

In The Name of GOD

An Investigation into a Rural Religious Settlement, NY

Columbia University, GSAPP
A4104 / Spring 2022 Advanced IV Studio

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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

Studio Scope:

The studio scope consists of an investigation of the architectural and “charitable” programmatic capacity of the forms of rural settlement developed by religious communities in Upstate New York.

The aim is to identify and propose a physical intervention and accompanying program for the religious Muslim community hamlet of Islamberg, its periphery, and the expanded network of religious communities in Upstate New York. These interventions will be proposed after critically unpacking Islamberg’s historical evolution and probing the hamlet’s architectural and territorial relationships to its physical environment (political, geological, natural, post-industrial, infrastructural). This initial phase will build on the information and knowledge compiled across the last two years of the Adv IV, In the Name of God studio’s work.

The studio is structured to include a field trip to the hamlet (Covid situation permitting) and a walking tour of New York City’s urban Storefront Mosque network. Students will also attend studio lectures on the history of Islamic architecture and its relationship to other global architectural histories, and will conduct workshops with Islamic architecture scholars and other experts.



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 pray¹.

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.



Islamberg, NY

¹ See: Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 1

'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. Theaters, 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 adopted Orientalized versions of the architecture of the Islamic world, American Muslim communities instead embraced localized vernacular architecture, sometimes pursuing a strategy of adaptive reuse to provide the architecture of their spaces of worship².

This architectural assimilation mirrors the long history of Muslims in the United States, who have correctly identified themselves as part of the American social fabric, rather than as an exotic foreign other.



1st purpose-built mosque: Ross, North Dakota. 1929

² See: Maryam Eskandari, "American Mosques," in *ED* Issue 3:Normal (2019) 53-56

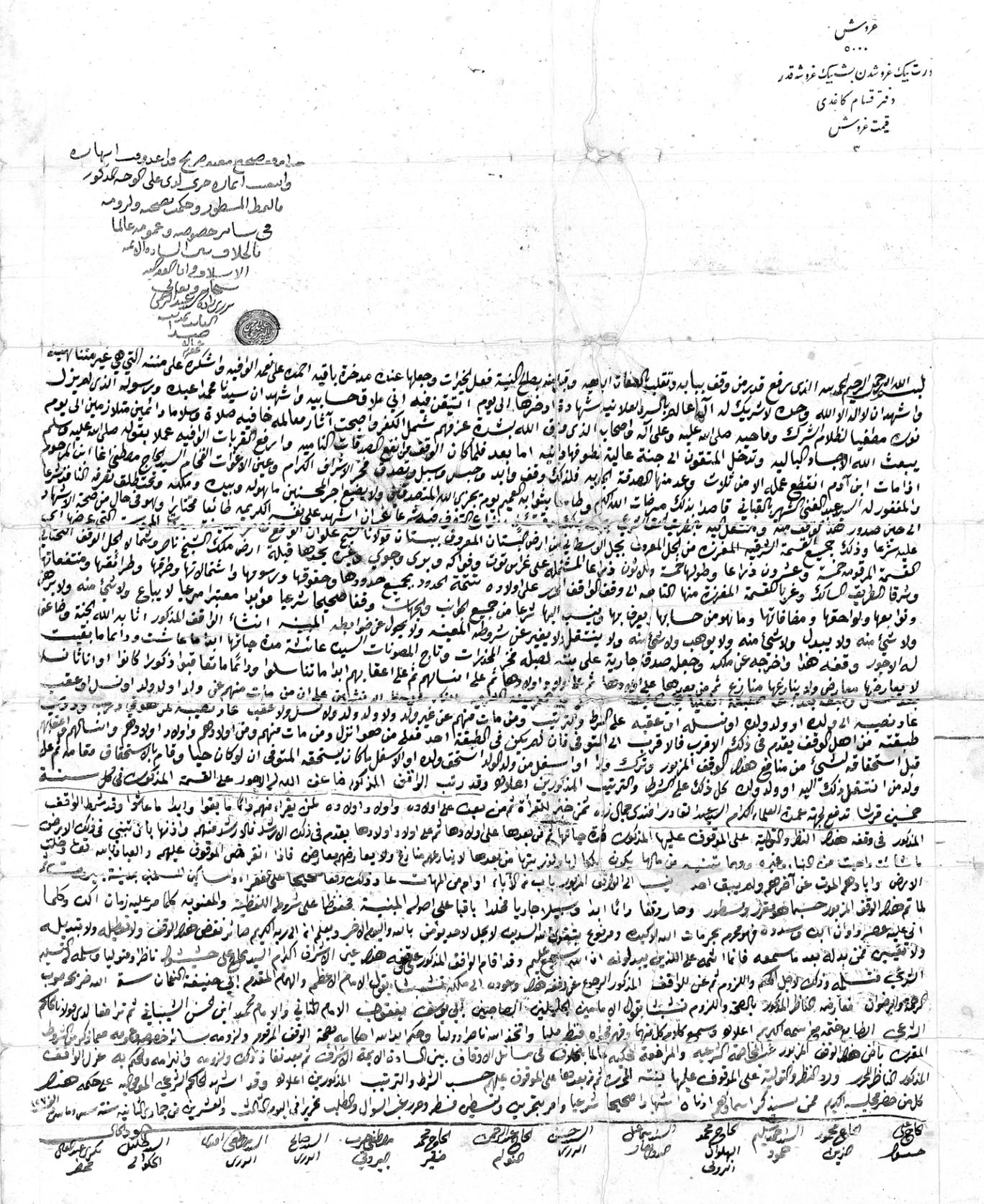
'Islamic Architecture' and the Waqf (Charitable endowment):

