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Notes on the Medinah Temple

Introduction to Presentation

This is a project on the Medinah “Temple,” an “Islamic Revival” building in Chicago’s River North currently occupied by a Bloomingdale’s home goods store. Working between field notes, in which I write myself in the first person, scholarship on Islamic Revival architecture, archival research, and other sources, I attempt to understand how the building came to be and how it has shifted over time. I think of this in some respects as an “object biography,” a way of trying to understand the weight of an object, although I am also wary of the limitations of this form. The full text is divided between several sections, roughly: Confusion, Problems, Fun, Sleep, Purity, Interiority, Problems (again), Networks, Sleep (again), and Revival. From these sections, I have cobbled together the following abbreviated text.

Confusion

It is a large, strange, building, a confusion of massive spheres and squares, a red-brown building that occupies a city block.

At first I tried to ignore it. I had recently moved to Chicago, and I was walking in River North. I was coming from the Trader Joe’s at Ontario and Wabash, and I think I was going to Clark & Lake. It was dark, and I was rushing, and my backpack was heavy with pdf’s and cans of beans.

It is an Islamic-looking building in River North. “Islamic-looking” is exactly what it is: it does not reference a particular region, time period, or style. It is only meant to conjure, vaguely, “the Near East.”

The eye goes first to its onion domes, one on each corner, and then the vertical banners, dwarfed by the building’s massiveness, that read, tentatively, BLOOMINGDALE’S.

Looking at it from outside, it is impossible to say how many floors there are. There are at times four rows of windows above the doors and at times three; but they do not match up: there are vertical insets and recesses in the brick, in which some, but not all, of the windows are set.

There is no clear horizontal line on the exterior facade, nor between the doors or windows.

There are occasional balconettes topped with small desperate rows of romanesque columns, crammed into the space above the railing as though short of breath. There are muqarnas-filled

niches and a grand entrance, its grandness now largely bypassed, a line of Arabic script running over and around the portal around it.

There is also a banner that says FOR SALE.

Only the street-facing windows on the ground floor, set into half-hearted ogival arches, open lines of vision to the brightness inside. They display blenders and grills and cushions, and the building is fortress-like and dark above them. The impulse of the new, the clean and airbrushed look of objects and interiors aspiring to the photograph-like, contrasts crazily with the rest of the building. What windows there are are small and dark, and, but for those on the ground floor, stained glass, the colors thin and weak, a little apologetic. They are like slits in a castle for archers to shoot out of.

It is shorter now than everything around it, and much stranger.

On the parking garage adjacent, an enormous banner -- "Experience 5G Sprint" ... and then, "NOW."

And, inside the image on the banner, another group of buildings.



The Medinah "Temple" was built in 1912 for the Chicago chapter of the Shriners, a Masonic order whose aesthetic was Orientalist in the full uncritical sense of the term: scimitars, deserts, camels, pharaohs, and their trademark red fez. The building was formerly used for

entertainment purposes: it originally contained a 4200 seat auditorium with a 30,000 lb. pipe organ. In addition to hosting Shriners circuses, this was also where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded many performances, including the soundtrack to Fantasia 2000. Granted landmark status in 2001, the auditorium was remodelled shortly afterwards and converted into four floors of retail space, and is now occupied by a Bloomingdale's Home. In June 2020, the store is slated to vacate the building, which has been bought by major River North developers Friedman Properties. Its future tenant is unknown.

There are other buildings like this one, that mimic “the Islamic” or “the Oriental” in ways that are shoddy, painstaking, and dated, yet also hard to look away from.





In Chicago, for example, there is the Avalon Regal Theater, at 79th St., in the South Shore and Avalon Park neighborhoods. Its pseudo-Islamic exterior is emphasized by its pseudo-minarets. The interior of the theater is made to resemble a cityscape or bazaar, with shallow buildings lining the walls under a starry night sky, as though the inside were actually another outdoors. After several decades of changing hands and intermittent closures, and now backed by a \$1 million donation from Kanye West, the Avalon Regal's new owner is now trying to reinvent it as a theater for holographic films.

