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**Faith, planning and changing multiculturalism: constructing religious buildings in London’s suburbia.**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper draws on recent research on the construction of new religious buildings by diverse faith communities in the London Borough of Ealing in West London to compare the navigation of local planning processes in the realisation of new permanent structures for worship. While existing research emphasises barriers for minority faith communities, this paper suggests that faith communities are successful local actors able to navigate local planning governance particularly through accumulated expertise and social capital networks, although there are marked differences in capacity and experience between different faith groups. There is also evidence of the mobilisation of narratives of ‘instutionalised multiculturalism’ embedded in local policy documents in support for faith communities, but ongoing on-going austerity cuts since 2010 have reduced the capacity of the local state to support projects. Finally, the paper suggests that these planning processes indicate changing ideas of the nature of the suburbs and suburban multiculturalism.

**ARTICLE HISTORY:**

**KEYWORDS: Religion, ethnicity, suburbs, planning, multiculturalism, places of worship**

**1. Introduction**

The construction of religious buildings for minority disaporic faith communities has often been regarded as a bellwether of successful planning in multicultural societies. At places of worship for ethnic minority and migrant communities the “politics of identity and citizenship intersect with the production of urban landscapes” as approval for religious buildings occurs within a contested politics of “public recognition” (Fincher et al. 2014, 39). In the UK and elsewhere, mosque building in particular has often seen fraught, contested planning processes (Peach and Gale 2003; Fincher et al. 2014). However since the late 1990s, this story of obstacles and exclusion in local planning processes has been supplemented and challenged by a growing literature that emphasises the increasing political influence and social capital of some faith communities (Gale and Naylor 2002; Gale 2008). Such work moves away from a monolithic reading of the planning system as a block to developments, and particularly traces the mobilisation of local forms of “institutionalised multiculturalism” in which certain religious buildings, particularly those with landmark qualities, are encouraged and celebrated (Vertovec 1996, 49). In this paper, we analyse the interrelationships between local planning governance and the agency of minority faith groups in the London Borough of Ealing. Based on close comparative analysis of five recent planning applications for religious buildings, we argue that the development of professional expertise, planning literacy and social capital networks strongly influences the success of minority faith communities in obtaining planning permissions. There are marked disparities in the capacities of different faith groups, which are revealed by detailed analysis of planning processes within the *same* local authority. Our analysis also identifies constraints to institutionalised multiculturalism, particularly evident since 2010. While institutionalised multiculturalism is embedded in local planning documents and in the composition of the Council, austerity cuts to the planning service have exacerbated this uneven experience, requiring even greater expertise in faith communities.

In the next section of the paper we review literature on faith and planning in the UK, particularly tracking a shift from emphasis on the barriers and opposition to new religious buildings towards the identification of institutionalised multiculturalism and the active promotion of developments by some local states. We then set out the specific demographic, religious, political and planning contexts in the London Borough of Ealing. We also discuss the growing complexity of planning in outer London, particularly in the relationship between management of a suburban landscape increasingly seen as a heritage asset and demands for new spaces of worship. The main focus of the paper is a close analysis of five contrasting planning applications in the Borough since 2015. These comprise: a spectacular new mosque in West Ealing, built by the West London Islamic Centre on the site of its former premises, a converted bakery warehouse (See Figure 1); the Shree Jalaram Mandir, a new purpose-built Hindu temple in Greenford; the Shree Kanaga Thurkkai Amman (SKTA) Hindu Temple in West Ealing, an ongoing process of conversion and development of an old chapel; the International Presbyterian Church at Drayton Green, where a new structure has been added to a historic chapel; and the Ealing Christian Centre in Northfields, a conversion of a disused cinema. [Insert Figure 1 here]

Drawing on these examples we develop four arguments. First, we argue that the institutionalisation of diversity in local planning has been mobilised by some faith communities in support for their aspirations. Second, we emphasise the importance of social capital and professional expertise in negotiating local planning governance, and indicate marked differences between different faith groups. Third, our analysis identifies the role played by the local planning department in supporting and guiding faith communities, but suggests that on-going austerity cuts since 2010 have reduced the capacity to offer proactive advice. Finally, we discuss the distinctiveness of this specifically suburban context for the changing practices and narratives of multiculturalism in planning.

