ‘pre-modern’ and the ‘contemporary’ and questioning the geopolitical, ethnic or religious frames of reference with which they are variously associated. This workshop, ‘Writing Histories of Now’, aimed to inaugurate a series of conversations that would foster collective, critical and sustained reflection on the state of the field and the place of the researchers within it.

Eighteen researchers from a wide variety of positions related to the study of modern and contemporary art and architecture in the Middle East and beyond were gathered in Berlin. Two intensive laboratory sessions allowed for the sharing of research agendas and discussions addressing terminologies, existing narratives, institutional frameworks and the evolving scholarly interest in modern artistic practices from the region. These sessions were bookended by two events mapping the field of current research for a broader audience.

Organized by Clare Davies and Mohamed Elshahed, the workshop was arranged within the framework of ‘Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices’ and ‘Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe (EUME)’, two research programmes at the Forum Transregionale Studien, and in cooperation with the Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz and the Department of Art and Visual History (IKB), Humboldt University of Berlin.

Writing Art History in the Middle East Today

‘Writing Histories of Now’ resulted from a desire to think critically, collectively and urgently about the current state of writing the histories of modern

art and architecture in a fast-changing Middle East. In the past decade, there have been significant transformations impacting the field: a surge in the presence of Middle Eastern artists in the collections of major European museums such as the Tate Modern and the Centre Pompidou; new forms of institutional alliances that produce projects such as the future Louvre and Guggenheim museums in Abu Dhabi; the ongoing gold rush of collecting modern Middle Eastern art by private collectors particularly from the Gulf; and the retreat of state institutions in countries like Egypt and Iraq from their attention to safeguarding, collecting and archiving the modern. Moreover, undocumented modernist buildings have been demolished in large numbers, and entire bodies of work by artists and architects have been lost, stolen or heavily damaged by war and vandalism as a result of the increasing political turmoil in the Middle East since 2011. The possibility of writing the histories of these contemporary dynamics has been compromised or entirely denied. Yet, an ever-increasing number of scholars are seeking to investigate, document and historicize modernism's manifestations in places such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. These frictions call for an urgent series of debates to reassess what it means to write histories of the modern in the context of today's Middle East: what terminologies and methods are to be deployed? How will such scholarship impact the volatile art market? And what are the historically specific political and cultural factors that shape the production of such histories today?

The invited scholars and researchers spanned a wide geography and diverse array of approaches to investigating the histories of modernism in the broader Middle East and beyond. The workshop included art and architectural historians, archivists, curators, independent researchers and a prominent collector of modern Middle Eastern art. The two-day event was organized to maximize the potential for productive and rigorous conversation and fostered the building of a network of actors, mostly working in the framework of western institutions, who seek to communicate the significance of the histories of modernism from the 'periphery' to both Euro-American as well as Middle Eastern audiences. On the first day of the gathering, each participant presented a ten-minute overview of his/her research material and questions. This format enabled the speedy introduction of the variety of topics, sources and research questions present in the room. It also allowed participants to quickly make connections with the work of others.

The following day, two intensive sessions allowed participants to speak in greater detail about two sets of questions. The first session, titled 'The Field', opened debate around methodological shifts in current scholarship, terminologies, sources and disciplinary limits. During this session, questions pertaining to archives, as well as the use of terms such as 'Middle East', 'Islamic art' and 'Arab art', were discussed in detail. The second session, titled 'Market, Museum and Conflict', gave participants the opportunity to discuss the backdrop against which this emerging scholarship is being written. Topics included the volatile political context of the Middle East, institutional developments such as new museum departments for modern and contemporary 'Arab' art, and the fast-evolving art market.

An overarching question that emerged from the two-day discussion was: are histories of modern art and architecture in the Middle East necessarily political? In other words, can art and architectural historians working on the region avoid the overbearing presence of politics, both in the past periods about which they write, and in the present context in which the Middle East

is a highly politicized geography? Can the art historian of the Middle East avoid being also an activist or, at the very least, an engaged scholar? An open conclusion of these discussions pointed to the need to accept the political as a quintessential part of engaging with art histories from the region's recent past. There is a need to produce formal and aesthetic analysis of works of art, and to place the various artists within their appropriate networks of other artists, writers and political figures with whom they engaged as they formulated their artistic practices. The presence of the political is not to be avoided in the context of histories of art in the modern Middle East, as artists were in fact politically engaged and their works more often than not responded to or reflected upon political events such as wars, massacres, incarceration and revolution, and sometimes subverted dominant political agendas or fully embraced them. Today too, as we write such histories we do so in an environment of extreme politics. Placing the political at the centre of writing the histories of art in the modern Middle East lends works of art and artists a level of credibility and relevance, and positions their artistic practice amidst the political realities they navigated, and in which their works are currently being collected and displayed.

