

# **In The Name of GOD**

An Investigation into a Rural Religious Settlement, NY

Columbia University, GSAPP  
Spring 2021 ADV. STUDIO IV

Faculty: Ziad Jamaledidine

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“While the institutional ‘separation of church and state’ is written into the U.S. Constitution, [religion] shapes many aspects of American culture, ..., it is a vital part of American civil society—including a central role in social welfare provision” Rhys H. Williams

The studio scope consists of an investigation of the architectural and programmatic capacity of the forms of rural settlement developed by religious communities in Upstate New York. The aim is twofold:

- 1.To map and study the physical architectural and territorial typologies of rural religious settlements. In the context of the studio, these settlements are understood as exemplars of a type of ‘intentional community’ and as offering a potential form of resistance to the increasingly commodified and fragmented territories of the countryside.

- 2.To identify and propose physical interventions (alter, transform, expand, re-program, etc.) for Islamberg, a specific religious Muslim community hamlet located in Upstate New York.

These interventions will be proposed only after having first critically unpacked Islamberg’s historical evolution and probing the hamlet’s architectural and territorial relationships to its environment (geological, topographical, post-industrial, infrastructural, socio-political). This initial phase will be undertaken in conversation and through collaboration with the community itself.



Islamberg, NY

### Muslims in the United States:

The arrival of Muslims in the American continent dates back to before the formation of the nation of the United States. This early wave of Muslim immigrants, estimated to number in the thousands, consisted of West Africans who were forcibly relocated to North America as part of the transatlantic slave trade. It included people such as Senegalese Muslim Job Ben Solomon. Enslaved and sent to America in 1730, Ben Solomon later recorded in memoir how he maintained his daily religious practice by escaping from the plantation farm to the woods, where he could pray. At the turn of the 20th century, this first wave was followed by the arrival of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and Eastern Europe, who settled in industrialized towns and cities. These later waves of immigrants increased the urban presence of their communities, building more visible spaces of worship.

### 'Islamic Architecture' in the United States:

In the United States, as in the rest of the Western world, idealized versions of 'Islamic' architecture have been imported and appropriated, appearing in the architecture of American cities since the end of the 19th century. Theatres, casinos, department stores and mansions were shrouded with a veneer of exquisite 'Islamic' motifs, intended to display 'wealth and cosmopolitanism,' but also to function as a trophy, representing the expansion of Western empires into the Islamic world. While non-Muslim institutions in the United States have adopted Orientalized versions of the architecture of the Islamic world, American Muslim communities have instead embraced localized vernacular architecture, sometimes pursuing a strategy of adaptive reuse to provide the architecture of their spaces of worship. This architectural assimilation mirrors long history of Muslims in the United States, who have correctly identified themselves as part of the American social fabric—not as an exotic foreign other.





Islamberg, NY

## Islamberg, and the (re)construction of religious 'rurality':

Islamberg, located in Delaware County NY—a rural hamlet serving a primarily African American Muslim community—presents itself as the ideal condition for the studio to work with. The 200-person hamlet could be understood as the type of religious 'intentional community' defined by geographer Louise Meijering: A community that purposely withdraw from mainstream society to live on its periphery, sustained and given cohesion by shared religious belief and rituals.

The settlement of Islamberg was founded in the 1980s, the result of the deliberate movement of an African American Muslim community from Manhattan; in leaving the city, they desired an escape from the consumerist, polluted, and criminal aspects of urban living. This 'counter-urbanist' community, who had suffered from urban economic decline, sought instead a monastic 'simple life' and closeness to an 'idyllic' nature. The settlement—which occupies a small valley, adjacent to a creek—consists of a couple dozen vernacular houses, a modest unfinished mosque, a schoolhouse, and a farm scattered across the landscape. Today, this settlement, which provided a rural haven for a formerly urban community, is again under extreme pressure. While Islamberg has developed positive relationships with its neighbors, in the past few years it has come under security threat from white supremacist groups. Concurrently, it increasingly faces environmental threat from the aging Cannonsville Reservoir dam, located nearby, and from a quarry site to the north. The degradation of its water supply system and its topography—characterized by difficulty to navigate terrain and icy roads that are continuously flooded with rain run-offs in the harsh winter—pose further obstacles to Islamberg's community.

