

Virtual Assembly: The Transformative Power of Artistic Collaboration and Experiential Archiving

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Abstract

This visual essay introduces *Virtual Assembly* (2023), an interactive 3D model of the Old Kent Road Mosque, London's oldest Nigerian community. In September 2021, the mosque building was demolished to allow for a six-storey mosque to be built on the site as both an act of devotion and a practical response to a growing community. Before the demolition, a LiDAR scan of the entire building was made by the Fabrication Lab at the University of Westminster. Working in collaboration with the Old Kent Road Mosque community, this scan became the foundation for an interactive 3D model to house pre-recorded films of congregational prayers, complemented by a collection of stories and personal accounts from mosque members. The project's methodology, 'Site-integrity', directly involved community members in the capture and analysis of their cultural heritage through artistic collaboration and experiential archiving. This democratic approach to research encourages reflexive conversations that avoid reductive ethnographic portraits of subjects, transforming the traditional anthropological 'subject of research' into the producer of their voice. The essay explores the potential of art and technology to promote polyvocality and investigate new ways to capture, perform, and safeguard diaspora faith communities' intangible cultural heritage through innovative digital modelling.

Keywords

Place-making, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Spatiality, Interactive, Experiential Archive, Virtual environments, Place-based storytelling

Introduction

Grass-rooted, designed and in many cases built by its users, the adapted mosque has generated an entirely new architecture for Britain. 'In many cases, the adapted buildings, after several extensions and modifications, are eventually demolished, and a large purpose-built mosque replaces it to accommodate a growing community'. [1] This visual essay introduces the research project *Virtual Assembly* (2023), a 3D virtual model that performs the materiality of Old Kent Road Mosque, a community in flux during their own redevelopment journey. Before the demolition of the Old Kent Road Mosque in 2021 (fig.1), the building was LiDAR scanned (fig.2, following page), forming the foundations of an interactive model. The point cloud 3D model accurately represented the architectural space for the congregation and users to explore. Pre-recorded films of congregational prayer are set within the context of a collection of stories and personal accounts from the congregation members. As the community explore the interior of the mosque, they can choose to activate the research findings produced as part of the project. The model hosts the congregation's social histories and personal accounts in the context of their own narrative, offering innovative ways to engage with London's oldest Nigerian community's tangible and intangible cultural heritage during a significant phase of their evolutionary journey. This visual essay illustrates the project's narrative, a collaboration with the Old Kent Road Mosque congregation and Islamic scholars



Fig.1 Outside view of Old Kent Road Mosque prior to demolition.

of MANUK (Muslim Association of Nigeria UK). It examines the research methodology 'Site-integrity' and describes how *Virtual Assembly* adheres to the social, religious, and cultural discourses present in the mosque and the ethics of the use of technology within a sacred site. The essay concludes by reflecting on the congregation's feedback on the project and the future focus of the research.



Fig.2 3D scan of Old Kent Road Mosque created by the Fabrication Lab, University of Westminster.

Context

In the early 1960s, a transient community of Nigerians came to London to study. Initially staying only for short periods, it wasn't until the 1980s that a more permanent community began to form, giving rise to the Muslim Association of Nigeria UK (MAN UK). In 1993, MAN UK acquired its first place of worship, the Old Kent Road Mosque, in Southwark, London. The building used to be a Victorian public house called the Duke of Kent. The bar and function room were both converted into two prayer spaces of equal size, the building's layout ensured equality for the male and female congregation.

The women's space was accessed through the front entrance, while the men's space was accessed via an outside staircase. In 2018, as both an act of devotion and a practical response to a growing community, approval was granted for a six-storey mosque to be built on the Old Kent Road site (fig.3) and in the summer of 2021 the mosque doors closed for the final time and the community moved to temporary smaller space (fig.4). In September 2021 the Old Kent Road Mosque building was demolished (fig.5&6). In November 2023 the frame of the six-story mosque stands proud on the site, reliant on the continued support and donations to fund the remaining stages of the project.

Old Kent Road Mosque REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Our new purpose-built mosque and Islamic centre is due to be built on the existing site. This exciting new project will increase prayer space, expand our Markaz and maximise our potential.

+ The Project

The Prophet s.a.w said "The (whole) earth has been made a place of prayer for me (and my ummah)" [Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī 438]

The new six-storey building will feature an Islamic Cultural Centre for religious, educational, community and leisure use. The new centre will enhance the existing provision and accommodate new facilities including:

- Additional prayer space
- Bookshop and library
- Sports hall/youth centre
- Additional classrooms and function rooms
- Dedicated counselling office
- Dedicated funeral preparation facilities
- Commercial space and retail units available



Fig.3 Old Kent Road Mosque development proposal.



Fig.4 Congregation members moving the minbar to a temporary site.



Fig.5 Demolition of Old Kent Road Mosque, September 2021.



