



Breath of the compassionate

Ten years after Marks Barfield won the invited competition, the new Cambridge mosque opened in May, in time for Ramadan. Nigel Walter takes a look

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Sitting on the north side of Mill Road, on the site of the former Robert Sayle warehouse, the new Cambridge mosque makes a good first impression. A formal garden, a glimpse of paradise, breaks the Victorian terraced feel of this part of Romsey, offering a powerful gesture of welcome and a rich addition to the streetscape.

The building

Above a concrete parking basement, the building unfolds in four principal stages. The first is the garden and a portico produced by setting the glazed entrance screen one bay into the building, creating a covered transition space at the entrance that is typical of many styles of mosque. Once inside, the second stage comprises public-facing rooms – the central marble-floored atrium, flanked by a meeting space to the west and a café to the east.

The orientation of the prayer hall towards Mecca is fixed and offset from the geometry of the site by 17°; this offset is taken up in the third section of the plan, comprising a lobby with male and female ablution areas. Earlier iterations of the design placed the entire building on a single geometry; the built arrangement is preferable, allowing more composure to the entrance garden that so successfully frames the building as a whole.

After the relatively confined lobby between the two geometries, the space expands into the final stage, the prayer hall,

▲ The character of the Cambridge mosque prayer hall is shaped by the 16 laminated timber 'trees'

32m x 32m and with the ceiling at 8.1m. To the rear (west) of this is a mothers' and toddlers' room, with a gallery above overlooking the main space. The *mihrab* – the niche orientating worshippers towards Mecca – and 10 large roundels on the prayer-hall walls will enrich the space once completed.

The character of the prayer hall is shaped by the sculptural form of the 16 eye-catching laminated timber 'trees', above each of which is a circular rooflight, the vertical sides perforated for extract ventilation. Artificial (LED) lighting is incorporated in a corona beneath each rooflight. It is these 'trees' that are the organising principle and signature of the building. With the exception of some peripheral spaces – which include two three-bedroom houses – the entire plan is lit through the roof, helping to create an even light and a calm feel.

Symbolism and sustainability

The trees are one example of the wealth of symbolism woven into the design, which will go unnoticed by many casual visitors, but which is central to the building's success, both aesthetically and as a place of worship. For example, 'the Breath of the Compassionate' is the name of the eight-pointed star pattern of the marble atrium floor; the phrase, from the 13th-century Sufi scholar Ibn Arabi, is a powerful metaphor for God's creation of the material world. The same geometrical device feeds through into other aspects of the building.

◀ The garden and portico create a welcoming presence on Mill Road

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Meanwhile, the patterned brickwork visible externally to the front and rear repeats the name of God in stylised Arabic script.

The building also delivers on a strong commitment to sustainability. Above basement level, construction is relatively low carbon; the walls are of laminated timber, comprising a 70mm cross-laminated inner layer with 330mm mineral-wool insulation between glulam columns, with brick tile cladding externally. Air source heat pumps feed underfloor heating and cooling, working with a 115m² photovoltaic array; this means there are no emissions on site. Rainwater is harvested from those roofs not covered with sedum, and used for toilet flushing and irrigation. The integration into the design of these sustainability measures is well managed, adding a technological dimension to the 'breath' symbolism.

A new face

Viewed as a piece of architecture, this building has a strong central idea, but this is compromised by moments of conservatism, such as the gilded dome and the Moorish crenellations. For some from outside the tradition, these will sit incongruously, at odds with an otherwise modern design. From within that tradition, the dome is richly symbolic of the purpose of the building, in directing worshippers' thoughts and lives towards God.

The building succeeds best when closest to its core idea of the oasis, which gives the face of the building its character, with the paradise garden – which then transitions into the tree structure of the building – and on into the interior, in a process of phased engagement. It is at its most eloquent at the threshold, at the interface with the community, mediating between the public realm and its religious functions with skill and elegance, drawing in the visitor.

At a reported £25m, its cost may be high, but for a building intended to last for the long term, and which creates a symbol of Muslim identity in Cambridge and nationally, it is a great success. Perhaps its most significant achievement lies in giving the Cambridgeshire Muslim community a new face: unmistakably Islamic, while speaking of its time and place.

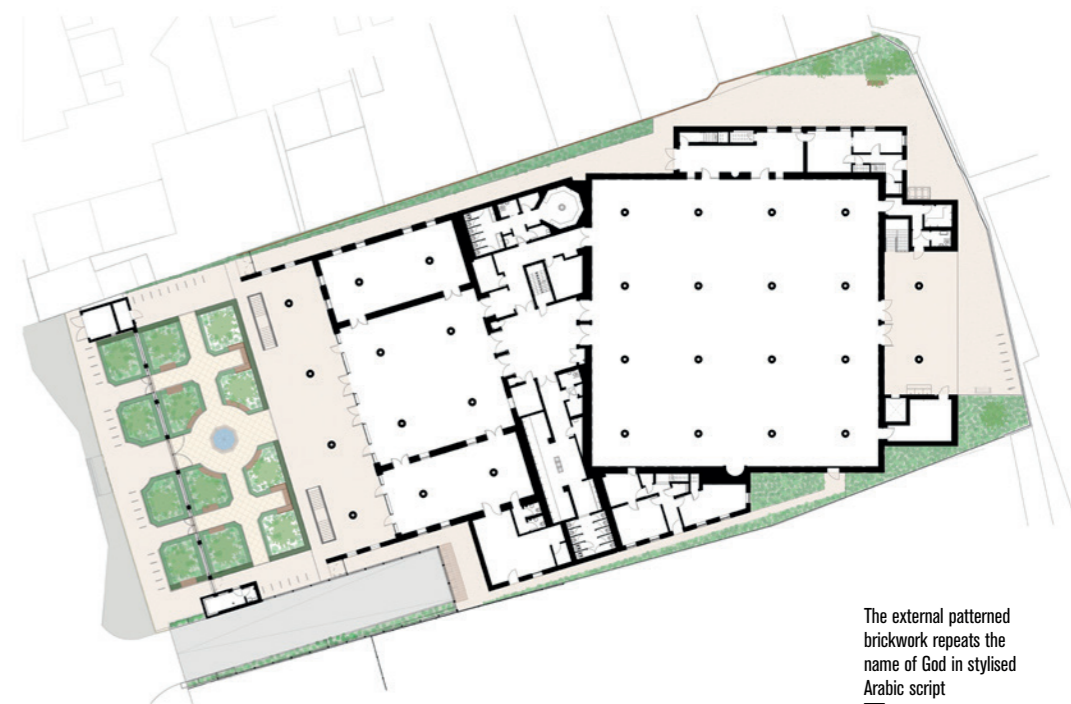
This building is as much a cultural as an architectural achievement. As Dr Tim Winter – imam of the mosque and son of the architect John Winter – said in the planning documentation, the design 'acknowledges Islam as an ongoing tradition, not as a cultural fossil'. Modernity, following Edmund Burke, too readily equates tradition with conservatism. This building, for the most part, champions a more nuanced view of tradition, creating a richly layered place for dialogue – for example, bringing its normally enclosed garden, representing paradise, to the street for all to share.

This is a landmark building and a worthy addition to the architecture of Cambridge, from which all of us can learn.



◀ The gilded dome is richly symbolic, directing worshippers thoughts and lives towards God

The prayer hall is orientated towards Mecca and offset from the geometry of the site by 17°



The external patterned brickwork repeats the name of God in stylised Arabic script

“The connection between the horizontal and the vertical, which is the symbolic message of a sacred building, is effected by a quiet celebration of the miracle of nature, and the ability of faith to detect mathematical order within it”

Tim Winter