Contributor Details

Mohamed Elshahed is Curator of the Modern Egypt Project at the British Museum in London. He teaches in the Department of Architecture at the American University in Cairo. He is the Founding Editor of *Cairoobserver.com*, a web and print platform for architecture and urban culture with a focus on Cairo. He holds a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern studies from New York University. He is currently preparing a book, *Revolutionary Modernism? Architecture and the Politics of Transition in Egypt, 1936–1967*, on architecture and urban planning in Egypt before and after the 1952 *coup d'état*. Elshahed also holds an MSc in Architectural Studies from MIT and a Bachelor of Architecture from the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

**'BEYOND THE MOSQUE: DIVERSE SITES OF MUSLIM PRAYER',
UNIVERSITIES ART ASSOCIATION OF CANADA/L'ASSOCIATION D'ART
DES UNIVERSITÉS DU CANADA ANNUAL CONFERENCE, MONTREAL,
CANADA, OCTOBER 27–30, 2016**

Written by Angela Andersen, MIT

The mosque (*masjid*, *jami'*, *camii*) is one of the primary sites of Islamic congregational prayer and worship. As such, it occupies a dominant role in the scholarly treatment of religious architecture in the Muslim world. Yet, Muslims engage in individual and collective prayer in a variety of settings, which are reflective of such factors as the size of the community in question; the genders, ages, geographical and linguistic backgrounds of practitioners; the internal and external political environments; the legal and doctrinal

restrictions upon construction and practice; and the confessional and ceremonial requirements of believers. With the intention of engaging the multiplicity of Islamic places of worship from an architectural perspective, this panel examined some of the questions surrounding the forms, uses and conceptual manifestations of Muslim prayer physically and ideologically undertaken outside of the paradigmatic mosque.

Significantly, only a small number of submitted papers for this panel were from architectural historians; most came from curatorial, visual arts, sociological and religious studies perspectives. This was welcomed in the call for papers itself, which suggested an effort to draw from anthropological and lived experience methodologies and to encourage participants to cross and merge disciplines. These multiple perspectives were fully and inquisitively realized in the discussion segment of the panel, which is a clear demonstration of the potential for architectural history to address complicated, multi-national, multi-temporal and multi-confessional issues. This highlights how architecture, space and site may act as a mediating and solidifying objective upon which to focus dialogue concerning matters of religious diversity, dogma, praxis, gender and the wider sphere of perceptions and relationships in the Islamic world.

The Qur'an provides virtually no instructions regarding the appearance or configuration of a mosque, although the obligation to pray is explicitly stated. *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) offers varying interpretations for what qualifies as a mosque; some schools exclude smaller or inconveniently sited prayer spaces from designation as mosques, or those with so-called heterodox affiliations. Mosques coexist with other spaces for prayer and ritual, but ceremonial halls and ritual precincts can also be established to replace or act as an alternative to the dominant culture of mosque use. In the modern, transnational world, designers and visual artists now comment upon how the occupation and use of a variety of public spaces shape the practices and identities of Muslims in new ways. For example, nascent, migrant and protestant groups designate temporary locations for worship in the hope that they will one day be able to furnish their communities with permanent, monumental versions of their current, temporary sites.

I opened our session with a summary of architectural and spatial typologies used in Islamic prayer and worship. A *hadith* (saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) states, 'The earth is a mosque for you, so wherever you are at the time of prayer, pray there.' This is a statement about the obligation to pray as much as it is about the site of prayer, enacted every day by Muslims who turn to pray in a room in their homes, upon a rug or a clean piece of cloth, or behind a line in the sand or earth. In demarcating prayer space with the resources at hand and uttering the declaration of the intent to pray, believers establish these parameters, and self-determine their sites of worship. Ceremony, pilgrimage and rituals of memorialization and lamentation are also significant practices in many Islamic traditions, and carry requirements for shelter and visual symbolism. These integral locales for the expression of faith and communal identity include ad hoc settings for prayer, ceremonies, commemorations and private meditation; Muslim assembly in schools and offices; temporary and permanent shrines and tents; purpose-built designs for places of *ziyaret* (pilgrimage); the congregational assemblies of minority and sectarian lineages (Nizari and Mustali Isma'ili *jam'atkhana*s, Alevi *cem'ev*is and Druze *majlises*) and meeting houses for Sufi orders (*zaviyes*, *tekkes*, *dargahs*); and the vernacular and monumental *imambara* or *husayniyya* halls, also

known as *ashurkhanas*, *ma'tams* or *takyakhanas*, where Shi'i remembrances and ceremonies are performed during Muharram.

