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## **Bowne Street, Flushing, Queens: The most diverse street in the world**



April 2, 2022. Co-naming ceremony, courtesy of the Hindu Temple Society of North America

Bowne Street in Flushing, Queens, named after leading American pioneer of religious freedom and anti-slavery movement, John Bowne, hosted on April 2, 2022, the co-naming ceremony into Ganesh Temple Street, signing an historical moment for the Hindu community of New York.

The Queens Borough President, Donovan Richards, tweeted: “Congratulations to Dr. Uma Mysorekar and everyone at the Hindu Temple Society of North America for all they do to spiritually support our families and uplift the collective soul of Queens<sup>1</sup>”.

Along with him, the Consul General of India in New York, Randhir Jaiswal, Dilip Chauhan, Deputy Commissioner for Trade, Investment and Innovation in the office of New York City

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<sup>1</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/street-in-new-york-named-ganesh-temple-street-after-prominent-hindu-temple/articleshow/90638850.cms>

Mayor Eric Adams, the president Dr. Uma Mysorekar, and the members of the Indian American community attended the event.

On the same day, at the Indian Consulate Jaiswal, commented that the gathering around the co-naming was not just a celebration, but an acknowledgement of the milestones reached through decades of hard work. The co-naming is, in fact, honoring the history of the temple Hindu Society of North America in Flushing, in Bowne Street, Queens.

The paper addresses the emergence and growth of a non-figurative<sup>2</sup> religious architecture in the urban reality of New York. Flushing was subject of investigation in 2011- 2013 for the PhD thesis “Sacred Spaces in profane Buildings” and my interest is to update and test what was critically examined in the past. This paper addresses the history of the Hindu Society of North America in Flushing, in the framework of the development of Bowne Street. This case study can demonstrate how some marginal urbanized and micro scale spaces of the city, named as “Sacred spaces in profane buildings” in the text, can become relevant for urban studies and planning policies. The research is supported by field work done during the fall semester spent at the Columbia University Italian Academy in 2022 and on a series of interviews with Dr. Uma Mysorekar, president; and Ravi Vaidyanat, director of religious affairs at the Temple.

### **Sacred Spaces in Profane Buildings**

“Sacred spaces in profane buildings”, scattered around both city centers and peripheries and situated in specific geographic and social contexts (Europe and North America), are places to worship that are informally built inside former garages, warehouses, shops, and apartment buildings that suffer, at their foundation, severe planning deficits. In their evolution, describe and map the nascence of a new religious architecture and communities, becoming manifest in the contemporary urban context. With *Sacred Spaces in Profane Buildings* are intended places of worship in non-traditional sites, in buildings that have undergone a transformation of function<sup>3</sup>. Many of these spaces are not visible from the outside. The interiors are what has been altered the most to accommodate the needs of a religion’s worship practices. The word “profane”, which literally means outside the temple<sup>4</sup>, in this context refers to buildings being secular from the beginning, not in a location that is precisely chosen and central, with an architecture that makes it highly visible.

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<sup>2</sup>Branzi, *W & W*. Pag. 9-11. In the essay “For a non-figurative architecture”, Branzi introduces the passage from a strong and concentrated modernity of the twentieth century to the weak and diffuse current one, and investigates whether there is the possibility of imagining a non-figurative architecture, posing outside of the architectural tradition which limits to solely figurative and symbolic codes its function.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Guggenheim, “Mutable Immobiles. Change of Use of Buildings as a Problem of Quasi-Technologies”. In Ignacio Farias and Thomas Bender, *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-network Theory Changes Urban Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010).; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (OUP Oxford, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Profanus* was what was “in front of the temple precinct”; in its earlier usage the term was always applied solely to places. Originally *profanare* meant “to bring out” the offering “before the temple precinct (the *fanum*), in which the sacrifice was performed. *Sacer* and *profanus* were therefore linked to specific quite distinct locations; one of these, a spot referred to as *sacer*, was either walled off or otherwise set apart, that is to say, *sanctum*, within the other, surrounding space available for profane use”. In Lindsay Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York [u.a.]: Macmillan [u.a.], 2005).

In this logic, the articulation of a produced space and how its architecture is modified according to different cultural needs is the subject of interest.