**2. Approaching faith and planning: changing contexts in the UK.**

Early analysis of minority faith buildings and the planning process in the UK concentrated on political opposition, racist hostility and bureaucratic barriers. In particular there was emphasis on the challenges of establishing mosques, stressing not just organized opposition, but also how the technical and legal languages of planning governance reinforced racialized discrimination (Isin & Siemiatcyki 2002; Naylor & Ryan 2002; Dunn 2005; DeHanas & Pierei 2011). Peach and Gale (2003, 286) argued that the aesthetics of Islamic, Sikh and Hindu architectural styles challenged “the normalizing language of planning discourse” in their “architectural forms, building materials and decorative colours” and that such buildings have often been represented as “alien” or in more coded language as “out of place”. Local opposition to new religious buildings has also been expressed through “the subjective problematic of amenity”, raising issues like noise, disturbance, increased traffic and car parking (Gale and Naylor 2002). These two modes of opposition, using discourses of appropriateness and amenity, have worked to prevent planning permission for minority faith religious buildings by reinforcing normative aesthetic values and prioritizing the claims of existing residents.

These barriers were pronounced for new faith communities in the 1970s and 1980s, and such issues continue. A recent report by the AHRC Faith and Place Network found that “faith communities often find it difficult to gain planning permission for suitable premises and this is particularly the case for migrant and post-migrant faith groups” (AHRC Faith and Place Network 2015, 4). Faith communities face prejudice and stereotyping, and there is evidence of racialized exclusion in planning governance (Beebeejaun 2012; Gale and Thomas 2018). The report highlighted the need for “more positive representations of some faith groups, in terms of their contributions to local community development, welfare provision and social support” (AHRC Faith and Place Network 2015, 6). The report also argued that migrant faith communities frequently lack social capital and planning literacy, and recommended actions to foster expertise and greater understanding of the planning system. Success for faith communities requires an engagement with the deliberative processes of planning, contesting normative narratives about the symbolic meaning of urban space.

However other commentators have highlighted the rise of institutionalised multiculturalism and its effects on the planning system. Vertovec’s original (1996) use of the term “institutionalised multiculturalism” was quite broad, but in this planning context it can be seen to work at a number of levels, from the promotion of landmark buildings, through the codification of diversity in local planning guidance affecting smaller-scale decisions, to the training, actions, identities and attitudes of local planning officers. Expressions of visible multiculturalism became part of planning culture in some cities from the 1990s. In a series of studies of mosque building in Birmingham, Leicester and other English cities, Gale (2004; 2005; 2008) explored how local authorities have promoted new places of worship as welcome and very visible contributions in the production and promotion of multicultural, ethnically-diverse cities. Muslim groups had success in shifting Birmingham City Council’s institutional narrative from hostility towards mosques, which instead were “increasingly celebrated as signifiers of Birmingham’s cultural diversity” (Gale 2004, 43). The intervening period has seen a ramping-up of institutionalised multiculturalism, and particularly the promotion of landmark religious buildings. As well as the more obvious urban locations, such landmark architecture is found in suburbia. The architecturally-innovative Salaam centre in outer north-west London was supported by the London Borough of Harrow as both a cultural asset and an example of creative design (Dwyer 2015). There are similar examples of Hindu and Jain temples in suburban and ‘edge-city’ locations (Zavos 2009; Dwyer, Gilbert and Shah 2012).

Gale and Naylor warned of the dangers of co-option into a “multiculturalism that merely celebrates and romances difference” (2002, 405). However, while the symbolic expression of multiculturalism in landmark projects can be a component of much-criticised top-down urban-boosterism associated with the likes of Charles Landry or Richard Florida, these developments also indicate that religious communities have become increasingly skilled in securing financial and political support, and in negotiating planning processes. Some faith groups have developed significant social capital, in Bourdieu and Wacquant’s sense of resources that accrue “by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (1992, 119). There are overlaps with the notion of institutionalised multiculturalism, particularly in contexts where minorities have gained election to local councils and serve on planning committees. However attention is also drawn to the agency, capacities and networks of faith communities. Many communities now have expertise drawing on past experience of planning applications, but also on knowledge and connections built through entrepreneurial activity, particularly in property development. There has also been an extension of formalised intellectual capital, particularly through the attainment of degrees and professional qualifications in architecture, engineering, law and planning.