Mr Ali Amin, a student of international studies at the Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies at Waseda University in Japan, provided a draft of his paper 'The Mushallas of Tokyo: The Architectural Development of Islam in Japan', to be presented in his absence. Mr Amin adopted a sociological approach for his 2014–16 interview and fieldwork study of South and South East Asian Muslim communities that had established prayer spaces in the Greater Tokyo region. Known as *mushallas*, these small and medium-sized, often privately operated rooms or buildings for the performance of the five daily prayers, also function as social and educational spaces for communities of migrant workers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia. During the economic boom of the 1980s, Japan permitted entry to predominantly single, male Muslim migrants to fill low-paid, unskilled labour positions. Decades later, the emerging Islamic communities of Japan have established businesses with street-level signage in a variety of languages. In addition to the smaller *mushallas*, they assemble in approximately one hundred mosques across Japan, which are increasingly visible and funded by Turkish, Saudi and Indonesian governmental support. Attendees face the daily tensions of living in Japanese society, which has not addressed the racial and religious stereotyping of Muslims. Amin elucidated the role of private and commercially funded *mushallas* in maintaining and fostering transnational relationships between migrants and their home communities abroad.

Dr Nadia Kurd, curator at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery in Ontario, Canada, presented her paper titled 'The Performed Symbolism of Islamic Ritual Practice in Contemporary Art'. Noting that the mosque, as architecture and symbol, has become the focal point of the debate on what she terms 'Islamic compatibility' in North America and Europe, she suggested that not only has the mosque been a signifier of Muslim communities, but it has further 'tested the limits of multiculturalism, citizenship and belonging'. These limitations are manifested in the public relationships between Muslim communities and non-Muslim authorities, including the 2009 'No Minarets' campaign of the Swiss People's Party and recent anti-mosque protests in Ontario, Canada. Kurd also addressed tensions concerning the gendered nature of mosques as a similarly exclusionary matter of space, experienced and recounted by some Muslim women. Kurd parsed the photographed performances and designs of three artists, who employ their work as a reaction to the fraught national and ideological environments in which Muslims are attempting to exist and practice their faith in the twenty-first century.

Kurd argued that these artists recognize the spiritual value of Islamic ritual, as well as how ritual practice intersects with the politics of space. Farheen Haq, in her 2004 lightbox series *Retreat*, used digital photography to document herself engaged in prayer in urban, often consumer spaces, such as shopping centres, food courts and entranceways. Azra Akšamija envisioned the mosque as a garment and a liturgical prosthesis in *The Nomadic Mosque* of 2005, through which she explored personal, and particularly women's agency following the destruction of over one thousand mosques during the war in her Bosnian homeland. Michael Rakowitz's 2001–ongoing performance piece *Minaret* engages a megaphone issuing from a mass-produced alarm clock to broadcast the call to prayer, to intervene in urban landscapes where this auditory announcement would not otherwise be heard. This is documented as a series of photographs. Through discussion of the artists in their North

American context, Kurd offered the idea that the mosque is not necessary as an architectural type, because prayer is a fluid ritual practice that can be undertaken across the urban landscape. This manifests the spiritual value of Islamic prayer and contests the mosque's role as a gendered and identity-modifying space.

Our discussion included inquiry into how non-mosque settings are transformed into settings for prayer, which ultimately combines matters of doctrine, law and personal practice. A former chaplain in the Canadian federal prison system explained his experience of facilitating the efforts of the incarcerated Muslim community as they sought the use of the chapel each Friday. Removing symbols from other faiths, cleaning the floor and ensuring that sectarian needs were addressed and negotiated were principal concerns. The manner in which the natural environment (as presented in some of the photographs discussed in the session) might determine or be integrated into sites of prayer, and how the sonic and visual results of prayer emerge, in opposition to or in combination with spatial needs, were also raised. In seeking specific buildings and communities to respond to these issues, the panel demonstrated that there are innumerable expressions of sites of prayer within the architectural and praxis-oriented diversity of Islam that can be engaged through critical scholarship.

Contributor Details

Angela Andersen works with the inter- and intra-religious interactions that take place via architecture in the Islamic world. She has undertaken extensive site studies and the assembly and translation of oral histories and religious teachings in Central Asia, Turkey and parts of Eastern Europe and North America. Her published and forthcoming works examine issues concerning the relationship between architecture, site and identity, diversity in Islam, the question of minority agency and visibility as embodied in architecture, and the ceremonial sites of the Alevi Muslim minority. She was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship for 2016–17 with the Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture at MIT.