“Islamic Revival” is a term whose inexact definition seems to mirror the jumbled array of buildings it is meant to describe.¹ It refers, roughly, to buildings in Europe, North America, and Latin America built by and for white or non-Middle Eastern audiences in the mid 19th to early 20th century that took their stylistic cues from Egyptian, Babylonian, Moorish, Islamic, Persian, Turkish, and Mughal architecture. Part of the wider set of Orientalist architectural styles, which might also include Chinese and Japanese elements, “Islamic Revival” is characterized by an open mingling of disparate architectural elements not only with each other, but also with European styles, and particularly the Gothic. These buildings might be storefronts, movie theaters, seaside piers, exhibition halls, synagogues, or, as with the Medinah “Temple,”

¹ Buildings of these types have also been referred to as “Arabian,” “Saracen,” and “Mahometan,” “Neo-Moorish” and “Neo-Mudejar,” and even “Exotic Revival” and “Fantasy Revival.” Clay Lancaster, writing in *Art Bulletin* in 1947, uses the terms “Near Eastern eclecticism,” “Oriental buildings,” and “Orientalized buildings,” then refers to the slightly more accurate descriptor (Egyptian, etc.) There seems to be little consensus as to which of these terms are preferred, or which ones might better reflect a critical distance from the style itself, a distance which I have tried to convey with excessive use of quotation marks.

buildings associated with the Shriners. They might have onion domes, horseshoe arches, crenellated arches, tri-lobed arches, pseudo-minarets, interior fountains, pagoda-like roof situations, star-shaped rooms, columns with bud or bell capitals, ornamental tilework, or filigree windows. Islamic revival is, more than anything, a style of incessant decoration, a horror vacui of the Western hand. Or they might not be whole buildings, but only a single interior room, replete with cushions and hookahs and imported, “genuine,” tile.

But none of the things that gave rise to the building seem to populate it now. This is a place manned with clerks trying to sell toasters and armchairs and serving platters, a place where muzac reigns supreme. It is an architectural mullet: exotica on the outside, nondescript mall within.

And so, walking down Wabash, in the break between glassy buildings, confronted simultaneously with a line of Arabic stonework that wraps around the grand entrance and the dull, understated graphics of the Bloomingdale’s banners, I was confused.

Problems

There are problems at 600 North Wabash Ave., and they start right away. They start with the founding of the Ancient Arabic Order of the Mystic Shrine.

The Shriners are a fraternal order within Freemasonry that flourished in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The Shriners may be best known for their hospitals, the first founded in the 1920’s, during the polio epidemic, which specialize in pediatric care. By 1878, there were 425 Shriners in 13 Temples; by 1900 there were 85,000 Shriners and 82 Temples. (Every Shriner is a Mason, but not every Mason is a Shriner. After completing the third and final degree, he becomes a Master Mason, and is then eligible to become a Shriner.)

From the beginning, the association of the “orient” with entertainment was central to the Shriners. Founded in New York City in 1872 by a group of Masons who wanted to move from the order’s seriousness to one based more on “fun,” they chose an “Arabian theme” because one of these members, according to Shriners lore, attended a party hosted by an “Arabian diplomat” -- the origin-story provides no specifics -- in Paris. Even their name, “Shriner,” is a strange anglicization, if anglicization means “perversion of comprehension.” It would be the equivalent of taking the cross and the Bible and moments of church architecture and founding

an order of people called Churchers. Like many other fraternal orders -- the larger umbrella of Masonic groups, the Shriners were founded and maintained as exclusive spaces for the white men who were initiated as nobles. But there is a parallel lineage, one that is largely separate from the white lineage, of black Masonic orders, including black Shriners chapters.²



Cultural burlesque continues to characterize their rituals and public personas, with slightly updated performances, such as the addition of platoons of tiny cars. Now the fabric of their “harem” pants is chintzy, and there are strange combinations, like a troupe in a Christmas parade, playing “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer” on horns and drums as they march in curly-toed elf shoes, alternating between fez and santa hat.