### **Revision of the zoning ordinance in a “new religious America”**

President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the New Immigration Act<sup>5</sup> into law on July 4, 1965 and America’s doors were opened once again to immigrants from all over the world. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965<sup>6</sup> initiated a new era of immigration and new complex pluralist environment started for America. “The framers of the constitution and the bill of rights could not possibly have envisioned the scope of religious diversity in America at the beginning of the 21st century. When they wrote the sixteen words of the First Amendment”, “Congress shall make a law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”, they unquestionably did not have Buddhism or the Santeria<sup>7</sup> in mind”. But the principles they articulated: the *non-establishment* of religion and the *free exercise* of religion have provided a sturdy rudder through the past two centuries as our religious diversity”<sup>8</sup>.

When the Congress, passed the Immigration (Hart-Celler)<sup>9</sup> Act of 1965, it opened the door to people from parts of the world not represented before in large numbers in America. New religious traditions coming to the United States brought what Diana Eck<sup>10</sup> has called “a new religious landscape”<sup>11</sup>. Many Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Muslims and other religious groups from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, The Caribbean and Latin America came to America. In the 35 years since the Immigration Act, America experienced peaks of immigration that surpassed other periods. The effects were felt in 1980s and 1990s when immigration reached the highest number of newcomers ever and the problems connected with this complexity stood out even more with the new wave because of world religions that were largely new to America. Most recent newcomers are people who represent non-Western worshipping traditions, in addition to Christians from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.

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<sup>5</sup> It was linked to the “Civil Rights Act” passed just earlier.

For more visit: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act/>

<sup>6</sup> President John Kennedy prepared legislation to “eliminate discrimination between people and nations on a basis that is unrelated to any contribution immigrants can make and is inconsistent with our traditions of welcome in John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*, New York, Harper and Row, 1964, 107 and John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (Anti-defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> *Santeria* is a syncretic religion of West African and Caribbean origin influenced by and syncretized with Roman Catholicism.

<sup>8</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (HarperCollins, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> The Hart-Celler Act abolished the national origins quota system that had structured American immigration policy since the 1920s, replacing it with a preference system that focused on immigrants’ skills and family relationships with citizens or residents of the U.S. Numerical restrictions on visas were set at 170,000 per year.

Source: [http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/1965\\_immigration\\_and\\_nationality\\_act.html](http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/1965_immigration_and_nationality_act.html).

For President Johnson’s speech marking the passage of the Act: <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/651003.asp>

For more information about the Hart-Celler Act: Charles B. Keely, “Effects of the Immigration Act of 1965 on Selected Population Characteristics of Immigrants to the United States,” *Demography* 8, no. 2 (May 1971): 157. And <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5391395>

<sup>10</sup> Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies and Member of the Faculty of Divinity, Harvard University, author of Eck, *A New Religious America*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Pag.1.

New York City is an important frame in which to explore broader questions that lie at the heart of the study of sacred places in urban contexts because it is a kaleidoscope.

New York hosts more Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Orthodox; Russian Orthodox, and religious Jews than any other city in the United States.

More than one-half of Asian immigrants are churchgoers; about one out of five schoolchildren is in a religious school; 82% of New Yorkers say that religion is important to their lives. In New York, conversion and religious switching almost always involve revivals or invocations of ethnic identities. Lastly, all religions in the United States have denominations, varieties of organized religion competing in the spiritual marketplace<sup>12</sup>.

Even if between in the 1990s there was an increase of construction and already a large number of places of worship had already been built throughout the city, only on July 28, 2004 the New York City Planning Commission voted unanimously to approve and upgrade a proposed zoning text amendment<sup>13</sup>. Approved a zoning revision, to regulate community facilities such as medical offices and houses of worship. This upgrade changed connotation churches / house of worship in 2004 only, even though the 1980s and 1990s saw an increase of construction: dozens of Mosques were built, the Mosque on 96<sup>th</sup> Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan<sup>14</sup> among others.

Besides historical artefacts, Synagogues became Churches in 116<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem in the years and a very large number of secular buildings, still host sacred places, being them towers, storefronts, small flats, garages, former factories, small townhouses and so on. People used from a parking lot at La Guardia Airport<sup>15</sup> to a subway stop in Queens to any other kind of space available. The culmination point was reached in Queens, Flushing, where a Synagogue stands next door to a Sikh Gurdwara, across the street from a Ganesh Hindu Temple, a Chinese Catholic church, and many more other confessions.

