

Malcolm Shabazz Mosque – 102 W 116th Street

Studio I Final Assignment



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Malcolm Shabazz Mosque, located at 102 West 116th Street in New York City, was one of the first purposely-designed mosques and the biggest one to be built in its period in the Harlem area. Muhammad's Temple of Islam Number 7 was renamed in 1976 to commemorate Malcolm X's legacy as one of the congregation's leaders in 1956-1964. Initially, this mosque belonged to the Nation of Islam, a Black nationalist organization promoting "Islam" in a significantly different form from traditional Islam, but currently, this mosque hosts a Sunni Islam congregation, which is one of the most significant branches of Islam right now, followed by around 90% of Muslims around the world. Today, the leader of this mosque is Imam Izak El-Pasha, the first American-born leader this organization has ever had¹.



Figure 1: Malcolm Shabazz Mosque today. Photograph: author

A. Historical Background

One of the most important values this building has is its historical background. The site is located in block 1825 with lot number 36, originally built as the Lenox Casino in 1905. The casino was designed by Lorenz F. J. Weiher, of 103 East 125th street and owned by Max

¹ "About Us," Malcolm Shabazz Mosque, <http://themasjidmalcolmshabazz.com/about-us.php>

Rosenblum, of 1 East 117th Street. The initial cost of this project was \$100,000. It was designed as a four-story brick and stone building with dimensions of 60'-11" by 105'². Not much is known about Lenox Casino, except that it was used as a theatrical performance venue and often utilized as a meeting place of the Socialist Party in the 1920s³. Before that, one article from *The New York Times* released on January 17, 1912, mentioned this property as police raided it for showing “illegal films.” Interestingly, it also noted that some of the audience who attended the “show” were notable politicians⁴.



Figure 2: Newspaper title about Lenox Casino. Source: New York Times

<https://isreview.org/issue/104/russian-revolutionary-bronx/>

The process behind the transformation of this building from a casino to a mosque did not happen instantly. It was started in 1930 when Wallace Fard Muhammad built the Nation of Islam, a political organization with an Islamic background. Yet, the beliefs they taught to the followers are noticeably different than what traditional Islam, even to the most significant things, such as

² “Permit Search,” Office for Metropolitan History, <https://www.metrohistory.com/permit-search>

³ Alex Steinberg, “A Russian revolutionary in the Bronx,” *International Socialist Review Issue #104: Reviews*, <https://isreview.org/issue/104/russian-revolutionary-bronx/>

⁴ “Police to Run Down All Illegal Films,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1912, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1912/01/17/104888928.pdf>

the idea of “God.” In orthodox Islam, the monotheistic concept of a single God is one of the primary doctrines. In contrast, the Nation of Islam believes “God” takes human form as a Black man, who is supposed to be regarded as an immortal, but could “die” and be succeeded by another God to take their place⁶.

The Nation of Islam uses the same religious building as traditional Islam, a mosque, but they often regard it as a “Temple.” Most of the temples they built were named with a number, starting from 1, and currently, there are 38 numbered temples around the United States and 31 unnumbered temples⁷. Temple of Islam number 7 was founded in 1946 by Elijah Muhammad, the Nations of Islam leader assigned between 1934-1975, at the Harlem YMCA, located around twenty minutes by foot from the current site. Ten years later, Temple number 7 moved to the Lenox Casino, where David W. Dunlap mentioned in his book titled *From Abyssinian to Zion: A Guide to Manhattan's Houses of Worship* that the mosque was just a storefront in 1956⁸. Malcolm X, an African-American Muslim minister, and an important figure during the civil rights movement, was assigned as a leader of this congregation between 1956-1965¹.

In 1964, there was tension between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, which started from the moment Elijah refused to help the Nation of Islam members who were beaten by the Los

⁵ David V Barrett, *The New Believers: A Survey of Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions*, (London: Cassell and Co., 2001), 252.

⁶ Matthias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and The Nation of Islam*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 171.

⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Nation of Islam: Cult of the Black Muslims*, May 1965, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nation_of_Islam:_Cult_of_the_Black_Muslims/Chapter_5

⁸ David W. Dunlap, *From Abyssinian to Zion: A Guide to Manhattan's Houses of Worship*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 136.

Angeles Police Department (LAPD)⁹ and rumors of Elijah Muhammad's sexual misbehavior¹⁰. Malcolm X decided to leave the Nation of Islam, converted to Sunni Islam and founded another mosque called Islamic Muslim Mosque Inc. (MMI)¹¹. During this time, some media portrayed Malcolm X as a target of multiple assassination attempts, and unfortunately, he was shot to death on February 22, 1965¹². There were three initial suspects, who were Nation of Islam members, namely: Talmadge Hayer, Norman 3X Butler, and Thomas 15X Johnson. However, in 2021, Butler and Thomas were exonerated from their murder convictions, followed by the discovery of FBI and New York Police Department involvement in withholding the critical evidence of this murder¹³.

Malcolm X Shot to Death at Rally Here



Malcolm X being taken to hospital from Audubon Ballroom yesterday after he was shot while addressing a meeting

Figure 3: News headline about Malcolm X's assassination. Source: New York Times

Despite the false conviction, in 1965, right after the murder, some people believed the accusation that the Nation of Islam was the mastermind behind Malcolm X's assassination. A day after this

⁹ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 3-20.

¹⁰ Perry Bruce, *The Last Speeches*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989), 230-234.

¹¹ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, (New York: Viking, 2011), 295-296.

¹² Peter Kihss, "Malcolm X Shot to Death at Rally Here," New York Times, February 22, 1965, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/116715745/19C8BBC0E59D4DE2PQ/1?accountid=10226>

¹³ Ashley Southall, Jonah E. Bromwich, "2 Men Convicted of Killing Malcolm X Will Be Exonerated Decades Later" New York Times, November 17, 2021.

case, Temple number 7 was bombed with a dynamic blast and caught fire that eventually destroyed most upper level¹⁴. This news was reported in multiple media outlets, including television, where the video archives are still accessible on YouTube, provided by AP Archive and Hezakya Newz & Films channel.



Figure 4: News headline about Lenox Casino firebomb incident. Source: New York Times

After this incident, the whole building was altered with a design by Sabbeth Brown, a non-licensed architect, with another firm signing the drawings. The lower part of the building survived the fire; the redesigned structure still corresponds to the original layout and plan. However, the overall exterior appearance of the building was altered entirely from classic style to modern design. Ten years after the mosque was rebuilt, Elijah Muhammad passed away, and the leadership of this mosque was succeeded by his son, Imam W. D. Mohammed. The latter was the person that changed the mosque from a Nation of Islam temple to Sunni Islam¹. A year after he was assigned, the name of this building was transformed from Temple number 7 to Malcolm Shabazz Mosque as an initiative to commemorate Malcolm X's involvement inside this mosque.

¹⁴ Peter Kihss, "Mosque Fires Stir Fear of Vendetta in Malcolm Case," New York Times, February 24, 1965, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/116775199/DAE579D0ED4644D7PQ/2?accountid=10226m>

It is important to note that in 1965, this building was the first “traditional”-looking mosque in the Harlem area since the other mosques were praying rooms inside other buildings. This means Malcolm Shabazz Mosque was the first purposely-designed¹⁵ mosques in this neighborhood and the biggest one in this period. Currently, it is second to the Islamic Cultural Center of New York, located on Third Avenue, which was built in the 1980s.

B. Architecture Significance

Originally Lenox Casino was a four-story building with brick and stone façade, with large three-panel windows consisting of picture windows in the middle and double-hung windows on the side, arched niches above the top windows, and cornices that possibly made of stone (see figure 5). Not much is known about the original plan of the building except that the first floor was possibly mainly used for commercial (indicated by the presence of storefront on both building facades) and the praying room that was located on the 4th floor (indicated by a written text on the entrance).