Here we extend these analyses of institutionalised multiculturalism and the increased agency, social capital and capacities of minority faith groups by suggesting that different groups and project types work differently even within a single planning authority. We therefore turn to investigate the “micro-geographies” of planning, tracking applications within an authority with a strong record of support for diversity and religious buildings.

**3. Faith, diversity and planning governance in the London Borough of Ealing**

Ealing’s demographic and religious diversity is a part of broader changes to outer London, what Watson and Saha (2013) characterise as suburban “multicultural drift”. In some imaginative geographies, Ealing may still have associations with stereotypes of white, monocultural, middle-class, semi-detached and “villa” suburbia, but reality challenges that narrative (Huq 2013; Dwyer, Gilbert and Shah 2013). Ealing’s built environment is changing significantly in the twenty-first century. It retains the Victorian villas and green spaces that earned its late-Victorian sobriquet of ‘Queen of Suburbs’, and also has large swathes of semi-detached housing associated with the inter-war suburbanisation of London. The conservation of this suburban landscape informs the planning culture of the local authority. However, Ealing is undergoing significant development and densification, stimulated by an inflationary property market and the anticipated opening of Crossrail (the new high capacity cross-London rail service). This varied landscape is recognised in the Borough’s corporate plan: “Like its population, the area and its identity is diverse in nature, with many areas of suburban greenery but also many areas with an inner city feel.” (Ealing Corporate Plan 2014-18, 5).

By any measure, the London Borough Ealing is very diverse. In the 2011 census, 51% of the population were defined as members of an ethnic minority, and around half the borough’s 338 000 population was born outside the UK. In 2016, GLA (Greater London Authority) estimates suggested that around 31% of the population were of Asian ethnicity, with 14% identifying as ‘Indian’. Only 49% of the population in the 2011 census self-identified as “White”, with in turn only 30% of those identifying as English/Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish. Ealing experienced significant migration of Polish refugees during and after the Second World War, and there has been a substantial influx of new migrants from Poland and other countries admitted to the European Union after 2004. There are also significant Iranian, Afghan, Japanese and French communities in different parts of the Borough. Ealing is also very religiously diverse. While 44% of residents identified their religious identity as Christian at the 2011 census, the next largest groups were Muslim (16%), Hindu (9%) and Sikh (8%).

Ealing’s ethnic and religious diversity has been formed through successive phases of migration that have shaped governance in the Borough. Irish migration from the mid-nineteenth century onwards was an important element of Ealing’s growth, shaping the character of local religion and politics. However, the most significant influence on the culture of the local state has been migration from South Asia and the subsequent importance of Asian politicians and voters. The history of South Asian migration, particularly to Southall, is a familiar one (see for example Merriman 1993; White 2001; Oates 2002). Initial settlement of Punjabi factory workers in the 1950s was followed by rapid migration in the 1960s that transformed Southall. The early political history of Asian Southall focused on struggles against racist violence and the far-right (Campaign against Racism and Fascism 1981). Alongside this story of resistance was a parallel history of the rise of Asian councillors and MPs. Piara Khabra was elected in Ealing Southall for Labour in 1992, becoming Britain’s first Sikh MP, standing until his death in 2007. Virendra Sharma won the Ealing Southall seat at the 2007 by-election, and has held it since. Sharma was an Ealing councillor from 1982 to 2010, serving as Mayor in 1994-95. As local government reforms in 1965 incorporated Southall into the larger Ealing Borough, political developments in Southall have wider significance for planning cultures. What Gale (1999, 61) describes as the local agency of the Asian community was established and strengthened early in Ealing, and councillors from Southall have influenced the culture of the planning committee, particularly in relation to the development of religious spaces for a range of faiths.