### **Bowne Street, Flushing, Queens.**

The example of Flushing and Bowne Street, within the neighbourhood, is the most extreme case of religious pluralism in the world<sup>16</sup>. In the commercial and residential area, smaller than 2.5 square

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<sup>12</sup> Carnes, T., *New York glory: Religion in the city*,

<sup>13</sup> Community facility zoning text amendment (N 040202 ZRY) Adopted by the City Council on September 9, 2004, Source: [http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/cfzp/cf\\_text\\_cc\\_adopted.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/cfzp/cf_text_cc_adopted.pdf), latest accessed, 07/19/2013.

<sup>14</sup> "(...) At the same time as in other cities: The Bridge view and Villa Park mosques in Chicago, and the Southwest Zone Mosque in Houston. The Buddhists huge His Lai temple in Hacienda Heights, California construction project resisted at every step by the community and now so beautiful that "temple view" real estate is coveted and expensive. In the Western Chicago suburb of Bartlett, the Jains have built a large new temple, and to the North in Palatine stands the visually striking hexagonal Gurdwara of the Sikhs(...)" Ibid., 2001, Pag. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Courtney Bender and Elta Smith in "*The creation of Urban niche religion, South Asian taxi drivers in new York city*", Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (NYU Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Diversity is not unique to Flushing, Mosques, Temples and Gurdwaras have risen up all over America. Similar areas are New Hampshire Avenue in Silver springs, Maryland, 16<sup>th</sup> street in Washington DC, Deer Park Avenue in Dix Hills, New York, West Rogers park in Chicago, Illinois and the town of Fremont California are all signs of a trend towards a greater religious diversity developing around the country.

miles, there are several Hindu temples, Gurdwaras, several Mosques, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Buddhist temples, Taoist temples, Korean churches, Latin American evangelical Churches, Falun Gong practitioners, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormon as the oldest Churches and Synagogues in the city. There are over 200 different places of worship densely concentrated in a heavily populated and busy urban neighbourhood<sup>17</sup>. The rapid and dramatic change in the religious landscape brought practical and spatial issues that affected the area and part of the phenomena must be appointed to a zoning loophole that permitted the presence of an infinite number of community facilities. By the 1960s there were a lot of vacant properties and commercial spaces along the city and the very flexible zoning law signed in 1961<sup>18</sup> allowed different immigrant groups to build the so called "community facilities"<sup>19</sup>. Flushing several years later became a dramatically different architectural landscape for a wide combination of factors.

During the 1980s, Flushing grew exponentially on one side, as the main transportation hub of Queens with large commercial areas; on the other side, in the remaining residential areas, most of the new places of worship, were opened in a more scattered way and without boundaries.

Congregations of nearly every religious tradition moved into converted storefronts, office spaces, buildings and warehouses, single-family homes and abandoned Churches<sup>20</sup> and perhaps Bowne Street<sup>21</sup> is the most symbolic theatre of these upheavals. The Street in 2013 hosted around 15 diverse sacred places. The zoning law of the 1961 allowed an unlimited number of "community facilities" in terms of religious institutions, schools, nursing homes, or medical offices, if they met Building and Fire Department codes. In Flushing since then, most new community facilities have been sacred places. "Nowhere else in New York have religious groups been able to do this"<sup>22</sup>. Community facilities were also allowed twice the size of the zoning ratio as homeowners. For these combinations of factors, Flushing population became so diverse<sup>23</sup> that everyone was a minority.

Following the process of construction of a new typology of sacred space, we use Flushing and Bowne Street as a case study, and document the evolution starting from the epiphany.

Sacred spaces in profane buildings, in their different stage of development, are understood as a process of formalization in a building identifiable as place of worship, that doesn't move or expand more. Not all sacred spaces manage to grow larger and expand into an identifiable building, the

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<sup>17</sup> Hanson, *City of Gods: Religious Freedom, Immigration, and Pluralism in Flushing, Queens, New York City, 1945-2001*.

<sup>18</sup> See paragraphs 6.1 and 6.1.1 of this Chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Hanson, *City of Gods: Religious Freedom, Immigration, and Pluralism in Flushing, Queens, New York City, 1945-2001*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> John Bowne (1627–1695) was an English immigrant residing in the Dutch colony of New Netherland, now Flushing, who is honored today as a pioneer in the American struggle for religious liberty

<sup>22</sup> They either had to build in commercial areas or put up 10 feet of landscaping in residential areas to soften the juxtaposition with adjoining houses.