After the fire incident, it appears that all original brick material was replaced with new brick, possibly due to the immense damage the blast caused to the original material. The new design has a three-story, “flatter” façade, consisting of brick walls, arch windows, and metal panels without cornice and moldings. The top part of the building has a green hemisphere dome with a golden spear. Similar to the original plan, the first floor of this building has multiple stores and a “Harlem Cultural Center” on the southeast entrance. The second floor is utilized as Clara Mohammad School. The praying room, also similar to the original plan, is located on the top

¹⁵ Purposely designed but not purposely built.

level of the building, with an entrance placed on the northwest side, allowing direct access to the elevator and stairs (see figure 6).



Figure 5: Comparisons between Lenox Casino (left) and Malcolm Shabazz Mosque after redesign (right).

Source: NYC 1940 tax photos (left), author's photograph (right)

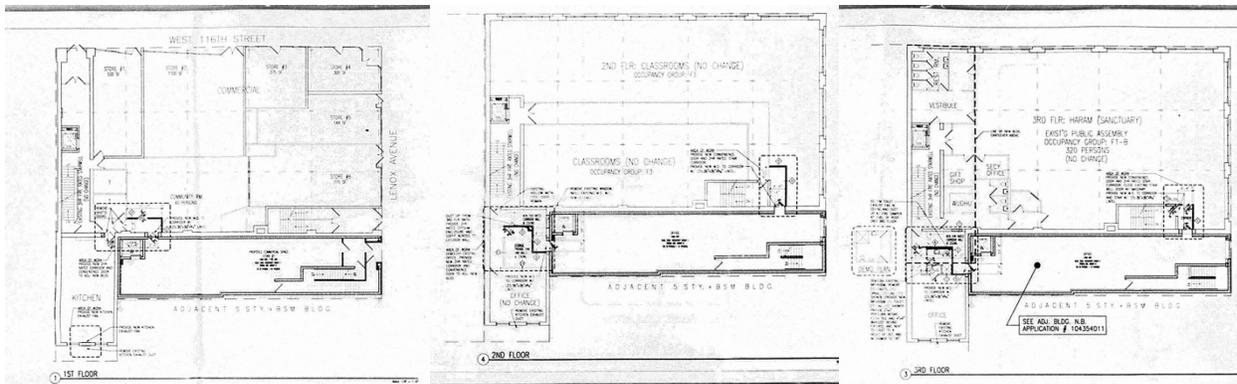


Figure 6: Malcolm Shabazz Mosque Plan in 2006 with north on top, first floor (left), second floor (middle), third floor (right). Archive: NYC Department of Building

Even though the architect of this building was not licensed during the time this mosque was built, the architecture aspect of this building is still interesting to take a look into. The whole shape of this mosque appears very rigid and modern, even commercial-like, with a combination

of bright-colored steel panels and bricks. The only giveaway of its function as a religious facility is the hemisphere dome¹⁶, arch windows, and signage on the entrance door (see figure 7).



Figure 7: Malcolm Shabazz Mosque. Photograph: author

Considering that it was built in 1965 before the Immigration and Nationality Act, there is a possibility that the architect is American-born with limited access to visual information about typical mosques in the Middle East and other Muslim majority countries. This led to an assumption that the inspiration behind the design could come from another source. One of the possibilities is children's storybooks, which portray mosques very similarly to the design of Malcolm Shabazz Mosque. In *Arabian Nights* and *Aladdin*, some illustrations show a square-shaped mosque with a similar-looking dome¹⁷, in addition to arched windows and somewhat bright colors (see figure 8).



¹⁶ Some mosques also have other types of domes such as an onion dome.

¹⁷ Similar in terms of the shape and its proportion to the whole building.

Figure 8: Mosque portrayed in children's storybook. Source: The Atlantic

Besides the form, the material used for the panels on the façade also strongly indicates when it was built. At first glance, the material of these panels appears very similar to aluminum. Still, rusts started to appear (see figure 9), indicating that aluminum is not the actual material¹⁸. One strong possibility of the material is steel enamel panels, which were popular during the 1950s and 1960s, and featured in some catalogs published in this era. However, it is interesting to note that Malcolm Shabazz Mosque is one of the very few buildings in South Harlem with a yellow façade.