Ealing’s religious diversity is evident in the borough’s places of worship, including churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and gurdwaras. In addition to purpose-built premises there are repurposed Christian and Jewish places of worship, as well as former commercial and residential premises (Dwyer, Gilbert and Ahmed 2015). Significant religious buildings in the borough include well-established Sikh gurdwaras dating from the 1950s (Nasser 2004, Singh 2006), Britain’s first Polish church (Stolarski 2016) and historically-significant Arabic churches (Galal et al. 2016). The borough is home to two of the most significant new religious buildings in London: the Mohammedi Park Mosque in Northolt (1988), and Southall’s Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara (2003), the largest Gurdwara outside South Asia. Their histories illustrate the changing culture of planning in Ealing. The Mohammedi Park Mosque was strongly opposed by some local residents who described it as an “alien development”, describing Northolt as a “garden suburb” that “should not become another Southall” (cited in Eade 2011, 158 ). The London Borough of Ealing worked with the Dawoodi Bohra Shia Muslim community, but also brokered a compromise with objectors. While there were some early indications of local state sympathy for minority faiths, the application was regarded as problematic, and discourses of amenity and appropriateness were used to refuse an initial proposal. The mosque complex was eventually constructed on a peripheral former-industrial site by the Grand Union canal. By contrast, the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara showed the importance of social capital, planning capacity, significant Sikh representation on the council, and an emerging institutional multiculturalism. It readily secured planning permission with the active support of the council (Singh 2006). The building was recognised as a significant “local heritage asset” in the 2014 London Plan.

Our research analysed recent planning applications for religious buildings in Ealing. Analysis was based on official planning documents, interviews with key actors including trustees and commissioned architects at different faith communities, borough planning officers, local politicians and residents’ groups. Successful planning permissions were often the result of a succession of applications, sometimes over as long as 20 years. Successful bids reflected persistence and cumulative expertise as well as the intervention of the council’s planning personnel to offer advice and assistance. Analysis of successful cases revealed the mobilisation of forms of institutionalised multiculturalism, identified both explicitly in policy documents and more indirectly through the political support of local politicians. However, the analysis also suggested that attempts to gain planning permission are becoming increasingly protracted. This was associated not with a decline in institutionalised multiculturalism, but with the effects of austerity cuts on the local state. The analysis also revealed a very localised micro-geography of success within the Borough, associated both with the local political cultures and positions of elected councillors, but also the variable impact of local conservation policies. Here, we focus on the contrasting development and planning experiences of five religious buildings in Ealing.

**The West London Islamic Centre**

Until 2017, the West London Islamic Centre (WLIC) occupied a former bakery warehouse in West Ealing. The building was adapted over four floors to provide male and female prayer rooms and washing facilities, a large hall used for weddings and Friday prayers, offices, a book shop and a gym. The building was acquired in 1996, with support from the local authority, who encouraged their re-location from two residential properties. The WLIC was founded by migrants of Pakistani heritage in the 1980s, and this pioneer generation remain the mosque’s trustees. However, the worshippers are diverse (including migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula) and has a cosmopolitan focus with sermons in English attracting worshippers from across West London. Planning permission was granted for a three-storey extension in 2009. Lacking funds and desiring more extensive redevelopment, the community reapplied in 2012 for permission for a larger purpose-built building. The new five-storey building includes prayer halls, a café, a crèche and playground, two residential flats, a gym and meeting rooms, and has a distinctive minaret and a domed atrium entrance (see figure 2). The architects highlighted the building’s “glazed elevations with vertical fins … to allow glimpses of movement inside the building when seen from the street whilst still achieving a sense of privacy for users of the building” (WLIC, Design and Access Statement, PAD Architects, 2012).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Permission was granted in May 2014, with councillors expressing support for a “landmark” building that would “enhance the area” and be a “boost for the community.” [[1]](#endnote-1) The key concern expressed by local residents was parking. The WLIC was required to contribute towards the pedestrianisation of adjoining roads and to make greater provision for disabled parking. The success of WLIC’s application for such an ambitious building drew upon professional expertise and capacities, and on the mobilisation of social capital networks. The application was prepared by professional consultants employed by the chair of the mosque trustees, Tariq Usmani, the son of one of the founders. As the owner of a large property development company, Usmani drew upon substantial professional experience and expertise. Interviewed about the successful application he emphasised the sustained programme of local consultation and events designed to win approval: “The plan as we put it was passed, they didn’t amend them. I think part of it is in the consultation process. That gives the local authority confidence.”[[2]](#endnote-2) This professionally-facilitated consultation process was included in the planning application. The mosque also actively fostered connections with local politicians, with MPs and councillors making regular visits.

