

Summary from:

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On:

Alec Rawls Document

Rawls has a fundamental flaw in his reasoning, namely: just because something is "similar to" something else, does not make it the "same." I doubt that anything I, or any except in Islamic architecture or mosque design, could say would satisfy him. A typical example of this is on page 40 where he gives the shapes of two maple trees and says that because the shape is vaguely similar to the space created by an arch, they are the same thing. He then shows a single evergreen and says that because the shape is similar to a pointed arch, it is the same thing.

The biggest hole in his argument is that all of the elements he points to are common architectural features that one would find in a church or synagogue. The mihrab originated in pre-Islamic buildings and can be found in temples, churches, and synagogues around the Mediterranean.

1. Muslims did not invent the arch, the pillar, the sundial, or any of the features he points to. The earliest mihrabs were just blocks that indicated the direction of prayer.
 - Many Synagogues have niches that point in the direction of Jerusalem (which, I think, would be roughly the same as the qibla from that point in Pennsylvania).
 - Virtually every Christian cathedral structure has a nave that could be said to be similar to the crescent shape of the design. Every cathedral has arches, spires, porticoes, and many have water elements.
2. Secondly, mihrabs (although not universally found in all mosques) take many forms not just the semi-circular shape. Many, if not most mihrabs are flat and inset, evoking a door. It is meant to symbolically indicate a boundary between the sacred and the profane world.
3. Thirdly, most mihrabs are small, rarely larger than the figure of a man, although some of the more ornamental ones can be larger, but nothing as large as the crescent found in the site design. It is unlikely that most Muslims would walk into the area of the circle/crescent and see a mihrab because it is well beyond their limit of experience. Again, just because it is similar does not make it the same. (A goat and a lion are similar in many respects but no one would confuse the two.)
4. Finally, there is no relation (in Islam) between the mihrab and the crescent moon and star that is a symbol of the festival of breaking the fast of Ramadan. They are two separate and mutually exclusive symbolic phenomena.

Rawls sees a mosque because he wants to see it. This is the power of symbols. A symbol, as I don't have to tell you, generates powerful "moods and motivations" that are culturally entrenched and interpreted (to quote Clifford Geertz). These symbols have vastly different meanings depending on where one stands, the ideas that form an individual's world view, and the aspirations one has for themselves and their communities. If one wants to interpret the structural elements of the design as symbolically referring to a mosque (and for Rawls, therefore, a symbol of evil) then there is no arguing against that interpretation. If one wants to interpret those very same elements as symbolically referring to a church or to nature then that is how you will interpret it. According to Geertz, the more central the symbol becomes to the culture or sub-culture of the interpreter, the more powerful the moods and motivations become.

If you are looking for a point by point critique of Rawls' argument then you really need a specialist in religious architecture who can demonstrate that specific elements are common in religious structures and are not specific to a mosque. If you would like a more detailed summery from me I would be happy to do it but I am not a specialist in this area. I would be happy to comment with more firm authority on the areas where he hits (and misses) upon Qur'anic interpretation or on subjects dealing with Islamic law or theology (such as the idea that the tower of voices is a sundial for the timing of prayer). I am a specialist in the development of Islamic theology and law.