To look at a photograph of Shriners in costume then or now is to be thrust fully into the inseparability of cultural appropriation from the core tenets of the Order. The Shriners remain, to this day, fundamentally gross in their use of racial and religious mockery. But a building is in a different relationship to time than a photograph of a performance or a live parade. A building is not in human-time like a shirt or a skit. A building lasts longer, potentially outlasts the architects who designed it and the workmen who built it. The built world -- not just buildings, but dams, earthworks, highways -- gets as close to the geologic as the human made can. And if its value

² Masonry originated in England and soon made its way to Colonial America -- the first Grand Lodge was founded in 1717 in London, and, less than twenty years later, the first Grand Lodge in North America, St. John's Lodge in Boston. In 1775, after being denied membership by the Boston Lodge, Prince Hall, a formerly enslaved leatherworker, and 14 other black men were initiated in a British Army regiment lodge in Boston. Eventually the African Lodge No. 459 was granted Grand Lodge status by a British lodge, meaning it had the power to certify new lodges, and from this nucleus Prince Hall Masonry spread throughout Colonial America and the rest of the world. Through Prince Hall masonry, Prince Hall Shiner temples sprang up as well, under the name *Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (A.E.A.O.N.M.S.)*, as opposed to *Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (A.A.O.N.M.S.)*. Although white Masonic lodges began to accept applicants of color in the '60s, in some cases this is more stated claim than practiced reality. Some white lodges have only recognized the legitimacy of Prince Hall lodges, even those based in the same state, as recently as the early 2000's.

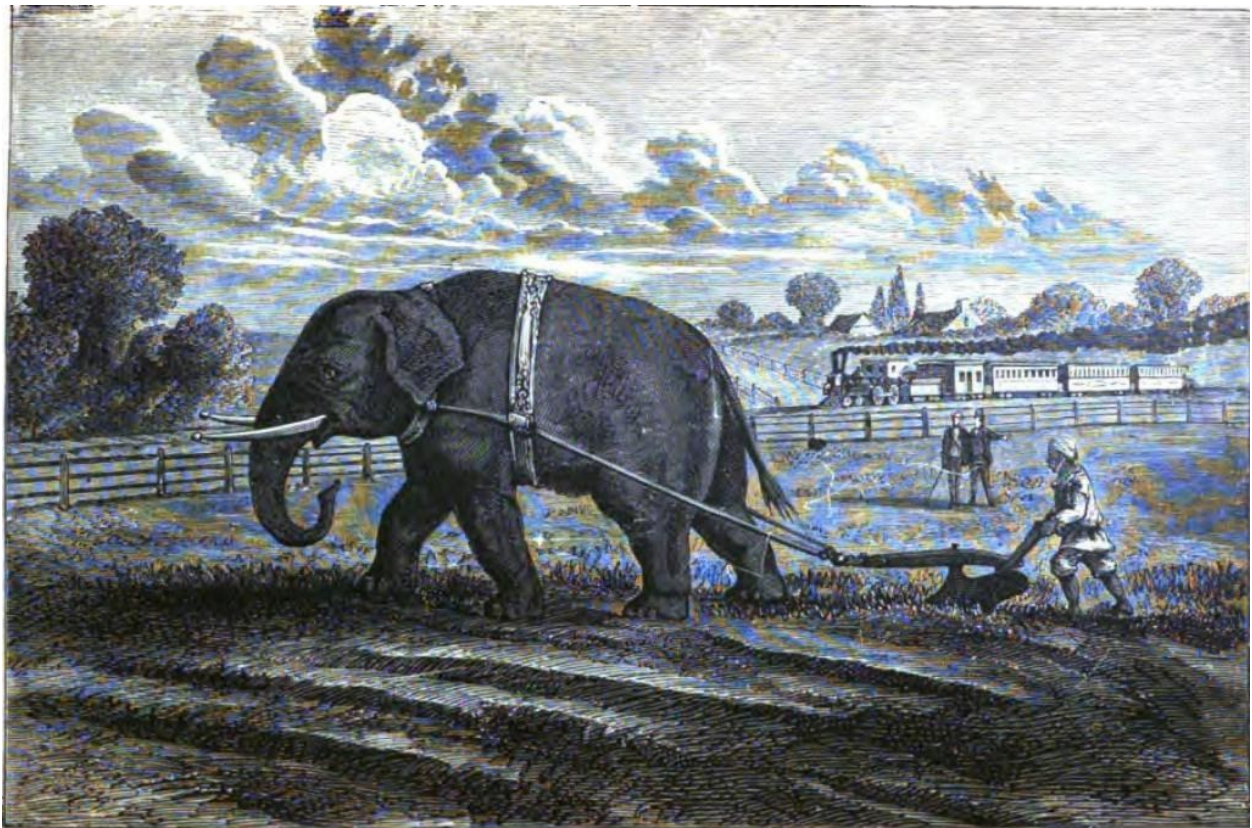
sustains it, if it remains financially viable or viable as a piece of capital-H History, the building shifts into a different register.