The embedding of the new mosque building in the regeneration of the surrounding housing estate, was crucial, emphasising benefits to a wider community. Although the approved design is recognisably Islamic in design, mosque members told us that they wanted the building to be easily assimilated into the suburban landscape, allowing the possibility that building could be sold for secular use. The mosque architect Jonathan Cross, of PAD architects, emphasised design features to integrate the building into the local landscape: “I suggested we didn’t want a situation where we just had a defensive building with a door … It needed to be open-armed. Everybody is welcome, this is a multi-faith building with lots of different uses and facilities”.[[3]](#endnote-3) Cross emphasised the introduction of a “living wall, a vertical garden” to soften the elevation on one side of the building, while the minaret became a usable tower, with reading rooms on each floor. He suggested that the architectural merit of the mosque determined its success: “any lingering concerns they [the planning committee] had were overwhelmed by the design and the fact that they wanted this building in their borough”.

**Shree Jalaram Mandir, Greenford and Shree Kanaga Thurkkai Amman Temple, West Ealing**

Our next two examples are Hindu temples with contrasting planning histories. The Shree Jalaram Mandir in Greenford has occupied a former synagogue since 2000. Following an earlier unsuccessful attempt, this predominantly Gujurati Hindu community gained planning permission in December 2014 for demolition of the synagogue and construction of a purpose-built mandir. The new mandir will be a two-storey building incorporating a dining and meeting hall on the ground floor, with the temple and a flat for the resident priest above. The building includes elements of traditional temple design including distinctive shikharas (turrets) and a stepped façade.

In granting planning permission, the Ealing planning committee acknowledged concerns raised by local residents and the Ealing Civic Society about traffic, litter and noise and changes to the character of the local area. Amenity concerns were mitigated by green travel plans. However, the distinctive appearance of the mandir was deemed not only not detrimental to the mixed residential townscape, but *necessary* for a purpose-built religious building. As the planning officer stated: “It is acknowledged that the proposed building does not directly reflect the architectural design of adjacent properties. However, it must be acknowledged that the proposed building is a religious community facility rather than a residence and is *best to be legible as such*.”(Planning Officer Report, 17th December 2014, p.19, emphasis added). The planning officers worked with the temple architects to modify the original design from five to three shikharas in a triangular arrangement on a central flat roof “to give the building a balanced appearance.” These interventions in the aesthetics of the temple design indicate the mediating role played by the planners in securing planning permission, and the importance they gave to the symbolic significance of religious buildings in the borough. As for the WLIC, strong social capital networks were significant. The trustees of Jalaram Mandir mobilised local politicians with supporting statements in their promotional documents, which emphasised the social outreach activities of the temple.

A second Ealing Hindu temple has a similar history. The Shree Kanaga Thurkkai Amman Temple (SKTA temple) was founded by Sri Lankan migrants in 1991 and occupies a former Baptist Church, built in 1865 and locally listed in a designated conservation area in West Ealing. Although substantially altered inside with deity statues and architectural embellishments, the conservation status of the building limits exterior changes. Nonetheless the temple obtained planning permission for a glazed extension, which holds the ceremonial cart used to convey the temple’s deities for its annual Chariot festival, and for a larger adjoining building described as a meditation centre (See Figure 3). Success in gaining planning permission came through negotiation with the planning authorities and local residents. For local residents, the temple’s presence has generated concerns about parking and noise in narrow residential streets. Their concerns reflect the intensive use of the temple site, particularly on festival days, when additional worshippers are accommodated in temporary marquees.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

The glazed structure to display the temple’s ceremonial cart was granted planning permission in 2004 following a previous unsuccessful attempt. The recommendation from the planning inspector was a clear commitment to diverse planning with the spectacular display of Hindu identity overriding concerns about the visual coherence of a conservation area: *“*Placing the cart on display could make a vibrant point and positive contribution to the street scene, [which] would help express in a dramatic and attractive fashion both the new religious function of the building and the mixed cultural heritage of the Borough as the Council’s policies intend.”[[4]](#endnote-4) In 2011 the temple successfully applied for permission for a larger adjoining hall. There was again significant negotiation and collaboration with planning officers, who worked to reduce the scale and mass of the building. Recommending that permission be granted, the planning officer suggested that “the proposed building has a contemporary appearance with elements of the ancient Indian architectural styles. It has a distinctive character which is considered to relate well to the adjacent temple building ... the new building could be a landmark contemporary building within this conservation area.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Like the trustees at WLIC, the trustees of SKTA are established Ealing residents and have developed relationships with local politicians, who are regular attenders at religious festivals. The chariot festival each August attracts around 10,000 participants and is a celebrated demonstration of Ealing’s multicultural diversity. Both Hindu temples have benefited from strong local social capital networks, advice from planners and the explicit mobilisation of multicultural policies embedded in local planning documents.

