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Mosques in Stuttgart Struggling for Space

PETRA KUPPINGER

The easiest way to reach the Al-Nour Mosque¹ from the local train station and avoid the extra walk around an entire city block is to take a short cut through a small dead-end street and an adjacent parking lot. For months I had used this route to reach the mosque which is one of the sites in my research about Islam in Stuttgart. In September 2007 I received an email from Andrea, one of the mem-

bers of the women's Quran study group that I regularly attended at the Al-Nour Mosque which read "I just want to briefly inform you that the entrance of the mosque by way of the parking lot is no longer open. The neighbours had a gate installed. We are already in touch with a lawyer." That evening I took the long way around to attend the study group. Since then there has been ongoing controversy about the gate. The new owners of the neighbouring building want to prevent traffic from the passage which is legally theirs, but has for a long time been shared, onto the shared parking lot. The mosque and its visitors clearly account for the largest share in this traffic and are the targets of the gate affair. However, with a few exceptions the new gate remained open throughout the fall.

The gate incident at the Al-Nour Mosque could be done away with as an ordinary right of access controversy between neighbours. But because the conflict involves a mosque, it is about more than mere rights of use and access. Instead the seemingly insignificant conflict illustrates elements of a much larger encounter between Islam and dominant society. Concrete mosque facilities and locations of mosques in the cityscape illustrate the current multi-layered social, political, and cultural position and struggles of Muslim communities in Stuttgart and beyond. Moreover, they illustrate the relative invisibility of Islam and Muslims in Stuttgart

and indeed their absence from the city's dominant self-image. As the city struggles hard to situate itself on the map of global cities, the dominant self-image of the high-tech, economic and cultural metropolis allows little room for migrants, mosques, and ethnic enclaves.

Stuttgart is the capital of the state of Baden-Württemberg. Home to the global giants Mercedes, Porsche, and Bosch, this region has over the past half century attracted hundreds of thousands of migrants and students from all over the world. Today almost forty percent of the city's residents have "backgrounds of migration" (*Migrationshintergrund*) which means that at least one of their parents was/is not of German descent. This is the highest such figure in Germany. Approximately 40,000 to 50,000 Stuttgarters are Muslims (about eight percent of the total population). Over the past few decades, Muslim Stuttgarters of different ethnic backgrounds have founded religious associations and mosques. Some combine religious and social or cultural elements, others only have a room for prayer. Regardless of these differences, there is a core of about twenty five associations that are relatively permanent, have premises (rented or owned), and offer space for prayer and other activities. Among these associations there is a core of about a dozen very well established communities with larger premises and an array of services, activities, and programmes for members and non-members.

Dynamic marginal spaces

Most large Stuttgart mosques are vibrant and dynamic spaces. They bustle with activities and visitors, in particular, for the Friday prayer, and on weekends when most offer religious instruction for children. Many communities are located in less than perfect premises. Some increase

Examining mosques, their spatial contexts, and the struggles to create, negotiate and improve their spaces in Stuttgart reveals the complex and controversial nature of spatial articulation for Muslim communities in this German city. These processes symbolize the broader struggles of Muslims and Muslim communities for recognition and participation in German cities and society at large.

their space piecemeal if possible, others renovate or improve their locations, yet others are in search for better spaces. Yet these processes are frequently marked by considerable obstacles. Some mosques have to move because of problems with landlords and neighbours. An official from the Al-Medina Mosque related how his association occupied five different locations between

the 1970s and the early 1990s. Finding appropriate spaces for mosque associations is difficult. There is the almost instantaneous opposition of neighbours when the news spread that a building will be turned into a mosque. In early December 2007, the Al-Medina Mosque which operates under the umbrella of Milli Görüş,² was denied access to an empty factory that it wanted to buy. The city decided to rewrite the zoning of the area in a larger planning effort that officials stated was unrelated to the mosque project. Mosque officials, however, were not surprised to see such re-zoning, indeed they noted that this was a well-established game in the city.³ The association's current facilities which the community has long outgrown are located in an industrial zone between two urban quarters. Adjacent to a power plant, produce wholesale market, a small gambling place, and a huge car show room, the mosque is part of a larger industrial and commercial complex. This mosque is one of the few remaining larger communities that do not own their premises. For years they have been searching for better premises. "We have looked at every single available facility in the larger Stuttgart area, but nobody sells to us in the end," an official told me.⁴

