



OUR TOWNS

In This Town, Open Arms for a Mosque

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UTICA, N.Y.

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Michael J. Okoniewski for The New York Times

Imam Ahmedin Mehmedovic at a mosque in Utica, N.Y., that is replacing a church. Immigrants make up a growing share of the local population.

In the boiling caldron of American outrage, here's one to throw in the pot.

In this faded industrial town on the Erie Canal, the old United Methodist church downtown is being turned into a mosque, the old roof topped with minarets, the crescent moon and star of Islam on new white stucco replacing the familiar red-brick facade. Like the immigrants and refugees making up an ever-increasing share of the local population and the 42 languages spoken in the local schools, it is one more sign of how much the familiar world here is fading into the past.

Somehow, though, people here have not been given the current script. Instead, while mosques and Islamic community centers have been contested from near ground zero and Staten Island to Murfreesboro, Tenn., Temecula, Calif., and Sheboygan, Wis., Utica is a place where the dog hasn't barked.

Instead, the mosque has been welcomed by, among others, former church members grateful that the old building will be saved. Some 200 people showed up this month for a tour by the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica.

Utica is hardly some post-racial nirvana, and it probably helps that the Muslim community is largely Bosnian, not Arab. But if we had today's stories told by Frank Capra rather than by talk radio, there are more than a few that could be told in this town, which is being revived by immigrants and is embracing difference not in the didactic style of do-gooder moralizing but as a continuation of what Utica has always been.

"Where would we be today if no one welcomed the Italians, like my father, the Irish, the Polish, who became the backbone of this community," said Mayor David R. Roefaro, who owns a funeral home. "When I ran for office, my slogan was 'We're in this together,' because I believe it."

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Like most of upstate New York, Utica has seen better days. The population, more than 100,000 for much of the past century, is now around 60,000. Most of the old textile and manufacturing jobs are gone. That said, a flood of immigrants and resettled refugees, Bosnians, Burmese, Somalis, Vietnamese, Iraqis and many others, who now make up about a quarter of the population, have almost stopped the population decline. The Bosnians, in particular, have refurbished much of the housing, and Utica feels like a place with a pulse and maybe even a future.

"I've been here for eight years, and to watch the transformation, new stores, new restaurants, has been amazing," said Peter D. Vogelaar, executive director of the [Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees](#). He said an estimated 600 houses had been purchased by refugees, helping to prop up the housing market. "Utica is a model for a small community in terms of integrating and acculturating emerging populations."

So while some other communities grapple with English-only movements, Utica's City Hall does its best to provide information in all the languages its residents speak while they learn English. The city and the Muslim community together came up with a plan to save the old church building, its basement underwater, which would have cost the city \$1 million to demolish.

Would the mosque construction have been as placid if it began now or if the congregation came from somewhere else or looked Middle Eastern rather than European? Maybe not. But the imam, Ahmedin Mehmedovic, said he took pains to be sensitive to the community, making sure to save and return all the religious artifacts to the church members, and he wasn't surprised his congregation was treated well in return.

"I think the main point is to respect each other," he said. "So if you respect me as a Muslim and as a good man, I'll respect you, too. I'll try to do what's best for you. You'll try to do what's best for me. In Utica, there is a big harmony between different religions and different congregations."

Not all is harmony. The Republican candidate for Congress, Richard Hanna, expressed support last week for the project in Lower Manhattan, only to have the Democratic incumbent, Michael Arcuri, come out against it. On Monday, Mr. Hanna changed course, calling the project "an affront to the victims of 9/11."

Still, it's not a fight people seem to want at home. Maybe if you came here to experience freedom, religious and otherwise, you appreciate it more than the guardians of morality insistent on leaving no hot button untouched, no election-year skirmish in the culture wars worth walking away from.


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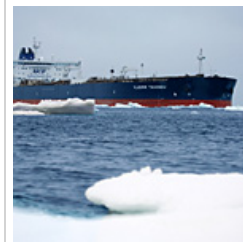
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