



my HOUSE, my SHIELD

CONSIDERING THE NEEDS OF MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS IN HOME DESIGN

"My house is the shield of my disgrace," says a phrase used by Arab Muslims. Cherif Amor points to this as an illustration of the importance Muslims place on the concept of privacy in their homes.

"Visual privacy has played an instrumental role in shaping Muslim home interiors and is still influencing the home interior space organization," says Amor, an assistant professor in Texas Tech's Department of Design.

In many predominantly Muslim countries, privacy issues rule home design. Houses are built with screens over the windows. Sitting rooms provide a barrier between the entrance of the house and living spaces.

This is not the case in the utilitarian designs of American homes. In fact, many Muslim immigrants collide with a cultural schism when they arrive in the United States seeking a home to suit their needs. This was especially true of early immigrants, who considered themselves sojourners in their new country, says Amor. He spent three years delving into the homes of Muslim immigrants.

Using focus groups, open-ended interviews and participant observation, Amor gathered data from the heads of 30 households primarily in Illinois, Michigan and California. His sample included a swath of people from all professional and income levels including early and recent immigrants; extended and nuclear families; and Arab Muslim immigrants from the Middle East as well as North Africa.

He was looking to answer three main questions: What forces shape the Arab American Muslim immigrant's home environment? Why do these immigrants surround themselves with their original social, cultural, and physical environments? What are the social and physical changes accompanying this phenomenon?

Amor's research uncovered a world where homeowners must straddle the gulf between their cultural demands and the designs of most American houses. These immigrants often made changes to their homes to suit their needs. Families who were not wealthy enough to pay for lavish renovations instead made do with makeshift measures. In some

cases, they stretched a rug across entrances to shield the interior against a stray glance from outside or pulled squatty couches into a loose horseshoe around a table to recreate Muslim majlees or sitting room. Backyard doors were refurbished to serve as a second main entrance for women because of their close proximity to the kitchen and dining areas, hence providing a separation between the domain of men and women.

These changes serve to alleviate feelings of alienation for Muslim immigrants in a new land. The dualism that emerges forms a rich blend of cultural artifacts and modern furnishings. But Amor contends that, despite their quickly swelling population in the United States, the home needs of Muslim Americans remain largely unexplored. He believes designers should be sensitive to issues of privacy and intimacy in the Muslim home and that design students should be introduced to these issues in the classroom.

"Design requires a holistic approach," he says, referring to the social, psychological, cultural and physical components that go into a home. "Design students imbued with sufficient data on diverse cultures have a tendency to be better designers of the built environment."

Changes made to Muslim homes in the United States are less prevalent now, as the nation's Muslim community has spent more time here and has become more educated and prosperous in recent decades. Yet some dualism does still exist. For example, a wealthy family might choose to build two living rooms—one for American guests and a majlees for Muslim visitors.

Knowing how homes are designed in places like the Middle East, Africa and Europe will give design students fresh ammunition to solve design problems such as those encountered by Muslims. This, in turn, will equip them to compete globally, Amor believes.

"We are living these days as if we are in a tiny village," he says.



An exercise room contrasts with Arabian seating in a Muslim American home.



Entryways have been redesigned to shield interiors from prying eyes.

— CORY CHANDLER