Figure 9: Yellow steel enamel panel with rust appeared. Photograph: author

Looking at the other facilities owned by Malcolm Shabazz Development Company (MSDC), it appears like yellow could be the company's symbol. One example is Malcolm Shabazz Market, located a block away from the mosque with a thin dome-shaped panel installed in its entrance (see figure 10). Another facility is Clara Mohammad School, an institution located on the second floor of Malcolm Shabazz Mosque, which has yellow T-shirts for its students.

¹⁸ However, the panel frame and the mullions are possibly made of aluminum.



Figure 10: Malcolm Shabazz Mosque. Photograph: Medium

Steel enamel panels could also be used as the material of the dome. Like the façade, some sources say the dome is made of aluminum¹⁹, but considering its pristine condition without any dents, even after decades, it indicates that the material used is possibly more robust. Another possibility is fiberglass considering the more economic value and similar finish it appears. However, a fiberglass dome is usually placed using a crane as a finished unit, unlike a steel enamel panel generally arranged on-site. There is no news regarding a crane elevating a dome around this area when it was built, indicating that a steel enamel panel would be the more significant possibility.

¹⁹ “Masjid Malcolm Shabazz Mosque,” New York Architecture, <http://www.nyc-architecture.com/HAR/HAR019.htm>

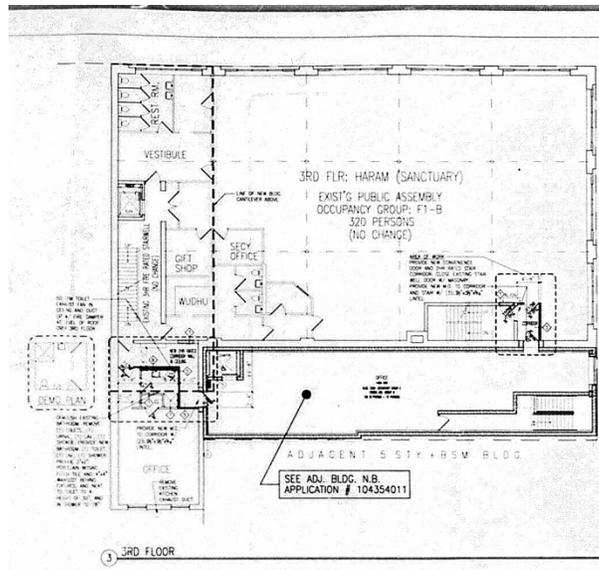


Figure 11: The third-floor plan. Archive: NYC Department of Building

Unlike the exterior, the interior part of Malcolm Shabazz Mosque appears quite close to the traditional mosque (see figure 11). It follows several mosque rules such as having “wudhu” rooms for ritual purification, separated entrance for males and females, and the restroom placement behind the sanctuary. It also has many ornaments representing values and symbolism in Islam (see figure 12). For example, on top of seven windows attached to the praying room, seven verses of the first chapter in the Holy Qur’an were written in Arabic calligraphy. The verse starts from the windows on the east side, reading from right to left. Another calligraphy is found on the decorative panel attached to the ceiling, with 99 names of Allah written to them. The last calligraphy is located in the front, close to the Imam (priest)’s podium, with Allah written to the right and Muhammad to the left.



Figure 12: Malcolm Shabazz Mosque interior. Photograph: author

One of the most interesting characteristics of Malcolm Shabazz Mosque is the way the building faces the “wrong direction.” Muslims must face Ka’ba during the service, the most sacred buildings in Saudi Arabia. In New York, the location of Ka’ba is on the northeast (leaning towards the east a little bit); hence the mosques need to accommodate the congregation by directing the service to the orientation they are supposed to face. Many mosques that were not built on purpose (a rented room or an alteration from other buildings) could not satisfy the orientation requirement, so they adapted the room by placing the carpet in the right direction even though it will not align with the building layout.