A general feature of Islamic social history, the Waqf document is a prescriptive legal text that suspends any transactions that could be imposed on a physical property, instead endowing it in perpetuity for the benefit of the community³.

This document often dictates in architectural terms the beneficiaries and associated charitable programs, and the spatial organization, building operation, material specifications, and norms and conditions of the property's physical upkeep (from land to buildings, to natural elements, to objects). In the history of Islamic architecture, the Waqf produced and financially supported varied architectural typologies serving society's poor and needy. These buildings and structures included waterworks, soup kitchens, schools, and hospices.

Learning from this long historical tradition, the studio posits the writing of the Waqf legal document as an architectural design exercise that inherently carries a focus on social welfare and environmental stewardship.

3 See: Amy Singer, "What is a Waqf?" In *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence, An Imperial Soup Kitchen in Jerusalem*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002) 17-22



Mustafa Agha Waqf document, Lebanon

Islamberg, and the construction of religious 'rurality':

Islamberg, a rural hamlet located in Delaware County NY that serves a primarily African American Muslim community, presents itself as the ideal condition for the studio to work with. The 200-person hamlet can be understood as what geographer Louise Meijering defines as a religious 'intentional community:' a community that purposely withdraw from mainstream society to live on its periphery, sustained and given cohesion by shared religious belief and rituals⁴.

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, this 'counter-urbanist' community desired an escape from economic decline and the consumerism, pollution, and criminality of urban living, seeking 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 few dozen vernacular houses, a modest unfinished mosque, a schoolhouse, and a farm, all 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. It also increasingly faces environmental threat from the aging Cannonsville Reservoir dam, located nearby, and from a quarry site to the north. The hamlet's topography—characterized by difficulty to navigate terrain and icy roads that are continuously flooded by rain run-off in the harsh winter—and the degradation of its water supply system pose further obstacles to Islamberg's community.



Islamberg, NY

⁴ See: Louise Meijering, "Making a place of their own: Rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe" PhD diss., (University of Groningen, 2006)

Schedule:

Week1
Jan 24 Monday Studio design brief review
Jan 26 Wednesday Model Tutorial: Joshua Jordan
Jan 27 Thursday Lecture: "What is Islamic Architecture?"

Week 2
Jan 31 Monday Walking Tour
Feb 2 Wednesday Drawing tutorial
Feb 3 Thursday Desk Crits

Week 3
Feb 7 Monday Pin Up
Feb 9 Wednesday Lecture: Feifei Zhou
Feb 10 Thursday Desk Crits

Week 4
Feb 14 Monday Pin Up
Feb 16 Wednesday Collective reviews
Feb 17 Thursday Desk Crits

Week 5
Feb 21 Monday Desk Crits
Feb 23 Wednesday NO EVENT
Feb 24 Thursday Pin Up: Draft of Mid Review

Week 6
Feb 28 Monday Desk Crits
Mar 2 Wednesday NO EVENT
Mar 3 Thursday Mid Review (Ware)

Week 7
March 7 - 11 Kinne Week

Week 8
March 14 - 18 Spring Break

Week 9
Mar 21 Monday Desk Crits
Mar 23 Wednesday Lecture:
Mar 24 Thursday Desk Crits

Week 10
Mar 28 Monday Desk Crits
Mar 30 Wednesday Lecture: Brigitte Shim
Mar 31 Thursday Desk Crits

Week 11
Apr 4 Monday Desk Crits
Apr 6 Wednesday Lecture: tbd
Apr 7 Thursday Desk Crits

Week 12
Apr 11 Monday Pin Up: Draft of Final Review
Apr 13 Wednesday Collective reviews
Apr 14 Thursday Desk Crits

Week 13
Apr 18 Monday Pin Up: Draft of Final Review
Apr 20 Wednesday NO EVENT
Apr 21 Thursday Desk Crits

Week 14
Apr 25 Monday Final Review (Ware)

Working Method:

The studio will operate in the first two weeks of the semester primarily as an online studio with the intention of holding few in-person meetings. This would include planning to meet outdoors, on campus, and walking tours (respecting social distancing and masked).

