

In a Suburb of Atlanta, a Temple Stops Traffic

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Erik S. Lesser for The New York Times

The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, above, a Hindu temple, is being built in Lilburn, Ga.

By BRENDA GOODMAN
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ATLANTA, July 4 — As Ponce de Leon Avenue snakes eastward out of Atlanta into the suburbs, the groomed lawns, the painted brick colonials and the neighborhood parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted give way to giant supermarkets, gas stations, strip malls and used-car dealerships with signs painted in several languages.

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Erik S. Lesser for The New York Times
A Muslim mosque, Al-Farooq Masjid, is scheduled to open this fall in Midtown Atlanta.

Even the name of the road changes — from Ponce, as it is known to in-towners, to the more utilitarian Lawrenceville Highway, helpfully alerting drivers who might be unfamiliar with Atlanta's suburban sprawl that they will eventually reach Lawrenceville.

In the midst of this bleak assault to the senses is a novel building that is certain to grab motorists' attention, and perhaps even cause a few car accidents. Sitting like a wedding cake atop a mound of red clay in the suburb of Lilburn is the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, a Hindu temple that shares an intersection with a Publix supermarket and a Walgreens pharmacy.

The exterior is a confection of creamy hand-carved limestone and sparkling Italian Carrara marble. Pink sandstone decorates the interior spaces.

When this building, topped with red-and-white flags to ward off evil, opens for worship in a few weeks, it will officially be one of the largest Hindu temples in the world. The main reaction in Lilburn, a town so conservative that it recently outlawed pastimes like pool, karaoke and trivia contests in establishments that serve alcohol — an apparent effort to keep bars out — has been puzzlement.

"I think people in that area didn't really understand what they were fixing to have there," said William Reynolds, principal architect at Smallwoods, Reynolds, Stewart, Stewart, the firm that worked with Indian designers to build the mandir, a Sanskrit word for the place where the mind becomes still and the soul floats freely.

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The stone for the project was shipped piece by piece from India, where craftsmen had sculptured it into more than 500 designs including rosettes, leaves, feathers and lacy geometric patterns. The thousands of sections, ranging from five ounces to five tons, each with its own bar code, have been assembled like a giant jigsaw puzzle based on instructions for religious buildings written into scripture thousands of years old.

Although the engineers said they had not counted the number of pieces they used, a mandir in London that served as a model for the Lilburn building required more than 26,000 individual parts.

The price tag for the project, \$19 million, has been kept down by the thousands of hours of volunteer labor donated by congregants of the BAPS Swaminarayan temple in Clarkston, Ga., who will move from a converted skating rink when the temple is completed in August. For more than two years homemakers and retirees have been polishing the stonework by hand and cooking for the construction workers. Hundreds of volunteers installed more than 50,000 plants for the landscaping.

"It comes from your inner heart," said a woman who insisted on being identified only as Minal because she said it would be unseemly to call attention to herself.

"The temple has inspired my 4-year-old to get up from his computer, and nothing can do that," she said. "Every evening we are going to go down there to worship, and it's going to make a tremendous difference on our kids' brains."

Inspirational though it may be, some locals feel that the temple might be more at home near the Ganges than the Rocky Food Mart. "Mostly people are proud to have it here," said Jack Bolton, the mayor of Lilburn. "But I've heard from a few who say it doesn't fit in with the character of anything else in the area."

"If it was a big Baptist church, I don't think anyone would have objected," he added.

In many ways the architectural juxtaposition reflects the booming diversity of metropolitan Atlanta's neighborhoods. A survey conducted in the Atlanta area in 1985 found there were just 15 to 20 core Swaminarayan families here. Today there are about 900 regular members in metropolitan Atlanta and as many as 6,000 worshipers who flock here from other places on festival days. (Atlanta has one of the fastest-growing South Asian populations in the United States, according to Census data.)



If the Swaminarayans feel the need to commiserate, they might consider visiting members of the Al-Farooq Masjid, a new mosque nearing completion in Midtown Atlanta that will serve about 5,000 Muslims when it is finished in September.

Medhat Elmesky, an architect in Panama City, Fla., who designed the mosque, went to great lengths to find a way to keep the building from sitting at an odd angle to the street while also satisfying the religious requirement that Muslims pray toward Mecca. His solution was to make the building octagonal, topped by a gleaming bronze dome and flanked by traditional minarets.

"The octagon shape was really the best solution," Mr. Elmesky said. "One of the sides is lined up with the street, another with the cross street, and another is directed toward Mecca."

The problem is that the prayer room also faces something less fitting: the splashiest new outdoor mall in metro Atlanta, Atlantic Station. "It was something of a surprise," said Y. Khalid Siddiq, an endocrinologist who sits on the board for Al-Farooq.

When planning for the mosque first began some 20 years ago, the property was adjacent to a defunct steel mill, a brownfield site so contaminated that no one expected it ever to be developed. In 2001 an ambitious builder announced plans to clean up the tract and turn it into a 138-acre mixed-use development, complete with housing, office space, a movie megaplex, a grocery store and an outdoor shopping center. The first phase opened two years ago.




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So on the eve of the mosque's completion, the Muslims, whose faith teaches them to let go of all material desires, are praying not just toward Mecca but also toward a massive Ikea store that sits squarely in their line of sight. "At least we have a two-block buffer of residential buildings," Dr. Siddiq said. "But yes, the mall was unexpected."

Yet Charles J. Hultstrand, a board member of Faith & Form, a group of architects that focuses on buildings for worship, said "not exactly fitting in" is often typical of new religious architecture these days. "The land is often cheaper away from the center of a city, and people will decide they want to be close to a mall or an office building for visibility," he said.

Having Atlantic Station as a neighbor has actually been a bit of a public relations boon for Al-Farooq, Dr. Siddiq said, with the mosque already drawing curious visitors from the shopping complex.

"We've had a very good response, with a lot of people wanting to visit," he said. "They want to know who you are and your beliefs. Most people don't know what a mosque looks like on the inside, and they want to know what we're doing here."

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