This is also the method Malcolm Shabazz Mosque used. Even though it was purposely redesigned as a mosque, they did not build it from scratch. Hence, they needed to follow the previous building’s plan. Besides the orientation, this also influenced the entrance location of the

mosque. Even though Malcolm Shabazz Mosque is the main building on the lot, facing 116th Street and Lenox Avenue, the main entrance is not in the most prominent location. Instead, the main entrance to the mosque is located on the side, with a straightforward entrance (see figure 15) that is arguably overwhelmed by the pharmacy entrance (see figure 3), which occupies the corner of the building.



Figure 13: Pharmacy entrance. Photograph: author

This placement is because, in the past, the praying room was located on the fourth floor, while the other floors functioned for another purpose. The entrance was placed on the side to direct circulation towards the stair and elevator to provide easier access for the congregation (see figure 14), which is also implemented in today's design. Even on the second floor, the circulation area appears very small in comparison to the whole floor area, which Clara Muhammad School mainly occupies.

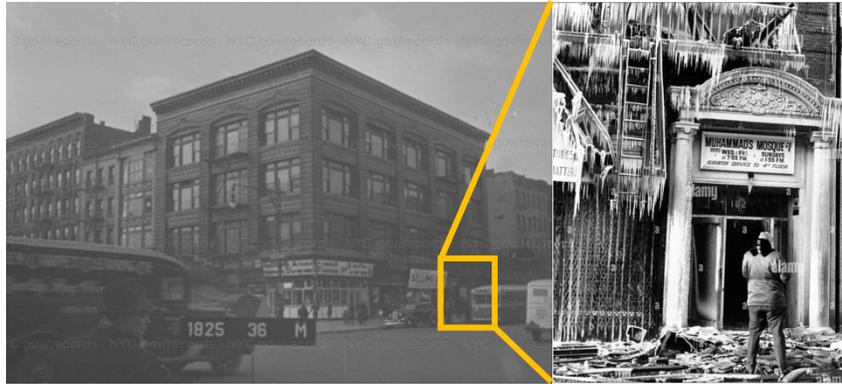


Figure 14: The entrance before the fire. Source: NYC 1940 tax photos (left), Everett Collection Historical (right)



Figure 15: Mosque entrance. Photograph: author

C. Intervention Suggestions

There are three suggestions for the institution: landmarking, maintenance, and providing a little addition to the entrance. Considering its rich historical value, to the African-American community and the development of Islam in Harlem, in addition to the involvement of Malcolm X in this building, Malcolm Shabazz Mosque has the potential to be landmarked. Even though the architecture appears unusual, this could also become a distinctive characteristic of this building.

The overall condition of this mosque is relatively pristine. However, rust, discoloration, and scratches on the storefront are still found (see figure 11). This deterioration might not harm people, but repairs could be necessary to prevent further damage, with repointing mortar on the brick and repainting the storefront.



Figure 16: Decays found in the building. Photograph: author

As the interesting condition of the entrance was mentioned earlier, a little addition to giving a more eye-catching appearance for the mosque's entrance could provide more convenience for the congregation, especially for those new to Malcolm Shabazz Mosque. Before the fire, the entrance was the only way for people to indicate a mosque on the Lenox Casino's property. This means the appearance of the entrance was quite significant in the past, and it could be the same today as well. Although reverting the design to the old one is not an option considering the style difference, some other options could help with this case. One of them is placing dome-shaped awning tents on the top part of the entrance, typical of mosques around Harlem. Interestingly, the

other entrance to the building, leading to the Harlem Cultural Center, has these awning tents (see figure 18). Still, somehow, they did not place the same element on the mosque's entrance.



Figure 17: Awning tents on mosques around Harlem. Source: Google Street View



Figure 18: Entrance to Harlem Cultural Center in Malcolm Shabazz Mosque with a green awning tent.

Photograph: Author.

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