Most mosques are default spaces and represent spatial compromises in a situation where only a few options are available and mosques are seen as bad neighbours at best and serious trouble at worst. Looking at only a few mosques, it becomes apparent how every single one occupies inconvenient, inhospitable, and certainly not very aesthetic or representative spaces. The Al-Nour Mosque, for instance, occupies three separate suites in a non-descript, if not to say ugly, 1970s office building. For community events and high holidays this means that the staircase turns into a human highway where, especially, children move between the first floor men's and fourth floor women's quarters. On the third floor the community occupies yet another smaller suite that serves for "in between" communal activities and more public events. This spatiality is highly inconvenient. But at least this community has a fairly central location within its urban quarter, something few mosques have.

Similarly out of the way is Stuttgart's largest mosque complex, the DITIB Mosque in Feuerbach which is located in the heart of a large industrial area.⁵ Once a metal factory, this sizeable complex includes a series of connected buildings and oddly shaped extensions. It accommodates a large men's and a women's prayer space, community facilities, and commercial spaces. A very lively and dynamic space, this mosque complex attracts Muslims and some non-Muslim shoppers in particular on the weekends. "Up to 4000 people come to pray here for the high holidays," one of the members of the board of directors proudly noted. The complex remains largely hidden from dominant urban society. Even the most liberal and culturally interested of non-Muslim Stuttgarters do not know where this place is, let alone have ever set foot there.

The Stuttgart crescent

Stuttgart does not have any larger or representative mosques, like other German or European cities. None of the local mosques were built as such or have any of the appearance of a mosque (e.g. minarets). There is no central mosque that brings together Muslims of different ethnic or national origins and serves as a symbol of the community in the city. Instead there is a diverse and dynamic landscape of mosques. Marking the twen-

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ty five established mosques on the map,⁶ I found the not very surprising pattern that these spaces, with only one exception, are all located on the vague crescent of older industrial, now turned lower class and migrant quarters. Bad Cannstatt constitutes the centre of Muslim Stuttgart with eight mosques. Only the Afghan mosque, situated in a more upscale section of Stuttgart-West, defeats the crescent pattern. A look at Stuttgart's social and economic statistics shows that mosques are almost exclusively situated in poorer and migrant quarters. While poverty in Stuttgart is not (yet) dramatic, social differences are real and visible. Of the six quarters with the highest purchasing power, five do not have mosques. Of the eight quarters with the lowest purchasing power, six have mosques.⁷ Seven of the eight quarters with the highest rates of unemployment have mosques; the eight quarters with the lowest rates of unemployment do not have mosques.

This list could be continued, but clearly the quarters with mosques are socially and economically more disadvantaged. To be sure, it is not the mosques that produce this social disadvantage. Instead, their presence in these quarters illustrates the status of mosques as lower class spaces and very clearly also as unwanted spaces. The Stuttgart mosque crescent curves around downtown with its upscale shopping, commercial, entertainment, and political spaces. The wealthier residential quarters lie inside the crescent or to its south. Many mosques serve specific ethnic communities, which are not tied to one district. Instead of an expression of the community's residential context, mosques tend to be spatial compromises that illustrate an intersection between a community's financial means and, more importantly, the willingness of a district and its population to tolerate and accommodate a mosque. The struggle of the Al-Medina mosque mentioned above demonstrates this. A few years ago another association bought an old factory and subsequently had to fight a long political, administrative, and legal battle over this site. In the end the city bought the site from them and the mosque project had to be folded. It appears that if a proposed mosque does not fit the images for the particular spatiality, as held by dominant actors, those in charge are prone to find reasons and administrative tools to undermine the project. This decreases the possible locations for mosques considerably. What remains are lower class/migrant neighbourhoods with less political influence or locations in industrial or commercial zones. Thus the emergence of the Stuttgart mosque crescent is the result of powerful urban images, economic necessities, and the less influential position of lower class/migrant districts.

