

*In the Name of GOD, An Investigation into a Rural Religious Settlement, NY*  
Instructor: Ziad Jamaledine (L.E.FT Architects)

*“While the institutional ‘separation of church and state’ is written into the U.S. Constitution, [religion] shapes many aspects of American culture, ..., it is a vital part of American civil society—including a central role in social welfare provision” Rhys H. Williams*



*Islambeg Baitullah Mosque, NY. Mark Lennihan / AP file.*

The studio scope consists of an investigation of the architectural and programmatic capacity of forms of rural settlement developed by religious communities in upstate NY. The aim is twofold:

- 1) **To map and study** the physical architectural and territorial typologies of rural religious settlements. In the context of the studio, these settlements are understood as exemplars of a type of ‘intentional community,’ and as a potential form of resistance to the increasingly commodified and fragmented territories of the countryside.
- 2) **To identify and propose physical interventions** (alter, transform, expand, re-program, bolster etc.) in a specific religious Muslim community hamlet in upstate NY (*Islambeg*). These interventions will be proposed only after having first critically unpacked Islambeg’s historical evolution, and probing the hamlet’s architectural and territorial relationships to its environment (geological, topographical, post-industrial, infrastructural).

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**Muslims in the US:** The arrival of Muslims in the American continent dates back to before the formation of the US nation. The early wave of West African Muslim immigrants in North America, estimated to consist of thousands of people, was part of the transatlantic slave trade. The wave included people such as Senegalese Muslim Job Ben Solomon (1730). Ben Solomon's memoir records that he maintained his daily religious practices by escaping from the plantation farm to the woods, where he could pray<sup>1</sup>. This early 'indigenous' Muslims generation was followed, at the turn of the 20th century, by the arrival of Muslim immigrants to the industrialized towns and cities of North America from the Middle East and Eastern Europe. These later waves of immigrants increased the urban presence of their communities, building more visible spaces of worship.

**'Islamic Architecture' in the US:** Idealized 'Islamic Architecture' in the US, as in the rest of the Western world, has been imported and appropriated in the architecture of American metropolitan cities since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Theatres, casinos, department stores and mansions were shrouded with exquisite 'Islamic Architecture' motifs, intended to display 'wealth and cosmopolitanism,' but also to function as a trophy, representing the expansion of Western empires in the Islamic world. While non-Muslim institutions in the US have adopted Orientalized versions of the architecture of the Islamic world, American Muslim communities have instead embraced a localized vernacular architecture and sometimes a strategy of adaptive reuse in the architecture of their spaces of worship<sup>2</sup>. This architectural assimilation mirrors the long presence of Muslims in the US, who have correctly identified themselves as part of the American social fabric—not as an outside exotic other.

***Islamberg, and the construction of religious 'rurality':***

*Islamberg*, Delaware county NY, presents itself as the ideal rural condition serving a minority Muslim community for the studio to work with.

The 200 person hamlet could be understood as the type of religious 'intentional community' defined by Meijering: A community that purposely withdraw from mainstream society to live on its periphery, sustained by religious belief and rituals as a form of cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

The settlement of Islamberg was started in the 1980s through the deliberate movement of an African American Muslim community from Manhattan. The members of the community moved north, seeking to escape the consumerist and polluted and criminal aspects of urban living at the time. This 'counter-urbanist' community, who had suffered from urban economic decline, sought instead a monastic 'simple life' and closeness to an 'idyllic' nature. The settlement is characterized by a couple of dozen vernacular houses, a modest unfinished mosque structure, a schoolhouse, and a farm that are scattered across the landscape with a nearby creek. This haven, an orchestrated settlement that provided a rural living for an ex-urban community, is today under extreme pressure again. In the last few years, the town has been under security threat from white supremacists, environmental threat by the aging nearby Cannonsville water reservoir dam and a cement factory site north of the town, and suffers from the infrastructural degradation of its water supply system and roadways.

