

The Western Mosque Space in Physical Place

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The acquisition of places of worship has always played a crucial role in religious emancipation processes. Religious groups, once settled in a new environment, have put major efforts in organizing accommodations for prayer. Historically, places of worship have constituted the most controversial and symbolically laden arenas with respect to religious emancipation. Although political empowerment, networking, and organizational activity are also important aspects of that process, and although legal arrangements consti-

tute crucial landmarks in the emancipation of religious "outsiders," the symbolic significance of places of worship cannot be overestimated. Places of worship, especially when built for that purpose, "objectify" religious presence in ways that reach beyond physical appearance and urban planning. In several cases initiatives to build a new mosque have aroused fierce debates about the place of Islam in society. While the first mosques were rebuilt garages, houses, or factory halls that did not visually stand out as *Muslim* buildings, new purposely built mosques attract not only more visual attention, but also have become prime signifiers of the process of localization of religious newcomers.¹

Most studies on the acquisition of mosques have either treated it as a marker of religious institutionalization, or as a test case for the formal relation between state and religion. In much of the immigration literature, the building of mosques is perceived as the result of the growing cultural diversity that characterizes Western European cities since the Second World War. Muslims arriving as migrants have built up a religious infrastructure, which was perceived as a sign of religious continuity with their countries of origin. Such instances of institutionalization have unleashed a more principal debate about the position of religious minorities in Western European nation-states. The extent to which they actually facilitate or discourage the institutionalization process can be considered within a structure of opportunities that harks back to earlier debates in many nineteenth century nation-states about the relation between state and religion.² In such an approach, identities, both of religious newcomers and of the host society often seem to be fixed categories. As a consequence, many studies on the construction of mosques do not look beyond formal arrangements.

Places of worship and the symbolization of space

I contend that any thorough understanding of the establishing of mosques should analyse the conceptualization of public space as a locus where identities are reconstituted. Negotiations about places of worship have always triggered debates about the character of public space in which authenticity, historicity, and representation are key concepts.³ This goes way beyond religious issues. Negotiations about the construction of a mosque are embedded in a principle discussion about the conceptualization of space and the question who is "local," the articulation of contextualized identities, and discourses of in-, and exclusion as "categories of practice." To capture these different dimensions, it is useful to make a distinction between "place" and "space." In relation to mosques, "place" starts off as a "religious" issue. A group of Muslims

Negotiations about the construction of the Western Mosque in Amsterdam started some ten years ago. While local politicians voiced their fear that Islamic immigrants would take over the neighbourhood, the local mosque organization immediately resorted to legal rights. This lack of trust has been overcome during the past ten years. Though the design of the mosque may still be seen as a compromise between opposing parties, the process of building the mosque led to a firm entrenchment of the organization in the local community.

collects money to build a mosque in order to be able to perform religious duties. When they take action and negotiate with local administrators, place also becomes an administrative category linked to urban zoning planning, bureaucracy, and legal arrangements. Place, as the final outcome of the negotiation process, is then the balancing of religious demands and administrative procedures. In the Netherlands, creating a place for mosques has often been realized as an almost purely administrative formality. Many cases of

negotiation, however, have turned into a long struggle for recognition, and this is where I would propose the term "space." Space is a discursive contentious field that is linked up with a particular problem definition, the production of locality, embedded in specific power and political relations and by definition something that resolves in the public sphere.

Islam as a public affair

Today, partly due to the recent changes in the political climate towards Islam, the construction of mosques has been transformed into a public issue that brings about much more than just administrative procedures. Mosque construction is simultaneously the creation of new spatial categories, the product of human agency. For many Muslim organizations a big, purposely built mosque signifies recognition and communicates religious identity. There are several projects in the Netherlands that are designed with these motives in mind. But bigger does not necessarily mean better. There are also cases in which the parties involved agreed on a design of the mosque that merges with the physical and social environment rather than sticking out against the surrounding community. This is not necessarily a compromise between opposing demands, but rather about the reconceptualization of space and identity. For a proper understanding of these processes, the actual design and the architectural specificities are less relevant than the discourse in which negotiations are embedded.

One of the most ambitious plans in the Netherlands was the realization of a huge complex consisting of a central mosque, sporting facilities, conference halls, etc. initiated by the Turkish Milli Görüş movement in the Amsterdam district *De Baarsjes*. Officially named The Western Mosque, the construction of which started in 2005, is being built in the style of the Amsterdam architectural school. At the launching of the plans the chairman of northern branch of Milli Görüş Netherlands announced: "We do not want an ugly big white pastry in our neighbourhood, as you sometimes see when they build a new mosque. Our mosque will be completely in the style of the 'Amsterdam School,' such that fits perfectly in the neighbourhood and becomes a real Dutch mosque. That should be the future of all mosques in this country: in line with the physical and social environment." Some have discarded the statement as pep talk for a Dutch audience. I strongly doubt that. The lengthy negotiations about the mosque project were instrumental for a process in which the northern branch of Dutch Milli Görüş developed from a Turkish political organization that sought to increase their support among Turkish immigrants into one that plays a crucial role in the shaping of a Dutch-rooted Islam. The mosque project envisioned not an alien element in a Dutch environment but the redefinition of a Dutch neighbourhood. Their rank-and-file is not anymore considered as Turkish aliens but as Dutch citizens-to-become. Thus initially the mosque project was the object of a power struggle between rivaling Turkish Islamic fractions, in the process it became a symbol of the definition of a "Dutch" Islam.