<sup>23</sup> As described by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* and by James Madison in *Federalist Papers* numbers X and LI, which speak of society so broken up into such a "multiplicity of sects" that there is a little danger of a majority acting as dominant aggressive faction. Scott Hanson uses this example to demonstrate that there's no majority in Flushing, so everything is subverted.

process can be interrupted at any stage. The final development, not yet enacted, is a very slow adaptation to the place where they insist, the zoning rules, the neighbourhood, the condition of the community as minority or relative majority, the financing system. If religious communities are divided, by different countries of origin, by different languages, by different denominations, the same happens to their sacred places. The existence of different practicing places for each different group is proven by the thousand different small nuclei, belonging to specific groups (for instance, in the same road you find more than a place to worship, belonging to the same religion, but not to the same denomination or language group). Sacred spaces in profane buildings, intended and legally treated as temporary, are for undetermined amount of time, part of the landscape of our cities.

### **Exploring transformations**

It usually starts with an individual and familiar devotional ritual practice within the home, it becomes an informal community congregation in the living room.

It develops into an external space, dedicated to a series of ritual activities in which private and public life coexist in the same space as well as sacred and profane meanings and symbols. A sublet room becomes a nucleus in which all kinds of performative acts are fulfilled: prayers, preaching, language teaching, legal advice, weddings and other more profane celebrations.

When the community grows larger or a financing system is started, they sometimes become multi-storey buildings in which only the interiors have been altered to include prayer spaces with minimal sacred features, community facilities and other forms of aggregation, without modifying the exterior part. Waiting for an approval of a planning applications can take long; in the meantime, everything happens indoors.

Subsequently, they develop from an existing storage space or former factory into an adaptive reuse. The original features of the architecture are used as a background to be transformed for the specific rituals and the building itself (i.e Dyva Dahm<sup>24</sup> in Corona Avenue) is transformed into a pilgrimage destination. The façade is expressively decorated and stand out since the symbolic meanings are brought outside.

The final example can be considered an expanded model. They are purposely built to be sacred places, designed according to rituals. They also evolved into established community centres of religion and culture, not only devoted to prayers but also to all the activities connected with the collective identity and culture, or political party of their members. They have websites, mailing lists,

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<sup>24</sup> The Divya Dham, was founded in 1993 by Swami Jagdishwaranandagain: almost invisible from the outside, is a huge complex and living-history museum in Woodside, Queens, opened in a former electronics factory.

they have surrounding properties for offices, priests' quarters, auditoriums, wedding halls, gift shops, and canteens. They have a virtual and physical presence, not only for the community but also within the image of the city.

In time, communities reach beyond the reductive image of otherness towards architectural forms that can articulate a more particular and less polarized identity. The traditional forms from the homeland are also reinvented in time to represent a new common identity.

### **Bowne Street, 2013 – 2023**

The visits at Bowne Street in Flushing, started in 2013 and continued until 2023. During December 2022, I've been visiting the area to document the evolution of Bowne Street, considered, as mentioned above, the most diverse street in the neighbourhood. If 10 years ago the street was a catalogue of sacred spaces at different stages of development, today, among the large number of places of worship belonging to different religions, only half have survived, due to many different motivations.

They moved as the congregation dwindled or grown or separated<sup>25</sup>, sometimes closed and moved elsewhere due to a gentrification of the area, added on to the existing place of worship, or moved to a larger location. Sacred places have been sold to a tenant that is usually another, different congregation and their building incorporates the history of an ethnic palimpsest through an adaptive reuse<sup>26</sup>. They are not yet defined as a model. Among the large number of places of worship belonging to different religions observed in the past, only some survived while others moved elsewhere, due to the reasons explained above. The most interesting case is the Ganesh Temple, also named The Hindu Society of North America.

The view that Hinduism is a unified, coherent religious tradition has been, in fact, criticized, neither the word Hindu connote a single religious identity. However, the easy adoption of these terms by practitioners themselves has legitimized them as meaningful categories. These hold for the Indian Subcontinent as much as for diasporic communities, which continue to practice inherited forms of religiosity with new modes. The 1980s and 1990s signified a major moment in the “institutionalization of Hinduism” in the United States, to connect the diaspora Hindus in India establishing umbrella nationalist organizations mirroring their Indian counterparts<sup>27</sup>.