**International Presbyterian Church (Drayton Green) and the Ealing Christian Centre (Northfields)**

Two further examples, of Christian churches with diverse international congregations, focus on modifications to existing buildings with Historic England heritage listings. The International Presbyterian Church (IPC) has been established since 1979 serving a diverse international congregation. The church occupies a Victorian women’s reformatory, including a 1912 chapel with a Grade II listing.[[6]](#endnote-6) The cramped site was insufficient for the community who were renting a nearby school for Sunday services. The church commissioned architects, Piercy and Company, to design a new building retaining the listed chapel. The building surrounds the chapel on three sides, with a striking new entrance and glazed walkway (see Figure 4). At the consultation stage opposition came from the Ealing Civic Society who argued that the design was not in keeping with the Victorian and Edwardian context. However the council planners argued that the “proposed development, whilst of a modern, contemporary design, is considered to be high quality and would create an easily identifiable building representing its community use.” Noting the variation in height and scale of the residential streetscape, the planners concurred with the architects that the “proposed roofscape is informed by the vernacular of the surrounding residential dwellings” and would “create a visually distinctive building in the locality” (Recommendations to Ealing Council Planning Committee, 18 December 2013). In granting planning permission the Council explicitly over-rode their policies on loss of residential space, prioritising the enhancement of a heritage asset, and the creation of a local landmark.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

At the IPC the key challenges were gaining approval from Historic England and the support of the local council to convert the site to congregational from residential use. When interviewed, the pastor of IPC expressed frustration that the innovation of their design was not recognised: “The chapel is obviously slightly unique architecture and we wanted to design a building that reflects historic Christian faith, but in the 21st century. It’s quite a contemporary design and quite funky … quite similar to Scandinavian churches in some ways.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The pastor reflected on an absence of positive support for the church’s mission: “I think there’s a lack of understanding of what we’re trying to do. Your primary focus is to build a place for worship and I think at times they’ve misunderstood that.” While the church stressed their social contribution to the area, particularly in their provision of free English language classes to new arrivals, the primary focus was on the change of use. Although the use of professional architects secured eventual success (the new building opened in February 2019), the planning process was slow, and it was clear that the building was not seen as a marker of diversity.

The Ealing Christian Centre (ECC) is an Elim Pentecostal church based in a former cinema, a Grade II\* listed auditorium built in 1934 (see Figure 5).[[8]](#endnote-8) The cinema had closed in 1985, and had been used as a nightclub and a commitment to restore the building was a condition of the sale to ECC in 1996. Nonetheless, the sale was opposed by some local residents who argued that an important secular resource was being lost. The church has worked with Historic England to return the cinema’s auditorium to its original appearance while also adapting the space for their large and diverse congregation (Gilbert et al. 2016). In 2016 ECC gained planning permission for a roof-level three-storey extension to the building providing office space and a large hall for church activities. The protracted planning process required consultation with multiple stakeholders including Historic England, The Theatres Trust, The Cinema Association, the Twentieth Century Society and Ealing Civic Society. There was sustained opposition from The Theatres Trust and some residents, but approval was granted subject to guarantees of protection of the original decorative plasterwork. The other contested issue was the visibility of the roof extension, but Ealing Council argued that the proposal was unlikely to have “any notable impact on the architectural and historical significance of the listed building.” (Planning Officer’s Report, 26th August 2016).[[9]](#endnote-9) Although pleased to finally gain permission, the church’s pastor expressed frustration that the planning process, started in 2013, had taken so long, pointing out “all the time we’re waiting, the building’s actually deteriorating and we’d have thought it would be in their interest for that not to happen.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

[Insert figure 5 here]

Like the IPC, the ECC’s experience of the planning process was protracted. Neither church was able to mobilise the kinds of social capital networks and political support that assisted the previous examples, despite emphasising the range of social services they offered. Although the significance of the buildings, and in the case of IPC the architectural innovation of the proposal were recognised, in neither case was specific merit attached to their applications as places of worship, or as markers of diversity. Despite what might be recognised as “super-diverse” congregations (ECC has worshippers from over 50 different nationalities and has services in Polish and Japanese), the discourse of diversity or multiculturalism did not feature in these applications. Both churches also indicated frustrations with the speed of the process, with delays caused by changes in personnel and lack of resources in the planning department.