Fig.6 Inside Old Kent Mosque prior to demolition, June 2021.

Project Narrative

Virtual Assembly was born out of a study of congregational prayer at Old Kent Road Mosque as part of my long-standing research project *Assembly* (2018–20). *Assembly* is a series of site-specific installations that perform Islamic prayer spaces, made and exhibited in Brick Lane Mosque (2018–19); and Old Kent Road Mosque (2019–20). The moving image installations were made in collaboration with each mosque community establishing clear guidelines for the filming process and ensuring an ethical, non-intrusive approach that respects the sacred moment of worship. Automated motorised camera rigs were installed in each mosque (fig.7) to record the Jumu'ah prayer from above. The film was then projected onto the same carpet where the prayer took place (fig. 9 following page), encouraging each community to reflect on their own religious practices and explore thoughts and feelings related to worship, time, space, and being. The 1:1 ratio between the image and site meant the projection appeared multi-layered. As artist William Raban described, “There is something beguiling and uncanny to these artworks where the digital moving image hovers improbably above its ‘real’ counterpart”. [2] Not only is the footage specific to each mosque but you also see the fluidity of the congregation and appreciate the uniqueness of individuals. This projection, functioning as both documentation and a performance of religious practice, was designed to allow others to immerse themselves in the experience of prayer through artistic representation. However, before the site performance could occur at Old Kent Road Mosque, the project was disrupted by Covid-19; the mosque had to close, and the project was subsequently put on hold.

During the pandemic, ongoing communication with the mosque community continued, leading us to opt for live streaming of *Assembly* as a component of Virtual Visit My Mosque 2020—an initiative on a

national scale organised by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) (fig. 8). This initiative encourages more than 250 mosques throughout the UK to organise open days, extending a warm welcome to neighbours of all faiths and none, to foster connections across diverse communities. By working closely with the Old Kent Road community, we developed an online experience for the event that welcomed the local community and an international audience to ‘virtually’ access the physical mosque. After the live stream, I joined a Q&A with MCB members, scholars, and the wider community to discuss the nature of the virtual in relation to Islamic religious practice. This discussion was the catalyst for *Virtual Assembly* an interactive 3D model of the mosque that asked the following questions; Can a virtual space act as a site for continued connection for a mosque community? How can digital technologies capture and preserve cultural heritage, particularly intangible cultural practices? And what possibilities may exist for place-making and storytelling through digital reconstructions and archiving?



Fig.7 Filming congregational prayer in the main prayer room.



Fig.8 Screenshot of Visit My Mosque Online, 2020, featuring Old Kent Road Mosque.

Old Kent Road Mosque & Islamic Cultural Centre - MAN UK was live. June 20 · 🌐

Visit My Mosque 2020 x Old Kent Road Mosque

Visit My Mosque 2020 Virtual Tours will be running over the course of this weekend!... See More

👍❤️ 13 18 Comments 1.4K Views

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share 🌐

Comments Hide

Most Relevant ▾

👤 Mufutau Adewale · 0:37
Alhamdulillah.This is indeed a wonderful and fantastic presentation .May Allah continue to reward you all for propagation of His religion.

Like · Reply · 10w

Fig.9 Reprojection of Congregational prayer in the main prayer room at Old Kent Road Mosque.



Methodology

Before the mosque building was demolished in 2021, the entire building was LiDAR scanned (fig.10). The resulting point cloud became the foundation for a 3D interactive model. The content was collaboratively produced with the congregation shaped by the research methodology known as ‘Site-integrity.’ This approach employs artistic techniques to explore a site’s social, religious, architectural, and institutional practices. ‘Site-integrity questions the traditional comprehension of space and presents it as dualistically experienced and represented’. [3] The methodology presents recorded material back into its original filming location using motorised architectural rigs, carefully defining spatial position and context. This process ensures an accurate transfer of scale and time, reorienting the act of representation from retrospective or projective dimensions to the experiential realm.

Within the interactive virtual site, pre-recorded films of congregational prayer were incorporated, following the movement from the entrance to the mihrab (fig.12). This mirrored the original filming method and resulted in a dynamic floor projection from an overhead perspective. The integration of LiDAR point cloud technology allowed these prayer films to seamlessly merge with the architectural structure of the original site, embedded within a compilation of narratives and personal accounts from congregation members. To avoid oversimplified ethnographic depictions, community members engaged in reflective dialogues by interviewing each other, empowering them to craft their own narratives (fig.11). Additionally, ongoing contributions from community members ensured that the models remained dynamic, fluid, and in a constant state of (re) production. This builds on Stuart Hall’s concept of the ‘living archive’, which he characterises as ‘ever-present, ongoing, perpetual, incomplete, and limitless’. [4]

