

Manhattan Jamatkhana Opens Doors to New York

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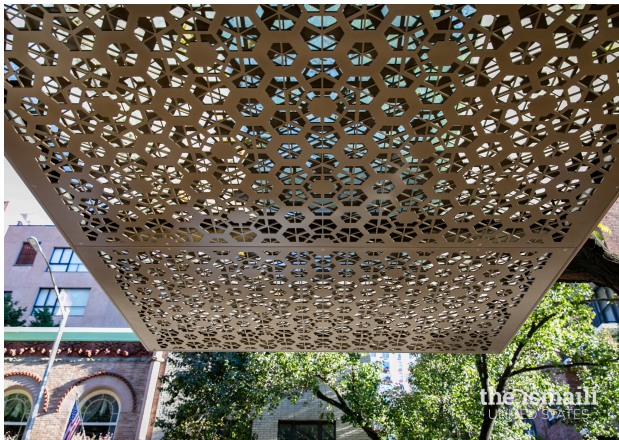
26 June 2024



Visitors at the Manhattan Jamatkhana entrance.

Manhattan Jamatkhana makes it on the list of Open House New York that hosts tours and provides access to spaces that are not usually open to the public.

Marquee above entrance of Jamatkhana. Natural sunlight casts shadows on the sidewalk during certain times of the day. It also functions as a lightbox after sundown.



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Manhattan Jamatkhana participated in an annual weekend hosted by Open House New York (OHNY) in October 2022, where they toured various noteworthy spaces to deepen their understanding of designs that can help strengthen communities and improve quality of life.

For the past 20 years, OHNY has partnered with local organizations across the five boroughs to host tours and provide access to spaces that were not open to the public. The new Manhattan Jamatkhana, opened only a month earlier, brought opportunities to welcome New York City residents to introduce them to the Ismaili community and its participation in the civic society.

Arriz Hassam, who helped design the Ismaili Centre Toronto, designed much of the interiors of Manhattan Jamatkhana. An extensive renovation helped in creating a permanent home for local Ismailis. His research and experience in Islamic design influenced his work with the Jamatkhana.

Celeste Umpierre designed the common areas of the building, including the

library, conference rooms, and classrooms. Her attention to spatial flow is apparent throughout as it connects the Islamic elements within the space.

As part of OHNY, the weekend tours started with the attendees gathering outside the building to view the simple but elegant entrance. The foyer gave glimpses of Islamic motifs inspired by mosaic tiles often seen in Islamic designs and geometrical patterns.

Zahir Virani and Natasha Pradhan led the groups through various floors of the Jamatkhana that showcased beautiful designs. The participants learned about Mawlana Hazar Imam, the Ismaili community, and the architectural designs of the space which consistently tied back to the faith and the community.

“Values and identity of a community are inherent within the architecture of a space. We experience those values when we spend time in that space,” noted Natasha while reflecting on the attendees' experience of the tour. She added: “So there is a very specific experience, whether or not you call it a religious one, of being in the Jamatkhana together that everyone can experience together, regardless of their own religious identification.”

Front door of Jamatkhana. Mahogany with a natural finish containing patterns of hexagons and stars.

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A couple of attendees who have visited religious places in other countries emphasized that religious buildings tend to echo the context and society in which they reside. The Ismaili Jamatkhana built with the same intention in mind. By grounding the dialogue in architecture and religion broadly, attendees are able to relate to the space in a familiar and meaningful way.

The tour ended with a video of Mawlana Hazar Imam receiving the 2017 President's Medal at the Architectural League of New York.

Echoing OHNY's mission, "to promote a deeper understanding of how the city functions and whom it serves," many attendees were delighted to visit the Jamatkhana, a prayer hall, a space they would otherwise not have had the ability to see. This sentiment also aligns with the Ismaili ethos of civic dialogue that encourages an openness to share, learn from one another, and ultimately seeks to unite people. Despite the differences, Jamatkhana provide a space for understanding through cultural dialogue with the local community.

Manhattan Jamatkhana looks forward to a continuing partnership with OHNY to further promote cultural dialogue and understanding, and continue inviting local community members to learn about and experience the Jamatkhana.

OHNY was founded in the wake of 9/11 when much of New York City was closed off due to security concerns. Since then, OHNY has advocated for openness and offered insight into the forces that shape the city. OHNY Weekend now includes over 275 participating sites with an estimated 85,000 visitors annually.