Fun

The Shriners were not the only ones to associate “the East” with entertainment. As discussed by Edward Said, and taken up and complicated by several generations of later scholars, “Orientalism” is a discursive system in which the violence of Western colonial expansion was linked to a fantasy of “the East” -- a nonexistent “Orient” of conflated cultures, stereotyped and imagined as backwards -- that justified Western cultural superiority. Cultural production not only in architecture, but also in other mediums, like painting, literature, and theater, were places in which this imaginary was translated into tangible forms. The association between fun and “the East” also meant that “Islamic Revival” architecture was favored for other spaces associated with leisure, such as seaside piers, exhibition halls, and theaters. Although some original seems inherent to the term “revival,” there was no original model style. It was only ever the revival of the architects’ ideas.

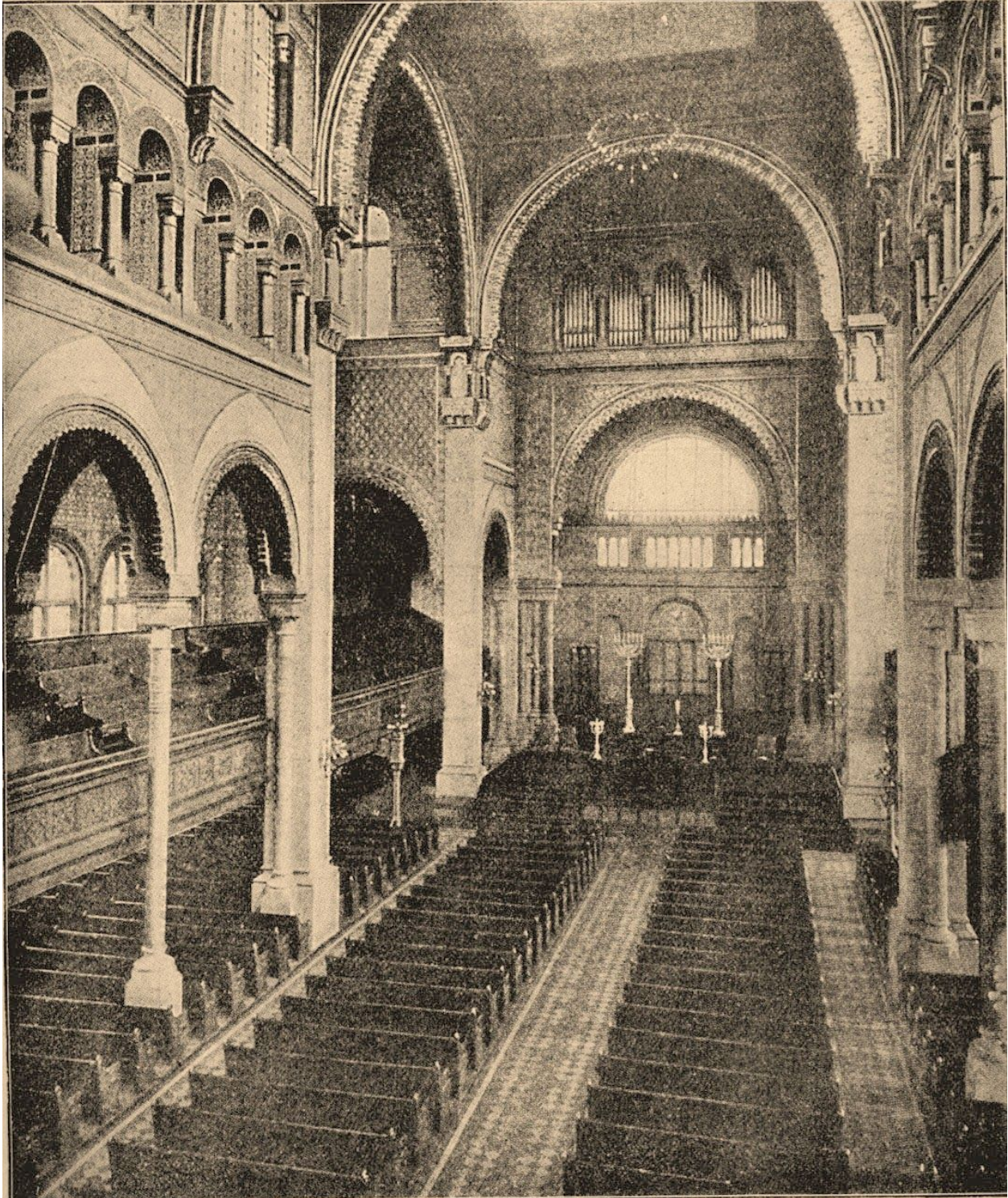


One of the first of these buildings in the United States was called Iranistan. After visiting the Brighton Palace, a royal residence in England with Mughal and Islamic architectural elements, P.T. Barnum of circus fame decided to build his own palace in Bridgeport, Connecticut, conveniently visible to train passengers on the New York and New Haven railroads. Although Barnum claimed in his autobiography to have requested plans of the Brighton Palace from a London architect, his mansion was drawn up by American architect Leopold Eidlitz. ("It was but a superficial interpretation of the English palace," Lancaster writes, as though the true source of the culturally genuine were the fricassee of domes and latticework that was the Brighton Palace.)



BARNUM'S ELEPHANT PLOUGHING IN 1855.

The building's visible placement to train passengers and choice of style were part of Barnum's marketing scheme, as though it were shapeshifting between mansion, billboard, and circus tent. Another part of his advertising tactic was having workmen pretend to plow the fields with elephants.



This interpretation, however, of Orientalist architecture's inherent link to leisure, is slightly more complicated. From the 1830's to World War I, Moorish revival synagogues were common in Jewish communities around the world (Kalmar, 69). Although some historians and contemporary