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



Islamberg, NY

Selected Bibliography:

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

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

Amy Singer, "What is a Waqf?" In *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence, An Imperial Soup Kitchen in Jerusalem*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002) 17-22

Rob Reich, "The Islamic Waqf: Precursor to the Contemporary Philanthropic Foundation" In *Just Giving, Why Philanthropy is Failing Democracy and How it Can do Better*, (Princeton University Press, 2018) 29-35

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

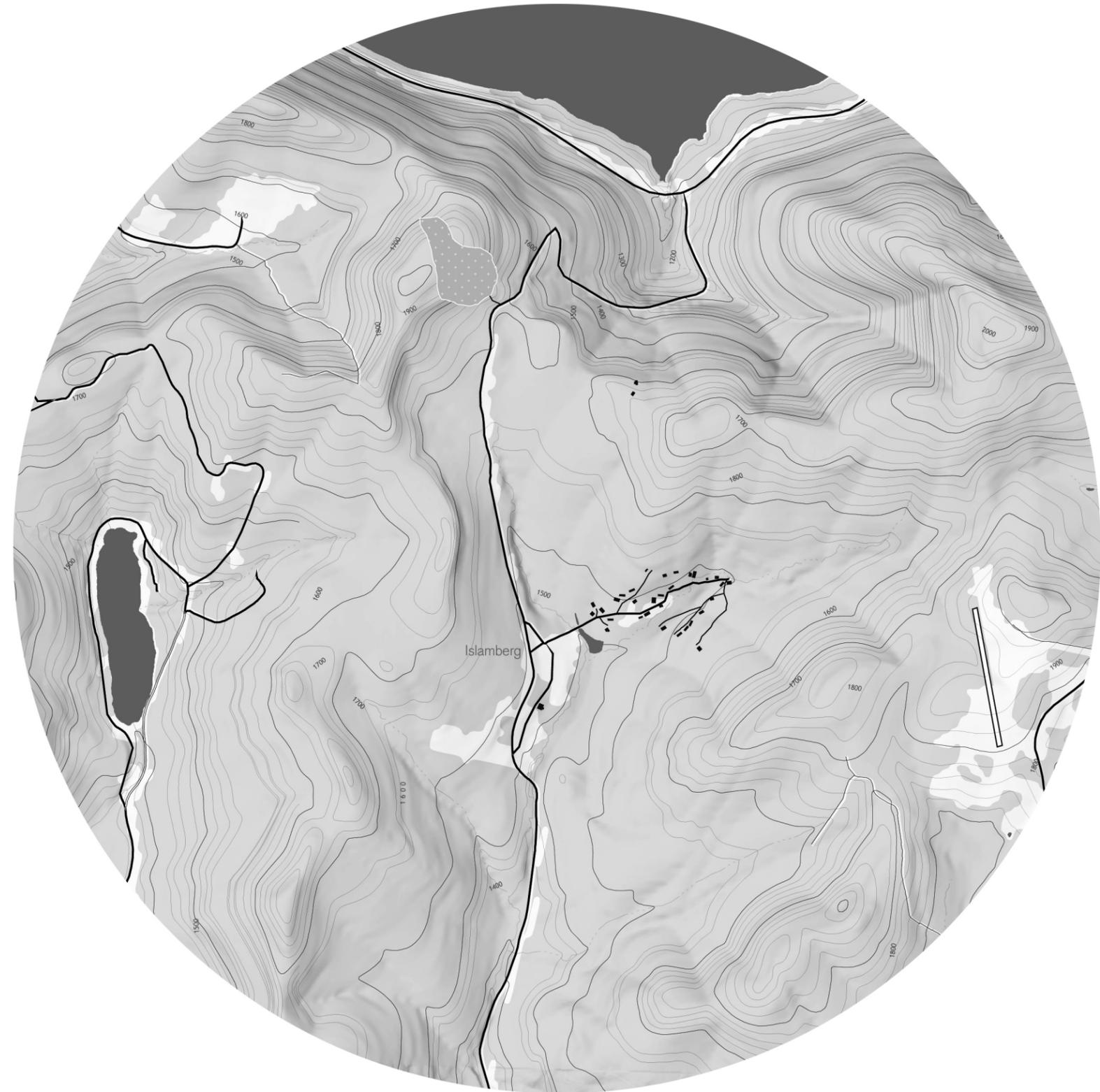
Louise Meijering, Bettina van Hoven, Paulus Huigen. "Constructing ruralities: The case of the Hobbitstee, Netherlands" *Journal of Rural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2007) 357-366

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)



Islamburg, NY