**The studio will use this 'ground' challenge as an entry point to reconceptualize and reconfigure the intentional community 'rural' settlement in relationship to its geographic, socio-political and environmental contexts.**





Islamberg, NY

### Schedule:

#### Week 1

Thursday Jan 14 First Day of Dstudio

#### Week 2

Monday Jan 18 University Holiday

Wednesday Jan 20 Lecture (5:00-7:00 pm)

Thursday Jan 28

#### Week 3

Monday Feb 1

Wednesday Feb 3 Workshop (5:00-7:00 pm)

Thursday Feb 4

#### Week 4

Monday Feb 8

Wednesday Feb 10 Exchange Pinup (5:00-7:00)

Thursday Feb 11

#### Week 5

Monday Feb 15 Mid Review

Wednesday Feb 17 No Event

#### Week 6

Monday Feb 22

Wednesday Feb 24 Lecture (5:00-7:00 pm)

Thursday Feb 25

#### Week 7

March 1 - 5 Spring Break

#### Week 8

Monday Mar 8

Wednesday Mar 10 Lecture (5:00-7:00 pm)

Thursday Mar 11

#### Week 9

Monday Mar 15

Wednesday Mar 17 Lecture (5:00-7:00 pm)

Thursday March 18

#### Week 10

Monday Mar 22

Wednesday Mar 24 Exchange Pinup (5:00-7:00)

Thursday Mar 25

#### Week 11

Monday Mar 29

Wednesday Mar 31 Lecture (5:00-7:00 pm)

Thursday Apr 1

#### Week 12

Monday Apr 5

Wednesday Apr 7 No Event

Thursday Apr 8

#### Week 13

Tuesday Apr 13 Final Review

### Working Method:

The studio will plan to operate in the first half of the semester primarily as an online studio with the intention of holding few in-person meetings on Thursdays when possible. This would include planning to meet outdoors, on campus, and walking tours (respecting social distancing and masked). Online desk-crit sessions (via Zoom + Slack) are primarily planned for Mondays.

In the second half of the semester (after the Spring Break), Thursday sessions will be dedicated to in-person pin-ups in the studio (for the students available and wish to meet in-person), and over Zoom for the students who cannot meet in-person.

The final studio schedule will be adjusted based on the students' locations and avoid conflicts with their other classes.

Students will be free to work in groups or individually. Group work is encouraged but not mandatory.





Islamberg, NY

## References:

### Religiosity:

Maryam Eskandari, "American Mosques" *ED Issue 3: Normal* (2019) 53-56

Edward E Curtis, *Muslims in America: A Short History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009

Nezar AlSayyad and Mejgan Massoumi eds., *The Fundamentalist City?: Religiosity and the Remaking of Urban Space*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010

Akel Ismail Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002

Jerrilyn Denise Dodds and Edward Grazda. *New York Masjid: The Mosques Of New York*. Brooklyn: powerHouse Books, 2002)

### Intentional Communities:

Louise Meijering, Paulus Huigen & Bettina Van Hoven. "Intentional Communities in Rural Spaces" *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 98, no. 1 (2007): 42-52

Louise Meijering, Bettina van Hoven, Paulus Huigen. "Constructing ruralities: The case of the Hobbitstee, Netherlands" *Journal of Rural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2007) 357-366