Mosques are relegated to leftover or marginal locations. They often recycle otherwise unwanted spaces, in particular, defunct industrial sites. First tucked away in small backyards locations, many mosques eventually upgraded to smaller or larger industrial facilities. In search of adequate and more respectable facilities, communities often moved several times until they finally bought premises. Pushed into marginal and unwanted locations, it is not surprising that mosques share facilities or are neighbours to other "unwanted" groups and activities. In one case, a Hindu Temple is located in the same building as a mosque. One community is located in the vicinity of Stuttgart's red light district.

Struggling for space and recognition

From the perspective of dominant society, there are the occasional loud disputes over sites for mosques. Issues of noise, lack of parking spaces, and the supposed oppression of women in Islam, in general, and mosques, in particular, dominate these controversies. In Stuttgart, they seem few and far between. When seen, however, from the perspective of Muslim communities, this scenery looks very different. In particular until the mid-1990s when many larger associations started buying premises, mosque associations were frequently on the move. This game of moving around escaped the view of much of dominant society. I repeatedly heard stories that ended with something like "and then there were problems with the neighbours and we had to move." These ongoing problems necessitated, and for some continue to necessitate, a tedious constant search for facilities. The willingness to sell and political interference into sales, such as re-zoning play an important role. Located in out of the way spaces many facilities are the discarded spaces of Stuttgart's economic transformations of the last decades, the city's rust-belt. Spaces that have lost their previous function and cannot otherwise be re-inserted into Stuttgart's glittery twenty first century cityscape then become available for mosques. Many mosques occupy the lowest end of the Stuttgart real estate universe.

The spatiality of Stuttgart's mosques is a reflection of the political, cultural, and social position of Muslim communities in the city indicating

just-how marginal they are with regard to urban politics and power. Hidden away from public view, Stuttgart's mosques are easily glossed over as urban actors and participants. It is not surprising then, that, for instance, a recently published book⁸ about Bad-Cannstatt (46.1% of its population have backgrounds of migration) dedicated a mere one and a half pages (of 242 pages) to "foreign fellow residents." Remembering that Bad-Cannstatt with its eight mosques forms the heart of the Stuttgart crescent, it is even more amazing that the book refers in precisely two sentences to Muslim communities. This void is not conscious exclusion, but much more the result of the forced invisibility of mosques and the chosen blindness with regard to Muslim affairs in the city's dominant self-image. This marginalization stands in stark contrast to the very dynamic and vibrant inner lives of these communities, as they build and rebuild their spatialities and their religious, social, cultural, and political position, and increasingly also grassroots participation in the city. Stuttgart's mosques still have to overcome many obstacles to escape their spatial and political marginality.

By mid-December 2007, just before the Eid, the gate at the back entrance of the Al-Nour Mosque was locked again on several occasions.

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Not available online

Protests in Cologne reveal that hostility towards mosques is not limited to Stuttgart.

Notes

- Names of mosques are pseudonyms.
- Milli Görüs is generally thought to be the European arm of the larger Erbakan movement in Turkey.
- N. Höfle and J. Brand, "Stadt verhindert Moschee in Wangen," *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 6 December 2007. The title of the article "City prevents mosque in Wangen" speaks for itself.
- This case is not unusual. The fact that Milli Görüs is under observation by state security may play a role here, but associations that are not on the watch list make very similar experiences.
- DITIB is the German association of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs. Associated with the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs, it represents official Turkish Islam.
- There is no comprehensive list of Stuttgart mosques. I assembled my list from my various research sites and Internet sources e.g. www.islam.de, www.orientbasar.de, and www.meinestadt.de.
- All Stuttgart statistics are from: Landeshauptstadt Stuttgart, *Datenkompass Stadtbezirke Stuttgart* (Stuttgart: Statistisches Amt, 2006).
- J. Hagel, *Cannstatt und seine Geschichte* (Tübingen: Silberburg Verlag, 2002).