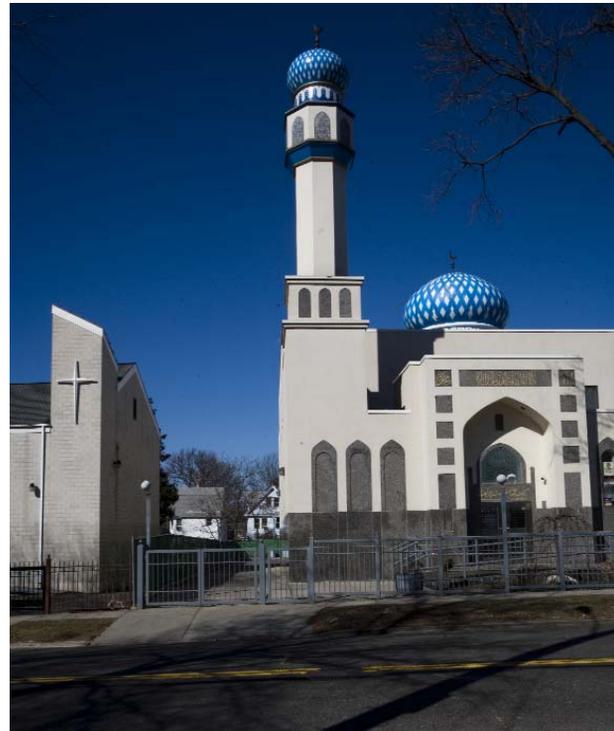


Living with Diversity

By CARRIE LOEWENTHAL



The neighborhood of Flushing in New York City is home to more than 200 places of worship.

The street blocks in Flushing, New York City, may seem long to walk on a hot summer day, but they make the distance between the world's many religions seem short.

On one block alone, the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir neighbors the Boon Church of Overseas Chinese Mission, which faces the Singh Sabha gurdwara. This block exemplifies the rest of Flushing, a neighborhood 16 kilometers east of Manhattan that compacts more than 200 places of religious worship into 6.5 square kilometers. Flushing is a community in Queens, one of the five boroughs that make up New York City.

A short walk around the neighborhood takes a visitor past 151 Christian churches (many are Korean), 30 Buddhist temples, seven Hindu temples, three Jewish synagogues, four Muslim mosques, two Sikh gurdwaras, two Taoist temples and a group practicing Falun Gong, according to statistics compiled in 2007 by R. Scott

Hanson, visiting assistant professor of history at the State University of New York at Binghamton. His book, *City of Gods: Religious Freedom, Immigration, and Pluralism in Flushing, Queens-New York City, 1945-2001*, will be published in 2010.

"Flushing was founded in 1645, when it was known as Vlissingen after a town of the same name in Holland. By the 1660s, when the British took over the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam (and it became known as New York), Vlissingen was also Anglicized and became Flushing," Hanson says. "Some English settlers in Vlissingen had already started to refer to it as Vlissing before then, so one gets the sense that Vlissingen was just too hard to say, even for locals."

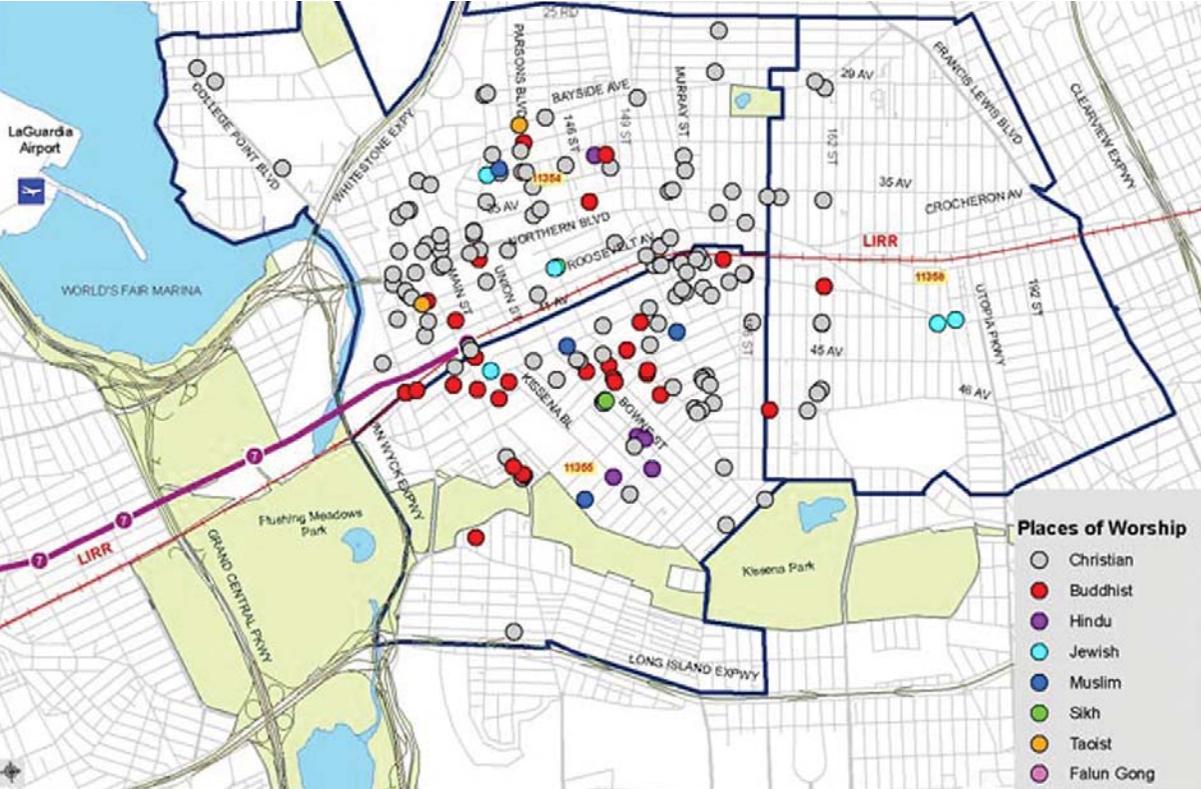
Local residents also proudly claim Flushing is the "birthplace of religious freedom in America" because of the Flushing Remonstrance, a petition by Flushing residents in 1657 asking the Dutch colonial government to uphold the