**Faith, planning and changing multiculturalism.**

These examples point towards four broader themes concerning planning contexts for religious buildings in London’s suburbia. First, there is sustained evidence of the institutionalisation of diversity within local government planning, increasingly embedded in planning cultures since the late 1990s. Discourses of multiculturalism, particularly those codified in Ealing’s policy documents and the wider London Plan, were mobilized to support minority faith buildings. This study shows that institutionalised multiculturalism operates in relatively fine-grained decision-making, as well as in support of large landmark developments, like the West Ealing Mosque. In 2004 when the SKTA temple’s first attempt to gain permission for a permanent structure for its ceremonial cart was referred to appeal, the planning inspector drew explicitly on Ealing’s cultural diversity to challenge local opposition. While in 2002 Naylor and Gale were identifying planning prejudices against the ‘alien’ nature of new forms of religious architecture, by 2016 we find the planning officer recommending that traditional Hindu architecture is needed to “clearlycommunicate” the purpose of the new building in Greenford.

In the latest London Plan there is less explicit reference to ethnic and religious diversity, and planners emphasise the value of ‘community facilities’. Thus the Planning Officer’s report to the Planning Committee considering the Jalaram Mandir states: “Policy 3.16 of the London Plan encourages the protection and enhancement of social infrastructure. This policy recognises the role places of worship and other such community facilities play in supporting London’s expected growth, and making an area more than just a place to live, but rather helping turn them into sustainable neighbourhoods and communities.”[[11]](#endnote-11) If this quote suggests less explicit engagement with cultural diversity as an inherent community asset, the commitment remains in the London Plan to support new places of worship. The expression of multiculturalism in local planning also prioritises some religious groups, particularly those associated with long-established migrant populations. The discourse of landmark buildings was used more readily for the mosque and temple examples than new Christian spaces, in part because they were easier to translate into markers of local multiculturalism.

A second theme points to the significance of social capital, professional experience and expertise, and relationships with the local state. Developing Gale’s early emphasis on the increasing “agency of Asian community”, this analysis demonstrates the increasing significance of social capital networks and accumulated expertise in some faith communities. Well-established faith communities acknowledged the long-term relationships brokered with council planning personnel and local politicians. One of the founders of the mosque reflected: “I met the planning chairman, planning head, so many times. We got it done, he helped us, he is such a good lad.”[[12]](#endnote-12) The STKA trustees acknowledged support from local politicians: “We have a good relationship, fortunately, with the leader of the council, the parliamentarian, they are all very helpful and I must say that they have been very tolerant with some excess noise and things”.[[13]](#endnote-13) In the English planning process, such local political support is vital. As an anonymous former planning professional acknowledged “local authorities are political beings and therefore they operate politically … decisions are made to avoid conflict, particularly in key areas, what we might consider a marginal ward.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Recent accounts of UK mosque building in the UK (Mangera 2011, Saleem 2018) suggest that a lack of planning literacy hindered the success of earlier migrant groups. For longer-established communities the accumulation of professional expertise enables minority faith groups to operate more effectively, as is revealed by one of the planning consultants at WLIC: “You’ve got the next generation coming through that are very different. They are more dynamic, they’re more up-to-date, they understand the planning process.”[[15]](#endnote-15) These examples show how some faith groups are challenging racialized inequalities in planning processes, though greater expertise in the detailed procedures of such processes, and by representation and influence in the local state. What our case studies also indicate are the differences in this expertise, experience and access to political influence. The Christian places of worship appear to have found it harder to mobilise local political support and neither group mobilised narratives of multiculturalism directly in their applications.

