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Roose, E.

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Eric Roose

Mosque Design in The Netherlands

Concurrent with intense public discussion regarding the ideal manner of social integration of Muslims into Dutch society is a heated architectural debate about mosque design. Muslims in the Netherlands are recognized as members of individual ethnic or culture groups, with Surinamese, Moluccan, Turkish and Moroccan Muslims represented by their own architectural style while sharing a basic Islamic belief system and liturgy. When municipalities are confronted with mosque plans, some see the conspicuous use of building elements from the Muslim countries of origin as an unwanted and unnecessary intrusion on Dutch culture by nostalgic patrons suffering from too much homesickness. Instead, Dutch Muslims are supposed to come with designs that on the outside will appear as Dutch community centers and not as Arabian Nights palaces. On the other hand, other municipalities find that although mosques are indeed thought of as mere practical places of Islamic liturgy, the introduction of building elements from the Muslim countries of origin will be a way for Dutch Muslim immigrants to feel at home in Dutch society by remaining proud of their cultural heritage, enriching Dutch culture along the way. Whatever the patron's architectural choices, the measure and content of his preferred layer of «cultural» building elements that go beyond the basic religious necessities has come to be seen by the Dutch public as an expression of his opinion on the ideal manner of social inclusion of Muslims in a non-Muslim environment.

Religious oppositions

However, contrary to the general assumption, an in-depth study of Dutch mosque design processes shows that religion plays a far greater role in the architectural preferences of Muslim patrons than merely

Eric Roose, born 1967, is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (ASSR) at the University of Amsterdam.

prescribing «a place to prostrate oneself before God in the direction of Mecca». Especially the three most recent and controversial Dutch mosque projects,

the Amsterdam Taibah Mosque and Wester Mosque and the Rotterdam Essalaam Mosque, show some unexpected twists. The architects generally looked towards the designs as expressions of progress within a grander scheme of Islamic architectural evolution from the «traditional» to the «modern». The patrons, however, looked towards their future mosque as an opportunity to represent their vision of Islam in opposition to other visions. Whether they insisted that certain «cultural» building elements be used or not did not depend on their mother countries' Hindustani, Turkish or Moroccan style characteristics at all. This preference had to do with the ways that certain building elements had been used by other Muslim patrons who, in their minds, held false Islamic beliefs. By selecting specific building elements from the world's Islamic architectural history that in their contemporary associations carried a certain meaning to them, the patrons literally aimed to «construct» the ultimate Islam. Notably, they saw opposing patrons and beliefs mainly within their own culture group. As a result of this, the mosque designs within one ethnic group show some surprising stylistic inconsistencies. Indeed, it appears that it is not in how they are alike but in how they differ from each other that we can find their meaning to the patrons themselves.

In the case of the Taibah Mosque, the Surinamese patron, Mohammed Junus Gaffar, effectively searched for a representation of his beloved Brelwi Islam. The latter had been created in 19th-century northern British-India in opposition to the Deobandi (consistently called «Wahhabi» by Gaffar) and Ahmadiyya versions embraced by other Hindustani Muslims in



Essalaam Mosque.



Taibah Mosque.



Wester Mosque.

Photos by the author

the region. Whereas the Deobandi school attempted to reform Islam by denying the role of the locally much-revered Sufi holy men – and their tombs – as successors to Muhammad and intermediaries between believers and God, the Ahmadi even had their own prophet. The Brelwi school, essentially meant as a counter-reformation, reinforced Sufi holy men, their tombs and Muhammad as the ultimate saint and Seal of Prophets. His light, or Nur of Muhammad, was seen as ever-existing and all-pervading, imagined as radiating from the Prophet's mausoleum and from his Sufi successors' tombs in Hindustan. Consequently, Gaffer combined a Hindustani-Sufi shrine, consisting of a central dome, an arched substructure, and four corner turrets as he identified them in the Taj Mahal mausoleum, with Muhammad's tomb, in his eyes consisting of the oldest minaret and dome within the Medina complex. He explicitly shunned the Saudi – since «Wahhabi» – extension around the latter. He then added his own creations of interior lighting, consisting of omnipresent lamps in the prayer hall and dozens of lights on the inside of the dome. He also aimed for exterior transparency by bringing in conspicuously large glass windows and doors in the form of the silhouette of the Prophet's dome. All were meant as representations of the central notion in the Brelwi conviction, the Holy Prophet's light as it was, and still is, passed on by later saints. At the time of writing, the Taibah Mosque was already in use but still remained to be officially opened.

Sacrality in the public sphere

The Turkish patron of the Wester Mosque in Amsterdam, Üzeyir Kabaktepe, effectively searched for a representation of the Islam as embraced by the Dutch Milli Görüş movement that he led. The movement had originated in Turkey in the Milli Selamet Partisi (MSP), the political party that strove for a larger role for religion in Turkish politics in the 1970s. It aimed to counter-act the Directorate of Religious Affairs or Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı in Ankara, founded in 1924 by Atatürk to prevent mosque organizations from becoming too politically active, threatening his secular-republican ideal. In Kabaktepe's account, mosque communities of the Dutch branch of Diyanet had stylized and modernized the Ottoman architectural legacy in such despicable ways that the sacral values he

(and many other «islamist» leaders in Turkey) associated with it had been corrupted beyond recognition. Consequently, requiring the recognizably authentic Ottoman building elements that to him would represent a much greater role of Islam in the public sphere, he first steered his architect towards incorporating elements from the Blue Mosque. However, after having taken his designer to Istanbul to visit Ottoman architecture and to meet with a contemporary builder of classic-looking Ottoman mosques, he requested his architect to use the much-admired Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, by the hand of the great Sinan, as an even more sublime example of Ottoman grandeur. He even had the mentioned Turkish builder come over to assist in designing a whole new, «genuinely» Ottoman mosque instead of the one that he had already submitted to the municipality and the public, a turn that his architect eventually managed to prevent. Due to a breach of trust between the project developer and the municipality on the one side and the Milli Görüş movement on the other, the construction of the Wester Mosque is now in jeopardy.