viewers have linked the Moorish revival synagogue's style to Sephardic communities, or read it as a reference to the Jews of Muslim Spain – a sort of golden age for Jewry -- Kalmar asserts that the majority of these synagogues, and none until the 1870's, reference Muslim Spain. They were instead built by modernizing Ashkenazi communities as stylistic expressions of self-orientalization, asserting a "Semitic" pride in Easternness and otherness (Kalmar, 69-70). It was precisely through underscoring this otherness, at a time when increasing tolerance for Jews in Europe made undisguised synagogues possible, that Ashkenazim sought to place themselves in European society.

Synagogues seem to have little in common with Islamic Revival mansions and theaters. But what unites all of these is their invocation of the exotic in the service of hypervisible. In fact, Leopold Eidlitz, a Prague-born Jewish architect and one of the founders of the American Institute of Architects, designed both Iranistan and a Moorish Revival synagogue in New York City, Temple Emanu-El, the first Reform Jewish congregation in New York City. Islamic revival was used like a neon sign, which, when one drew close enough to read, dissolved into a pseudo script, a jumble of dots and ideas whose only purpose had been to proclaim its obvious otherness.



But cultural forms can mutate in unexpected ways. There are other building types now ubiquitous throughout the world that have lost all connotations of cultural otherness, such as the gazebo or the bungalow, which comes from the Gujarati “bungalo,” or “house in the Bengali style.” The British began to employ bungalows as standard European housing in India, until it came to symbolize the British Empire itself (Mackenzie 100). Its first widespread use in the West, albeit in altered forms, was in 1860’s British seaside resorts, through which it became associated with vacation. In the 20th century, it became widespread in American suburbs.

So I am walking in River North, or I am walking in Addison, Illinois, or I am walking in Elgin or Skokie or La Grange. And before me I see structures made of proof: tangible, three dimensional proof, that links the shopping district or the suburb or the cul-de-sac to a twofold colonial violence: the violence of British colonial rule from which the shape of the house comes in a roundabout way, to the violence of American settler-colonialism realized on the piece of land on which each house sits.

Sleep 1

Parts of the building take turns at rest. Now the main entrance is asleep on its feet.