religious freedom provisions of the town charter. It is recognized as the earliest political assertion of freedom of conscience and religion in New York.

Several factors came together over time to make Flushing one of the most religiously diverse communities in the United States. It is centrally located, with two major New York airports nearby, subway, bus and railroad stops and major roads. International visitors came to the area for two major World's Fairs (1939-40 and 1964-65). Many immigrants wanted to get away from overcrowded Manhattan to find a little bit more space, grass and trees in the outer boroughs like Queens. Also, a loophole in the zoning law made it possible for many different immigrant groups to build so-called "community facilities," including houses of worship, in residential neighborhoods, Hanson says. Converted houses and storefronts serve as churches and temples, scattered up and down blocks

The Birthplace of America's Religious Freedom

Flushing is called the "birthplace of religious freedom in America" because of the Flushing Remonstrance. Signed in 1657 in the neighborhood of Flushing, New York, it is the earliest known document in America to argue for religious freedom. The map indicates the many houses of worship in Flushing today.



Courtesy R. Scott Hanson

Far left: The annual Ganesh Chaturthi parade passes through Flushing near the Kissena Jewish Center.

Left: "Space between church and mosque in Flushing, Queens" by Kim Badawi, at the Queens Museum of Art.

between larger places of prayer.

These conditions attract scores of immigrants to the area because it is easier to establish faith-based community centers that bring some familiarity to a new, foreign home. Waves of Irish, Russians, Greeks, Italians and Africans, over time, have shared space with and made way for Indian, Chinese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Pakistani, Afghan, Korean, Mexican and Central American residents, according to *The New York Times*.

Over half the residents of Flushing were Asian American at the time of the last census in 2000. The community's main street "has the kind of business diversity, foot traffic, liveliness and buzz Middle American main streets only dream of," says *New York* magazine.

Despite Flushing's capacity to provide a home for so many different groups of people, learning to live together has taken time because "people become more accustomed to diversity over time," Hanson says.

"The 1970s was a period of growing pains, and into the 1980s and 1990s, when diversity really escalated," he says. Now, Hanson adds, "people are at least aware.

There is a sensitivity that's there."

Ganapathy Padmanabhan, the public relations officer for the Hindu Temple Society of North America, agrees. "We find Flushing to be respectful and tolerant," he says.

The Hindu temple was consecrated in Flushing in 1977 and members work to be good neighbors, Padmanabhan says; the temple welcomes about 500 people during the week and up to 3,000 on weekends.

"We make very good neighborly relations. We take care that [neighborhood residents are] not disturbed," he says.

Beyond maintaining peace with the neighbors, the temple does have some interaction with people of other religions in the area. After all, it sits one block away from the Boon Church and Singh Sabha gurdwara and about four blocks away from one of the oldest mosques in Queens, the Muslim Center of New York.

Although occasional incidents of vandalism and hate crimes have taken place over the years, and tempers flare over parking problems on weekends, diversity exists "without warfare and bloodshed," Hanson says. People cannot connect any conflict to the past, which allows for a spirit of "live and let live."

"Many Muslims, Christians and Jews come here," says Padmanabhan. "People from other faiths visit the temple, particularly students. We take them around the temple and tell them about our religious

For more information:

The Melting Pot on a High Boil in Flushing
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/02/arts/02expl.html?_r=2&oref=slogin

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University
<http://pluralism.org/affiliates/shanson/index.php>

practices."

Other places in the United States where diversity has become commonplace include Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington; Fremont, California, near San Francisco; and Rogers Park, Illinois, in Chicago. Like Flushing, these areas all border urban centers.

Hanson acknowledges that even in Flushing, with all its diversity, interaction among groups is often "superficial." In a lecture at the Queens Museum of Art, Hanson said, "City people value their privacy, so while residents of Flushing may live, work, and worship *near* each other, overall there is not much meaningful, lasting interaction among different ethnic/racial/religious groups."

But Flushing should continue to flourish as a model of religious pluralism, Hanson predicts. He credits Flushing City Councilman John Liu, the first and only Asian American on the New York City Council, with making great efforts to bridge remaining gaps between the groups in the area.

"I'm hopeful about the future," Hanson says.



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