

Dr. Omar Khalidi of MIT's Department of Architecture presents his photo exhibition

"Mosques in America." December 2-4, 2006.

(Words that could not be identified are marked "???")

Speaker: Dr. Khalidi, Mr. Claussen, dear members of the American embassy, dear colleagues and dear students. Dr. Khalidi, we're very honored that you've come to the Theodor Heuss-school to share with us your wisdom and experience. We're also grateful to the US embassy for making this event possible. For those who don't know Dr. Khalidi, he was educated in India , risen in the United States. His interests are in the sociology of politics, economic mobility of ethnic groups and nationalism. He is the author of Indian Muslims Since Independence end edited Hyderabad: After the Fall. Dr. Khalidi.

Dr. Khalidi: Good morning. I'm truly delighted to be here in your high school, and in many ways it reminds me of some of the high schools where we have multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic students. In MIT, my own institution, fully 18 % of the students at MIT, America's top-notch university, are people from outside of the US. This is not to include the children of immigrant parents who were born and raised in the US, so MIT is a very multi-ethnic, multi-religious campus to be at. I am grateful to the embassy for inviting me here, and I'm grateful to the school for welcoming us here to give a talk about American Muslim live, and what it means to us Muslims as well as to the rest of the American population. So what I am going to do is to show a thin slice of American Muslim life and by extension also talk about how Islam is seen by Americans at large. I may do so, am I, are you able to understand me?

Audience: Yes.

Dr. Khalidi: Good. Wonderful.

Audience: Can you be a bit louder perhaps?

Dr. Khalidi: Okay. Okay. As you know, America was founded on religious liberty. That is the foundation stone of the new country, the new nation of America, because people were fleeing from England because of religious persecution, and found religious liberty in America, so that is a very important principle of American civilization. Secondly, America is a land of immigrants. Everybody has been an immigrant from somewhere or the other, except for Native Americans, since about everybody there has come from a different part of the world altogether. But it is also true that these

people, having come from various places in the world are also very deeply religious at the same time. In other words, there is a big deal of diversity within people in America in terms of Christianity itself for instance. There are numerous denominations. If you don't like the church that your parents were or that you are born into, you can always go and found a new church and start your own denomination, so there is freedom all over, there is freedom to believe, freedom not to believe or change your mind any time you want, and so forth. The state does not interfere at all one way or the other. It doesn't ask you to believe, it does not ask you not to believe, it's entirely up to you, what you wanna do. And the third thing is that the laws in the United States guarantee religious freedom by the Federal Government, to everyone. But at the smaller level of governments, if you want to build a mosque, you don't have to ask anybody's permission other than the city governments. And most often there is no problem whether you want to build a synagogue, a Jewish place of worship, a mosque, or for whatever other religious group that you happen to be. That is, I think, the basic principle of what America is all about. And as you know these are not just things on the paper, but these are live, dynamic principles that are followed no matter what has happened, so that immigration continues, people come in from all over to the United States. Skilled people, semi-skilled people, people with no skills, families getting reunited and so forth so that this is a country that is still, is a land of immigrants in many ways. And now I want to turn then to the situation of Muslims in America and show their places of worship, how diverse they are, how similar they are or whether the Muslims in America want to integrate into the American society, or do they want to stand apart, do they want to mix a little, not mix. So there's a whole range of issues that we can talk about. But let me give you now a bit of a background of Islam in America. Today it is estimated that there are over 2,000 mosques in America. Out of which a little over a hundred were built for the purpose of the mosque. The large number of mosques were earlier schools, churches, warehouses and whatever other buildings were available or sold to the community and then converted into mosques. But about a hundred, a little over a hundred are built from the beginning as mosques, and those are the ones that I would show you the pictures of. And it illustrates, it shows you the diversity within Muslims. So Muslims began to come to United States since the 19th century, when Araman Empire was breaking up, and so you had communities of Muslims and Christians from the Middle East coming to all over US, but also in some of the smaller Midwestern states so that you find Arab-American communities in Deerporn, Michigan, in Iowa, Midwest of the US, and then late 19th century, early 20th century, you find people, Muslims from India also coming via Canada by boats and so forth, so in California you find Muslim communities from India dating back to the 19th century, early 20th century. So there were the beginning of Muslim presence in America, although it is now recorded that a large number of African American slaves were in fact Muslim. And many of them retained their Islamic faith. In deep south, in North Carolina I happened to see a mosque

which dates from late 18th century and has a Qur'an, the Islamic scripture, preserved from that time in Arabic, so it is an indication of how deep Islam is in America. In the 1960s, a large number of African Americans began to embrace Islam, become Muslim, because they found it to be something that appeals to them spiritually. So a large number of Africans, African Americans, became Muslims. Then in the 1960s, late 1960s, 1965, there was a famous landmark: immigration laws were changed to allow people from just about every part of the globe to immigrate to US. So you had a large number of immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and so forth, so then again, because of all the problems and troubles in the Middle East you had immigration from the middle eastern countries, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, just about every country. So that today, there are I'd say three main ethnic slice national groups of Muslims in America. One would be the African Americans, about 30 %, and another good 30 % or so would be Muslims from the subcontinent of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, followed by people from the Middle East. Muslims from the Middle East actually are smaller in numbers when compared to the ones from African Americans and Indians, Pakistani and Bangladeshis.

Here and there in New York, you will find even Muslims from Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon. So that you have people from just about everywhere. It is said that at the time of hadjj, you see the greatest diversity of Muslims in one place for two or three days. But in United States you will find that same diversity reflected 365 days of the year. Throughout the year. So it is an astoundingly rich community in terms of which ethnic, religious, ethnic and cultural diversity. All of the Muslimic immigrants speak English fluently. Many of them, the majority of them have college degrees, so that they are in the mainstream of the national economy. You will find engineers, doctors, people who are scientists, who are running their businesses, people who are in IT, information technology. So Muslims in the United States are an upwardly mobile group who are upper middle class for the most part. So that you won't find people, who are in less rewarding jobs and positions. So Muslims comprise a very dynamic, productive part of the work force in the US and these people, when they came, obviously they came not to propagate Islam or to build mosques, they came because they want a better life, a better future for themselves. But also once you're immediate economic needs are met, you obtained a college degree, you have raised a family, and now it's time to start thinking of building mosques. So in the beginning there were mosques that were in schools, in college campuses and so forth, but now, gradually, Muslims began to build mosques.

And there are three main approaches to build mosques. One would be, and I'll show you by examples to see what you think, one would be a mosque that would be transplanted. Completely, in

terms of the domes, the arches, and all the features that come in a traditional mosque, let's say in Bosnia, in Egypt, in Turkey, in Pakistan, in India, in Egypt, whatever of the countries that we come from, so you transplanted in complete traditional way. The second approach was that people realized 'we are in America, we want to integrate with the rest of society, so we want to build a mosque that's in harmony with the rest of the built environment that is, in other word, it blends in with the rest of the buildings'. The third approach would say, that you want to build a mosque that complies with the requirements of the Sharia, in other words, to build a mosque is only very small, conditions. All you have to have is flat, rectangular space facing Mekka with a niche or a mihrab in the middle, so that the imam stands there to lead the salat, lead the namaz, whatever is the right word for some of you. So the requirements of mosque buildings are very simple. Because our prophet Muhammad [arabic] mosque, the first mosque, Masjid al-Nabawi for instance, was his own home, which was flat rectangular space with a niche, or a mihrab, facing Mekka. [applaus]