

## **Introduction**

### **Re-Conceptualising the ‘Ghetto’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century City**

The content of this volume is based on a conference held at Birmingham School of Architecture in July 2006 carrying the same name. Discussions amongst the editors of this volume identified an under-developed gap in research explaining the perceived realities and imaginaries of Muslim communities within the spaces of the city. More importantly, we were seeking research which challenged the myths about the spatial segregation of Muslim groups. The conference revealed a number of interesting findings to support a more complex and robust understanding of the historical and current reasons for settlement patterns and use of spaces within the city.

Utilising architecture and urban space as a critical framework, this volume has selected key conference papers which explored ways of revealing the complexity which belies this phenomenon of settlement from two perspectives. The first perspective is that of the person who lives and works in these areas and their everyday experiences – that is to say from inside the ‘ghetto’ looking out; and the second perspective is that created by the state, the politicians, and the media – which refers to the view from outside looking in. Do these two perspectives coalesce or can we draw out the dichotomies that exist? Are these areas as segregated as we are lead to believe? Is there a role for the state and local government, as well as the English Muslim citizen to play, in bringing these two perspectives closer together?

Today, our views are too often governed by the media which portrays this faith community as a monolithic group of people, separated from society. The Muslim community’s sense of belonging and integration to the mainstream society is questioned. The media choose to ignore the diversity of cultures and ethnic groups which make up Islam’s religious base and which co-exist within the city and its neighbourhoods. It is this homogenising of Muslims and other religio-cultural based communities which distorts the realities of everyday experiences. It is this construction of a monolithic ‘otherness’ which has governed state policies, from the definition of Englishness to the allocation of housing during the settlement process. Therefore, we are subtly coerced in comprehending the ‘other’ in terms of separation and difference. Even as we turn to examine the city, separation and difference is infused in terms like ‘the ghetto’, defined as ‘an area where people from a specific racial or ethnic background or united in a given culture or religion live as a group, voluntarily or involuntarily, in milder or stricter seclusion’.

If we reflect on some of the key components of this definition, a number of lines of inquiry are raised. First, are the ghettos of the 21<sup>st</sup> century based around a specific group of people – how diverse are they? Second, have the concentrations of settlement of these groups been voluntary or involuntary? Lastly, do they live in milder or stricter seclusion – i.e. how can we evaluate the degree of integration?

It is these lines of inquiry which have formed the framework for a re-conceptualisation of the contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century ghetto. The papers in this volume each deal with a certain aspect of these lines of inquiry, bringing to light some of the reasons and challenges that have led to perceived segregation. The significant finding is that segregation is complex; it is the result of a combination of economical, political and cultural forces working to varying degrees and by different agencies. Without understanding the historical context of immigrant settlement within the city, as well as the changing dynamic within newer generations, it becomes almost impossible to accurately evaluate the degree of integration.

This volume is a timely and unique contribution to the growing debate around community cohesion. Its novelty lies in its use of architecture and spaces within the city as a means of critically analysing the ‘spaces of interaction’; the choices people make around where they live; the types of land uses which support communities; the ease of access to certain parts of the city; and the architectural and visual identities which are inscribed in space. This volume is helpful to all those interested in furthering a shared understanding of the varied communities which make up English society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Tasleem Shakur, Noha Nasser and Jamie Halsall**  
**December 2007**