Thirdly, these cases show that the local planning department has been significant in supporting faith communities and intervening in potential disputes, but that such support is under strain. While discussion of institutionalised multiculturalism have tended to focus on key policy statements and landmark buildings, these studies show how a form of multiculturalism can extend into the small-scale details of policies, practices and decisions. Recent work on everyday multiculturalism, including Watson and Saha’s (2013) identification of the “mundane multiculturalism” of outer London, have tended to consider intercultural conviviality, everyday encounters in streets, markets and shops, and the “day-to-day textures of learned habits and their disruptions” (Watson 2017, 2650). Watson also highlights “the policies and practices of institutions, and … the particular material and design infrastructures of place.” (Watson 2017, 2650). It can be argued that with the decline of the local state associated with austerity, and the continuing weakness and decline of most non-religious civil society organisations, that the development of new religious buildings has become the most significant non-commercial influence on built form in many cities, towns and suburbs. Changes in the cultures of planning departments shape those landscapes. The details of the planning process indicate increased awareness of religious design elements and traditions among planning officers, and a recalibration from a focus on “appropriateness”, “coherence” and “fit” towards a positive reading of distinctiveness in the suburban landscape. However, interviews with planning staff at Ealing Council indicated that austerity cuts in local government since 2010 had reduced capacity to engage directly proactively with local community groups. “We’re constrained really to be reactive in most circumstances … certainly our ability, our class of resources in order to go out and engage with people if you want to look at it that way, particularly on the policy side, has diminished a lot.”[[16]](#endnote-16) A retrenchment in local government capacity suggests new faith communities will find it harder to gain support for religious buildings. Those without internal architectural and planning resources, and influence in local politics, are less likely to succeed without the support of what was once a better-resourced and enabling local state.

The final theme raised by our analysis is the distinctiveness of the suburban context. The case studies suggest a weakening of the power of traditional actors in the suburban planning context, such as established residents’ associations and the Ealing Civic Society. This reflects both a redefinition of suburbia, and an expression in both planning and local popular culture of “mundane multiculturalism”. Objections based on the integrity of Victorian or Edwardian streetscapes , and the retention of an appropriately suburban character were often overridden by the planning committee through appeals to cultural diversity and ‘vibrancy’ as key *local* characteristics: as a former planning professional in Ealing reflected “diversity and more conventional notions of suburbia may not be mutually exclusive”.[[17]](#endnote-17) Success for the minority faith communities in gaining planning permissions depends in part on their abilities to mobilise identities as long-term, established suburban residents. Tropes of belonging that once underpinned racializing logics of “migrant” and “native” (Brah 1996) were self-consciously re-worked in appeals to localism by faith communities. At the same time, the political constructions associated with the terms ‘local’ and ‘suburban’ are shifting in the context of opposition to large-scale commercial developments, particularly property developments. The politics of suburban planning can no longer be reduced to a simple story of racialized opposition to new faith buildings; rather we find a more complex pattern of differential political capital between faith groups, of an “institutionalised multiculturalism” creaking under the pressure of cuts, and of reworkings of the tropes of suburbia.

1. Minutes of Ealing Planning Committee, 30th January, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Interview with Tariq Usmani, Chair of West London Islamic Centre trustees, 29th May 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interview with Jonathan Cross, PAD Architects, 12th April 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Planning Inspector, quoted in Planning Application Report to Ealing Planning Committee , 7th July 2004, p2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Planning Officer’s report to Planning Committee 27th July 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A Grade II listing indicates a building of special interest legally protected from being demolished, extended or significantly altered without special permission from the local planning authority. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with Paul Levy, IPC Pastor, 15th December 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. A Grade II\* listing indicates a particularly important buildings of more than special interest, with stronger expectation of protection in place. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. P/2015/1077 OFFICERS REPORT [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Richard Buxton, Pastor ECC, 19 February 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Planners recommendation to Ealing Planning Committee, 17th December 2014, p18 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Interview with founder trustee, WLIC, 23rd April 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Interview with Mr Rafnasingham, Chair of Trustees, SKTA Temple, 9th July 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Interview with former planning professional, Ealing Council, 15th January 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Interview with Mark Pender, Planning consultant, West London Islamic Centre, 3rd March 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Interview with Head of Strategic Planning, Ealing Council, 15th December 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Interview with former planning professional, Ealing Council, 15th January 2018

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