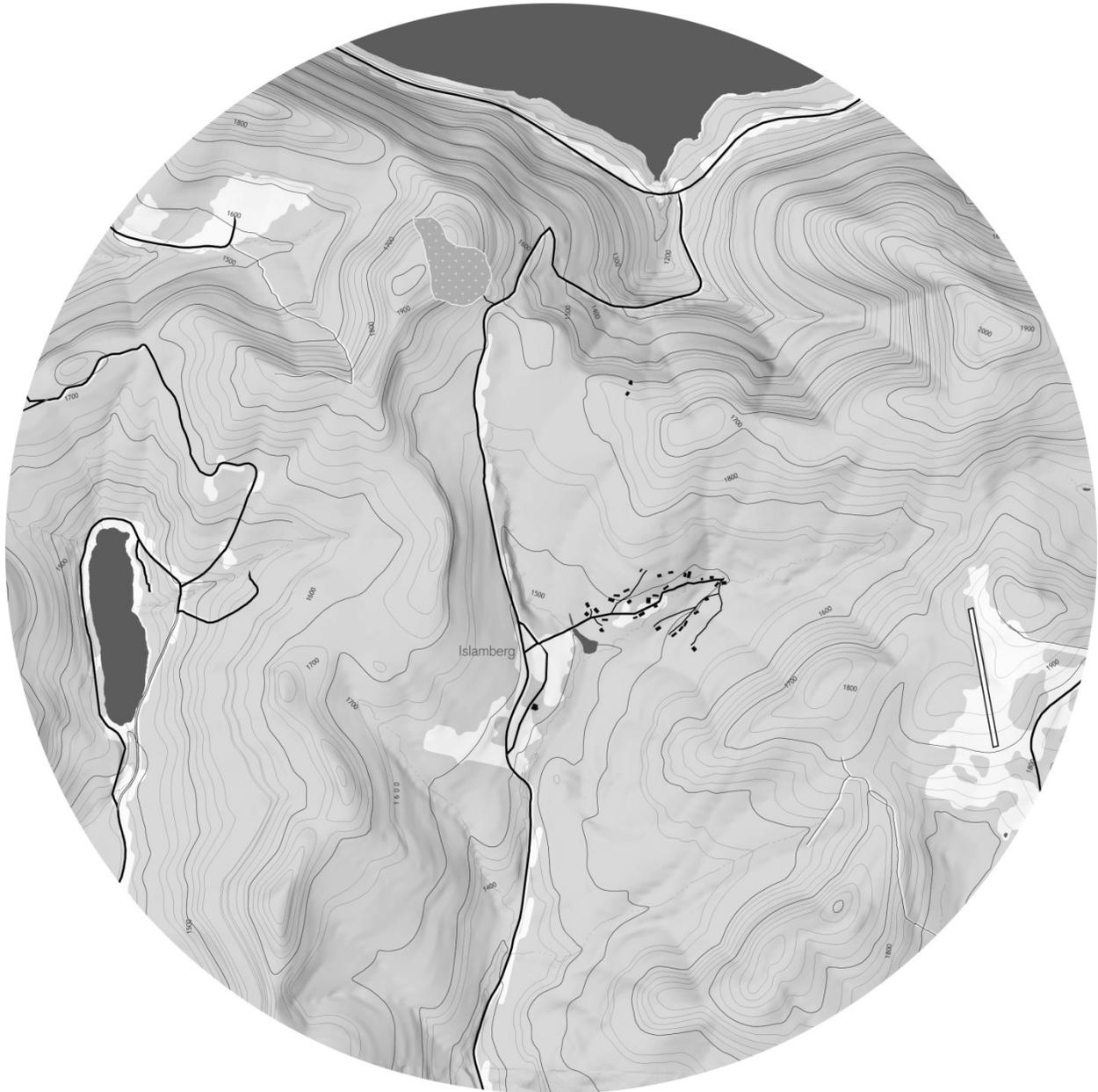
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<sup>1</sup> See Curtis, Edward E. (2009). *Muslims in America: A Short History Account*, Chapter 1. Oxford University Press;

<sup>2</sup> See Eskandari, Maryam. *American Mosques*. ED Issue 3:Normal

<sup>3</sup> See Meijering, L. (2006). Making a place of their own: Rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe.

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*Islamberg* hamlet and geography, Delaware County, NY

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**READING LIST:**

**Environmental History:**

William Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.)

Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.)

**Religiosity:**

Maryam Esakandari. *American Mosques*. ED Issue 3: Normal

Edward E Curtis. *Muslims in America: A Short History* (Oxford University Press; October 1, 2009)

Nezar AlSayyad and Meijn Massoumi editor. *The Fundamentalist City?* (Routledge , August 27, 2010)

Akel Ismail Kahera. *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002)

Jerrilyn Denise Dodds, Edward Grazda. *New York Masjid / Mosques Of New York* (PowerHouse Books, May 2002)

**Intentional Community:**

Louise Meijering, Paulus Huigen & Bettina Van Hoven. *Intentional Communities in Rural Spaces* (Department of Cultural Geography/Urban and Regional Studies Institute, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, June 2006)

Louise Meijering, Bettina van Hoven, Paulus Huigen. *Constructing ruralities: The case of the Hobbitstee, Netherlands* (Journal of Rural Studies 23, 2007)

Louise Meijering. *Making a place of their own: Rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe* (Netherlands Geographical Studies, 2006)

Martha Chaves, Thomas Macintyre, Gerard Verschoor, Arjen E.J. Wals. *Radical ruralities in practice: Negotiating buen vivir in a Colombian network of sustainability* (Journal of Rural Studies 59, 2018)

Pablo Alonso, Gonza´lez, Eva Parga Dans. *From intentional community to ecovillage: tracing the Rainbow movement in Spain* (GeoJournal, 2019)

Albert Bates. *Technological Innovation in A Rural Intentional Community, 1971-1987* (Bull. Sci. Tech. Volume 8)

**Reviews Dates:**

Feb 19, Wednesday: Exchange Pinup 1

**Mar 2, Monday: Mid Review**

Apr 8, Wednesday: Exchange Pinup 2

**Apr 28, Monday: Final Review**