In the case of the Rotterdam Essalaam Mosque, the Moroccan patron, Ahmed Ajdid, effectively searched for a representation of an encompassing Islam, one that would surpass all national versions. The Dutch intelligence service (AIVD) accused him of having been active in organizations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Although Ajdid never confirmed these allegations, his vision of Islam and Islamic architecture shows similarities to the Brotherhood's pan-Islamic ideals, as opposed to the more purist tendencies of the Salafist school. He particularly disliked the official Moroccan vision, revolving around the king as the successor to Muhammad, aiming to ban any opposing convictions, and strongly stimulating the use of Moroccan building elements in mosque design. Neither was he much attracted to the Salafist alternative as upheld among some other anti-royalist Moroccan community leaders in The Netherlands. The purist and inconspicuously Islamic building elements that they had chosen would not, in his account, do justice to the dignity and splendour of a truly global Islam. Going for the translation of pan-Islamic values into a design within the parameters set by the municipality, he initially rejected anything Moroccan as «old-fashioned». At the same time he discarded anything

Dutch as «too modern» and avalanched his designer with an – also truly global – multitude of mosque references. The public assumes that he copied a mosque from the home-region of his Dubai sponsor since «who pays the piper calls the tune». Ajdid however gradually worked his way towards incorporating the major building elements from the extension around the Prophet's mosque in Medina. In his eyes, the latter formed a global culmination of all Muslim architectures at once, with all Muslim nationalities presumably having worked on it and all Muslim cultural styles presumably having been included in it. At the time of writing, the Essalaam Mosque had not yet been completed.

The ultimate Islam

Meanwhile, whereas the municipalities and architects were reasonably straightforward in their particular ideas on the translation into design of social integration and architectural progress, the patrons were much less direct about the religious content of their own design preferences. None of them started out by saying «I am a Muslim who follows the such-and-such path of Islam and I need to recognize it in my mosque design». Instead patrons began with a list of practicalities and a statement like, «we are Muslims and therefore our design should be Islamic» and with some seemingly general and vague images. Only in the course of a relatively long design process they proved to have some very specific design requirements indeed. When publicly asked, however, they justified their insistence on certain building elements by using the publicly much-valued notions of social integration and architectural progress.

Gaffar, for instance, at one time called his glass arches and windows a sign of social transparency, having «nothing to hide», even though he had admittedly meant them to represent the Prophet's light. At his turn, Kabaktepe successfully claimed his design to have purposefully made use of the «Amsterdam School style», even though the architect as well as the design process easily shows that it did not. And finally, Ajdid said that his mosque used European forms which, without dome and minaret, would look «a little bit like the Rotterdam city hall», even though in every single reaction to his architect's proposals he admittedly had had the Medina Mosque's extension in

mind. Upholding the claim to represent the ultimate Islam and not a mere contested version, their ultimate Islamic buildings could only be publicly explained as diverging from others for non-religious reasons.

Towards a Dutch Mosque?

Architectural critiques in newspapers, magazines, books, exhibitions and televised documentaries in The Netherlands tend to compare only the most superficial and judgemental interpretations of these mosques with a growing number of «progressive» design alternatives created by a range of engaged architectural students. Besides having led to municipal expectations and ever so many municipal disappointments, these critiques have even resulted in public accusations of social segregation whenever patrons did not wish to use such publicly acclaimed alternatives. However, notions of social integration and architectural progress appear to form much less of a factual issue to Muslim patrons during the actual design process than does a specific vision of Islam. As a consequence, to automatically assume that the building elements they require represent notions of integration or segregation and then forcibly try to convince them to embrace a pre-established modern-Dutch prayer hall might not be the best way to reach the terminus of a Dutch-Islamic style. Instead, municipalities as well as architects would first have to realize the existence of the multitude of Islamic varieties within the Netherlands as much as within any Muslim home country. Then, they would have to find out the specific vision of Islam as upheld by the patron they have before them. Finally, they would have to reach a basic understanding of the particular architectural representation that the patron has in mind, even if he may not wish to disclose his religious considerations. Only once the basic motivation behind the «collage» of building elements, insisted on by the patron in his aim at creating the ultimate Islamic prayer hall, is understood and accepted, a more efficient discussion on how it could be materialized by other means could be started. Although the Prophet's tomb, the Selimiye Mosque and the Medina complex can hardly be made to look otherwise, the religious notions underlying their introduction into the Netherlands just might.

This is a revised version of the article «Mosque Design in the Netherlands», ISIM, Review, 2008, pp. 50-51.