From the architectural point of view, very interestingly, many of the Hindu temples outside of

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<sup>25</sup> *Gurdwara Singh Sabha of New York*, in Bowne Street, Flushing, was founded after a disagreement over how the nearby Sikh Center of New York was being run. Smaller in size and membership than the Sikh Center several blocks away, Gurdwara Singh Sabha has been comprised mainly of people in the immediate neighbourhood who walked to worship. Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Lucia, A., *Hinduism in America*, University of California, 2017

India are ecumenical in character, bringing together, under one roof, deities and rituals from separate, and sometimes conflicting, stands on Hinduism forming a new typology of temple. One example is The Hindu Society of North America.

### **The Ganesh Temple or The Hindu Society of North America**

The Ganesh temple was completed in 1997 after a long and elaborate evolutionary process.

In 1890, “the First Baptist Church of Flushing built what it called a “park branch” on what was then called Bowne Avenue and Hitchcock Park, where it was described as “a neat chapel”, in a 1904 Atlas of Queens”<sup>28</sup>.

Between 1919 and the late 1950s, the same structure became the First Church of the Nazarene until its community moved to another location and the building was sold to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Holy Annunciation. In 1971, the Church needed a larger space, and the property went for sale again<sup>29</sup>. A year earlier, a board of trustees met to envision the Hindu Temple Society of North America “in the living room of a two-story house in Queens where Dr. Alagappa Alagappan lived with his family. The group planned to obtain funds for a place of worship, and the project started with a check for \$51”<sup>30</sup>. The search for a suitable building took him all over the neighbourhood, until when he learned that the Russian Orthodox Church was available for purchase. In 1975 the small old church was demolished, and construction began of a huge and ambitious building designed in the traditional style of a South Indian Hindu temple. Finished in 1977, is the first Hindu temple in North America, built according to the Agama Sastras scriptures relating to temple building, composed largely of imported materials, and constructed by artisans from India, the Temple is one of the most important Hindu temples in the West <sup>31</sup>. Formally renamed Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam in the early 1990s, and still named the Hindu Temple Society of North America, or more commonly the Ganesha temple, is now a two-story south Indian Temple, acquired more than 64,000 ft<sup>2</sup> of the surrounding property for offices, priests’ quarters, incoming immigrants, guests, and a new auditorium, wedding hall, gift shop, and temple restaurant. As at the same time, newer Hindu Temples took form, Ganesh Temple grew and evolved into established community centre of religion and culture and, finally Bowne Street is now renamed after the temple, as Ganesh Temple Street. This case study testifies the development of the temple, from an informal gathering to a more established institution serving the community. The temple evolved through time into an established community centre of religion and culture, not

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<sup>28</sup> Hanson, *City of Gods: Religious Freedom, Immigration, and Pluralism in Flushing, Queens, New York City, 1945-2001*.

<sup>29</sup> History of Śrī Mahā Vallabha Ganapati Devasthānam, Commemorative Edition Book.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



only devoted to prayers but also to all the activities connected with the collective identity and culture, or, to serve the community during covid, to assist elderlies in the last years for their lives. More than 15 buildings in Bowne Street are now owned by the Temple, and serve a very diverse range of activities for the entire community of Queens. Moreover, it can be considered a new typology of Hindu Temple, strictly connected with its diasporic nature, bringing together, under one roof, deities and rituals from separate, and sometimes conflicting, stands on Hinduism.

**CITY PLANNING COMMISSION**

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**July 28, 2004/Calendar No. 50**

**N 040202 ZRY**

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**IN THE MATTER OF** an application submitted by the Department of City Planning and the City Council Land Use Committee pursuant to Section 201 of the New York City Charter, for an amendment to the Zoning Resolution of the City of New York relating to community facilities.

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This application to amend the text of the Zoning Resolution was filed jointly by the Department of City Planning and the New York City Council Land Use Committee on December 12, 2003. The

**Houses of Worship**

"Houses of worship" would replace "churches" as presently listed in the Resolution, in order to better reflect the city's diverse range of religious institutions.

Source: City Planning Commission, July 28, 2004. CPC report, approved.



The Hindu Temple Society of North America in 1991. Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times



The Hindu Temple Society of North America in 2022. Giovanna Silva



The Hindu Temple Society of North America in 2022. Giovanna Silva



The Hindu Temple Society of North America in 2022. Giovanna Silva