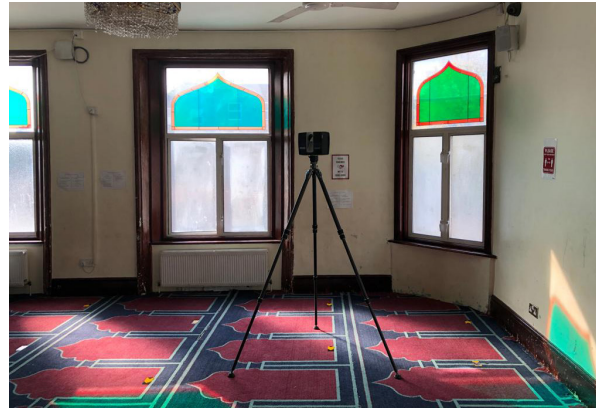


Fig.10 LiDAR scanner in Old Kent Mosque.



Fig.11 Congregation members interviewing themselves.



Fig.12 LiDAR scan of the male prayer room with the pre-recorded congregational prayer, along with quotes from congregation members.

Technology as a place-making tool

Virtual Assembly introduces new avenues for establishing, sustaining, and transforming connections and a sense of belonging through innovative digital modeling (fig.13&14). As a congregation member expresses, “Now that the mosque building itself has been pulled down, we’ve lost everything. Outside of the building, we’re continuing as a community, and this platform helps maintain a very good virtual connection and a sense of belonging.” *Virtual Assembly* recognises technology as a medium for place-making; it becomes

a “powerful theatre for memory, both individual and collective”. [5] Echoing Anne-Marie Fortier’s (1999) perspective, technology breaks away from traditional heritage presentations, empowering communities to shape their own narratives. [6] As one congregation member discusses, “In this project, filming technology has come to meet ethics. Ordinarily, a mosque would be seen as a sacred place where you hardly touch anything. The way technology has been used, in such that it did not disrespect the space, it worked with the space and our community to tell our individual and collective story” (Congregation feedback).



Fig.14 Exhibition view of *Virtual Assembly* in Ambika P3 gallery, UK



Fig.13 3D scan of Old Kent Road Mosque created by the Fabrication Lab, University of Westminster.



Fig.15 Exhibition view of *Virtual Assembly* in Ambika P3 Gallery London, UK.

A catalyst for community reflection and identity building

During the project's development phase, a series of prototypes were exhibited at Ambika P3 Gallery in London (fig.15 previous page, fig.16,17&18), allowing congregation members to engage with the models and reflect upon the work. As one congregation member states, "The work showed the limitation of human memory; I realised I had already forgotten many of my embedded memories within this space which this virtual experience is re-living for me, the feeling of walking down a particular step or the bit of carpet where I usually pray. I walk to the parts which mean the most to me. A photograph cannot do this, relive these sensations, and when we are in our new building, there is a likelihood that we will forget about this space." (Congregation member). Within this framework, cultural heritage is regarded as performative memory, which has the potential to stimulate community-based reflections on past, present, and future identities. "When you experience the virtual site, you feel like you are coming home. It's like you have many embedded memories and histories in that building and in the space. I think it's historically important work, not just sentimentally, as our community



Fig.16 Congregation members participating in a Q&A at Ambika P3.

was formed in that space and building" (Congregation member). Due to the building's physical absence, the experience has transitioned to a virtual realm, prompting contemplation of the relationship between physical space and its utilisation, as one congregant aptly observes, "Even though the mosque was quite small for us, there was space above us, the space was there. I never thought about space in that sense; you know, a lot of the time, as human beings, we are only conscious about the space we use physically around us, but there's space beyond that, and our new six-story mosque will now capture that for us" (Congregation member). *Virtual Assembly* employs visual, spatial, and auditory elements rooted in collective memory, creating a virtual space for contemplating the dynamic relationship between the past, present and future.



Fig.17 Congregation members interacting with *Virtual Assembly*.



Fig.18 Congregation members interacting with *Virtual Assembly* in Ambika P3 Gallery, London, UK.

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Biography

Julie Marsh is an artist and researcher at the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM) at the University of Westminster. Julie is a specialist in collaborative and knowledge-led approaches to field research. In 2017, she coined the term 'site-integrity' as part of her practice-based PhD at London College of Communication, University of the Arts, London. Her interdisciplinary practice explores the intersections between film, installation, performance and site-specificity. Through the exploration of real and representational space, she investigates how technical machines can perform site, creating critical experiences for audiences that open debate and question social spaces. She has exhibited most recently as part of the 'Three British Mosques' at Venice Architecture Biennale 2021, LOOP Moving Image Festival, Barcelona (2019), The Biennial for Emerging Arts, Romania (2018) The Starmach Gallery, Krakow (2018), Sputnik-Kino, Berlin Short Film Festival (2018), Meetfactory, International Centre of Contemporary Art, Prague (2018).