When 600 N. Wabash was a theater, this entrance in the building’s center, located halfway down the block between Ontario and Ohio, was where cars pulled in to let out passengers. It was where the street slowed and the traffic pulled up closer to the building like an eddy departs from a stream.

But now its mainness has been taken out from under it. It retains its function even as it demonstrates its obsolescence. In order to get to this entrance from the street, you would have to walk by the doors at the building’s corners. Or you would have to cross Wabash in the middle of the block, where there is no pedestrian crosswalk, to get here. And so the only reason I can think of that you would walk through these doors at all is if you were leaving the store, because its function as an entrance has been usurped.

And now the busiest parts of the nervous system, an anxious system, is not the main doorway, but the cash register, the muzac, the wifi, the CCTV, these regions of circulation that push on even when the lights go off.

Sleep 2

It is one thing to locate the beginning of a style, but another to define the conditions and reasons for its end. As Mackenzie writes,

“The sheer range of eclectic experimentation, together with the critical debates about climatic and cultural, religious and geographical suitability which it stimulated, prevented the emergence of a continuing and influential set of oriental forms which might have seriously modified European architecture. In the nineteenth-century ‘battle of the styles’ between Gothic and classical, the Orientalist interest constituted a set of relatively minor, geographically distant and virtually unrelated skirmishes” (71).

“Islamic Revival,” in other words, was a Western aesthetic moment, a fashion that came and went. And so, when it is preserved, it is this epoch that is preserved -- Chicago circa 1912 -- what Huehl and Schmid and the Medinah Shriners thought the the Middle East looked like.

Where did Islamic Revival “go”?

Maybe it disappeared, because all things decorative or extraneous -- whether they were Oriental/ist, Gothic, or Beaux-Arts -- were shaved off in pursuit of Modernist slickness.

Or it disappeared, in the manner of bungalows and pavilions and moments of ironwork. It became so commonplace that bits of Orientalist architecture assimilated into, or were assimilated by, the entity that is “American Architecture” or “Western Architecture” -- whatever those are.

Or it stayed around, and the spirit of “Islamic Revival” -- the spirit motivating the construction of extremely vaguely mosque-like buildings -- became the spirit of Islamophobia, the spirit motivating opposition to the construction of actual mosques.



It's also right down the street, at 1240 West Randolph, at the Alhambra Palace Restaurant and nightclub, with its belly dancers, "Latin dancers," "genuine furnishings," "over 250 pieces of art," and "Middle Eastern musicians." To quote the website copy: "Once you've been transported to Alhambra Palace's exotic fantasy land, we're sure you'll have an unforgettable experience you'll never forget!"

It's still here, timelocked in its rehearsal of stereotypes and its beeline associations between exotic places and fun. But now the buildings are casinos, like the former Trump Taj Mahal -- under new ownership, and renamed the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino -- in Atlantic City, or the Luxor Las Vegas, with its pyramid-sized pyramid, twin ziggurats, and enormous sphinx. Buildings that I imagine art historians of today, just like those of 19th and 20th century looking at Islamic Revival, consider lowbrow, offensive, and devoid of art: novelty beneath the serious discipline of architecture.

"Unusual"

The Medinah Shriners, too, are still around. Now based in Addison, IL, a suburb twenty miles west of Chicago, they are housed in a building that seems to reference the Temple, but turns down the flame of its structural fantasy. The Addison building looks like a natural outgrowth of the parking lot that encircles it. It is not not so much Arabia as Suburbia.

But the Medinah Temple almost didn't make it. In the late 1990's, as the group's membership sank and the building's upkeep began to outweigh the revenue it brought in, they voted to sell it.

A Chicago developer proposed demolishing the building to make way for a 400-room luxury hotel and a 40-story residential building.