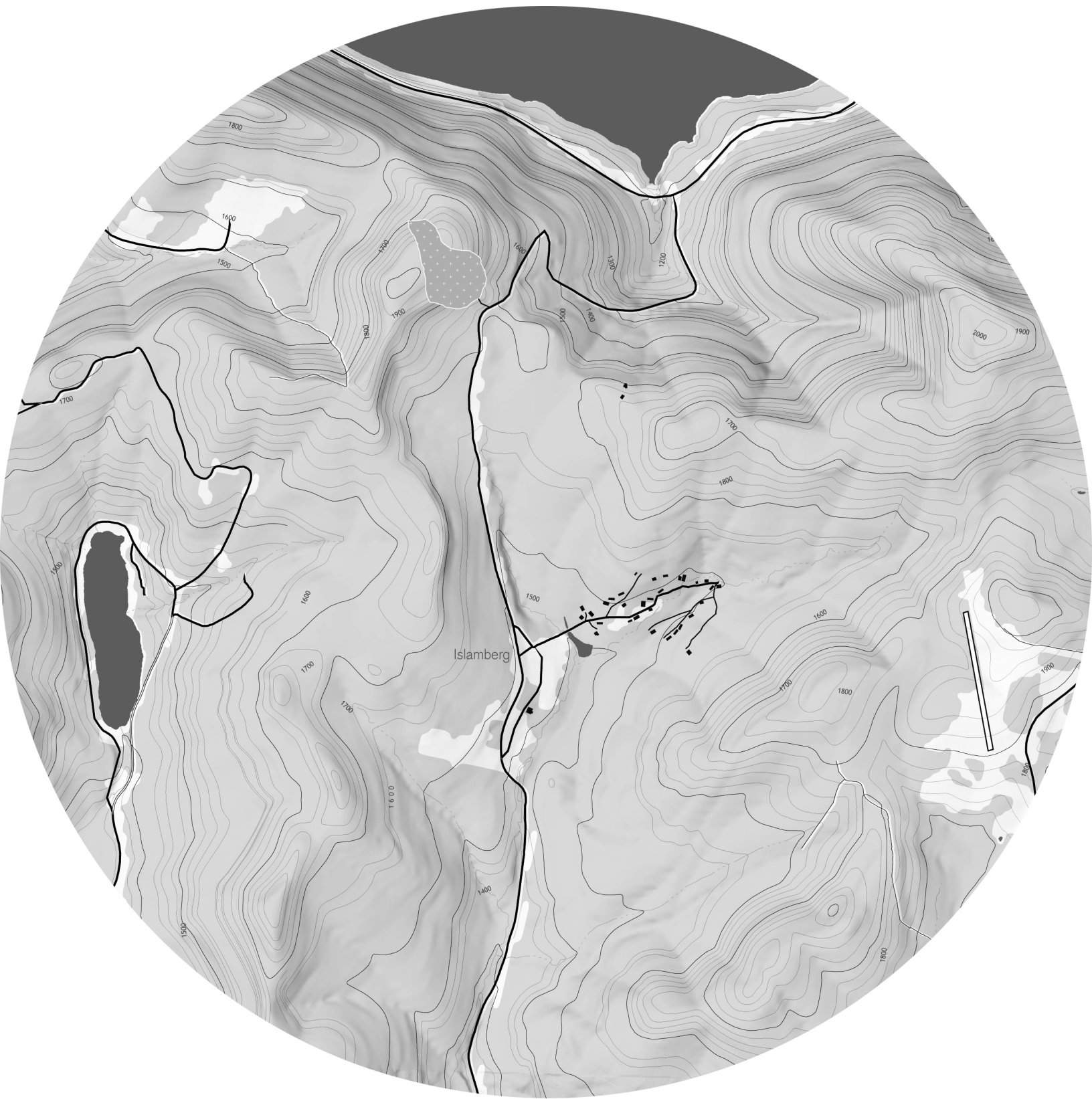
Louise Meijering. "Making a place of their own: Rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe" PhD thesis. University of Groningen, 2006

Martha Chaves, Thomas Macintyre, Gerard Verschoor, Arjen E.J. Wals. "Radical ruralities in practice: Negotiating buen vivir in a Colombian network of sustainability" *Journal of Rural Studies* 59 (2018) 153-162

Pablo Alonso Gonzalez, Eva Parga Dans. "From intentional community to ecovillage: tracing the Rainbow movement in Spain" *GeoJournal* 84, no. 5 (2019) 1219-1237

Albert Bates. "Technological Innovation in A Rural Intentional Community, 1971-1987" *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 8, no. 2 (1988)





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