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At the time when Milli Görüs bought the plot and the premises of a former garage in the early 1990s, the organization was still firmly connected to the German headquarters in Cologne and to the Turkish Welfare Party. The party was involved in a fierce political struggle with the Turkish secular state about the status of Islam in Turkish society. From the early 1970s onwards, several Turkish Muslim organization have struggled for gaining influence among the newly arrived immigrants. Initially this struggle was a purely Turkish affair, transplanted to the European host societies. The construction of houses of worship was an obvious and strategically very effective means to attract people and to build up rank-and-file. When the Turkish state-backed *Diyanet* gained increasingly influence among Turkish immigrants in the late 1970s, Milli Görüs decided to set up organizations as well to counterbalance this influence. Many of the Turkish mosques in Europe came into being as a result of these organizational activities.

The organization of Turkish Islam

At the time of the initial plans of the Western Mosque in the early 1990s, the future of migrant youths was one of the most pressing issues that occupied both Muslim leaders and the municipal authorities and politicians. There was a pressing need for more youth facilities in the neighbourhood and Milli Görüs claimed that their plans would include accommodation for sport and other activities with which they could attract young people and keep them off the street. Although there were people in the municipality who were not principally against such a complex with facilities, shops and a mosque, there was also a lot of objection. The traditional leftist migrant organizations, but also the established welfare institutions considered the plans as a dangerous development. An Islamic organization such as Milli Görüs could gain a disproportionate influence in the neighbourhood. Due to its critical stance towards the radical secularism that dominates Turkish political culture, Milli Görüs was often branded as a "fundamentalist" organization. Already at that time, long before 9/11, the traditional Turkish population, with its grim socio-economic future, was considered an easy target for radical Islamic politics. Very negative articles appeared in the newspapers and journals about the "obscure" objectives of Milli Görüs.

Also internally the project aroused a lot controversy. Some of the younger leaders of Milli Görüs, raised in the Netherlands and very familiar with the political mores, considered the whole initiative a test case for the development of a much more independent organizational structure. Formally speaking the Dutch branch of Milli Görüs was accountable to the German headquarters, which in turn had a strong link to the Turkish mother branch. Many of the young leaders, however, deemed the situation in Dutch society a much more relevant point of reference for their political agenda, than the ties with the party in Turkey. In the course of years this resulted in a gradual rift between sub-branches of Milli Görüs in the Netherlands. The southern branch emphasizes the strong link with Turkey, whereas the northern branch considers Dutch society as their prime operational field. The controversies around the Western mosque have been momentous in this process.

When we take a closer look at the difficult and protracted negotiations, we can see how the parties involved developed their strategy and how the project rendered a highly symbolic significance. At the start of the negotiations some ten years ago, local municipal politicians vigorously objected to the very idea of such a big religious structure in the neighbourhood. They perceived it as an invasion of Islamic immigrants taking over the neighbourhood. The mosque organization, on the other hand, initially operated very formally, resorting to legal rights. And although the resulting mosque may still be depicted as a compromise between two opposing parties,⁴ the "hidden" processes taking place both within the municipality and the local branch of Milli Görüs are striking. When Theo van Gogh was murdered in November 2004, Milli Görüs, rather than being treated as an adversary, was immediately included by the authorities as a partner against radicalism and criminality. Today the mosque organization has become instrumental in bringing together several parties in the neighbourhood. The so-called "contract with society" that had been signed by several parties in the Baarsjes following the tensions after the Van Gogh murder, was an attempt initiated by the local municipality to create a common "modus operandi" in cases where radicalism thrives. The contract serves as a blue print for proper citizenship. Although the initiative may well be dismissed as a mediated public event initiated by the local govern-



Construction site of the Western Mosque, Amsterdam

PHOTO BY DENNIS JANSSEN, 2006

ment, it is also a redefinition of locality. Such ritual events can only be understood as processes of localization with an axiradius that exceeds the local community.

In April 2006 the conservative German headquarters of Milli Görüs dismissed the board of the northern branch of the Dutch organization and installed a more subservient board. By that time, the previous board had become well-known for its fresh ideas, its cooperativeness and open-mindedness towards Dutch society. They had become well-known public figures, frequently appearing in media performances. The replacement of this liberal board by more conservative members of Milli Görüs therefore triggered negative reactions. As an observer concluded: "The loot is hauled. The fundamentalists take over."⁵ I do not subscribe to that conclusion. As I stated above the protracted negotiations about the mosque project have been instrumental in bringing about political changes within Milli Görüs. The most crucial aspect of these changes is the firm entrenchment of the organization in the local community. The German headquarters can only superficially influence that process. If we take a closer look at the actual negotiation process over the past years, it becomes clear that the initial goal, the building of a new mosque, has unleashed so many issues that concern the whole neighbourhood, its inhabitants and its public spaces, that an unfortunate but relatively trivial "takeover" can not possibly turn the tide. The Western Mosque has become a project of De Baarsjes, not anymore solely of Milli Görüs.

Notes

1. See also Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996).
2. S. Stuurman and T. Sunier, ed., *Explaining the Reactions of Nations to Religious Newcomers* (Amsterdam: AUP, forthcoming).
3. For London, see J. Eade, *Placing London: From Imperial Capital to Global City* (Oxford: Bergahn, 2000).
4. F. Lindo, *Heilige Wijsheid in Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1999).
5. According to Dutch Muslim convert Jan Mahmood Beerenhout in an email letter on the thirteenth of May 2006.

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