When a building receives historic landmark status, parts of it, particularly its interior, may be unprotected. First, if there were any concerns about accuracy (which seem particularly relevant to the building in question) its location must be confirmed:

that part of Block 27 in Kinzie's Addition to Chicago, in Section 10, Township 39 North, Range 14 East of the Third Principal Meridian, lying east of the following described line:

beginning at a point on the north line of said block, 144.03 feet west of the northeast corner thereof; thence south on a line forming an angle of 89 degrees, 54 minutes, 48 seconds to the right of the last described line, 49.53 feet; thence west on a line forming an angle of 89 degrees, 49 minutes, 06 seconds, to the left of the last described line, 6.00 feet; thence south on a line forming an angle of 90 degrees, 10 minutes, 55 seconds to the right of the last described line, 119.45 feet; thence east on a line forming an angle of 89 degrees, 33 minutes, 57 seconds to the right of the last described line, 6.02 feet; thence south on a line forming an angle of 89 degrees, 24 minutes, 13 seconds to the left of the last described line, 49.22 feet to a point on the south line of said block, 144.08 feet west of the southeast corner thereof, in Cook County, Illinois.

There is a strange historical mirroring that happens at the Medinah Temple: designed to stand out, it was also preserved because it continues to stand out. Another passage from the proceedings of the Chicago City Council's Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards, which approved its status on June 27, 2001, reads:

WHEREAS, The Medinah Temple, since its opening in 1912, has served as the Chicago headquarters of a popular national fraternal organization, the Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, commonly known as the Shriners; and

WHEREAS, The Medinah Temple is an important and unusual example of Islamic Revival architecture, an unusual architectural style in Chicago and a style closely associated with the Shriners; and

WHEREAS, The Medinah Temple is one of the best examples of Shrine mosque architecture in the United States and exhibits excellent ornamental detailing and craftsmanship in brick, terra cotta and stained glass; and

WHEREAS, The Medinah Temple, with its distinctive Islamic-influenced design, has been an important visual landmark of the Near North neighborhood for almost ninety (90) years; now, therefore,

The oddness of the building juts against the stiffness of the text. A list of some adjectives in the above: “popular ... Ancient Arabic ... Mystic... important and unusual ...unusual ... excellent ... stained ... distinctive ... important.” Built in the style of a projected architectural past, it is now preserved to hold the pose forever, as though it never existed in the present.

The renovation was extensive. The proscenium was preserved, but the inside was scooped out and reanimated. Behind the pearly curtain that spans the three floors, the stage, once the region that was most visible and brilliant and awake, is now shipping.



Sleep 3

But I want to skip through the 20th century with its pile of bungalows and inappropriate onion domes for a moment. I want to pass the kitchenware on the ground floor and take the escalators that crisscross in front of the concealed stage like two waterfalls moving in unison to end on the top floor.

It is here that the rehab becomes most skin-like. This floor is built close to the dome, so close that to look up at it from here is like pressing your face to the top of a tent.

There is something funny about transition from theater to home goods store. The stage has been extended into every inch of space, and all the actors, the watched things, are props. The subject of the show is now the still things themselves.

The third floor is built like an internal sheath. There are beige demi-walls that separate quasi-room from quasi-room and jut up weirdly against the side of the building itself. They only go about ten feet up; above them, and through the window-like cut outs, corners of the stained glass windows are visible.

There are perhaps thirty germs of ideas of bedrooms up here, commingled with their possible living rooms. There are sectional couches, tags hanging off the back, arranged in pseudo-domestic scenes around carpets and coffee tables like statuary around a garden. And on each coffee table, a single centerpiece. One silver curvilinear platter, filled with silver balls, is clinking slightly; and although I examine it, I cannot tell if the source of the clinking is the platter against the table, or the balls against the silver; nor can I determine if the rocking movement is caused by a nearby train, or the current from the central air, or the building shaking slightly in the wind.

There is art in here, too. An enormous glossy photography of a neon sign that says MORE. The art is otherwise abstract, because abstract art is best to project ideas onto or ignore.

There is track lighting hung from wires across the demi-walls.

The home goods store is a sort of mega-possibilities of houses, a stuttering interior dream. It is the long entrails of the McMansions, the things you put inside McMansions, and so to write

about a Bloomingdale's home goods store is to write a salvage anthropology of McMansion interior design.

The top of the dome is uncertain: it has teardrops of stained glass ringing its center, but they're dark, like there is something obstructing the light above them.

Home goods stores are like a kind of revivalism, a tactile afterlife of a decorative ideal. In the way that the subject of revivalism recedes from each realized building -- there was no original, there is nothing to be revived -- so the ideal of a perfect home recedes.

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