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The Mosque in the European City: Testing the Cohabitation

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The paper discusses issues related to the insertion of mosques in European cities and its implications for urban planning, architecture and perception, with a focus on the case of Florence. The cohabitation of different communities within the city is put to the test by the construction of mosques as physical and symbolic elements that interfere with the dynamics of the identity definition, of self-representation and of the right of use of urban land, posing unusual challenges to administrators, planners and designers. The 'agreement' concluded between citizens and religious minority for the construction of the mosque recognizes and requires to the place of worship a significant urban role and specific architectural qualities. But it corresponds to the multi-functionality of the mosques in Islamic countries and is in line with the latest trends in Europe.

Mosques and social-urban conflicts¹

The gradual spread of Islamic communities in European cities and their emergence as social components endowed with self-awareness leads to the need to build new places of worship, to meet the ritual needs, as places of aggregation and service to the religious community, and as elements of identity and self-representation. Often, the citizens' reaction to the insertion of the mosque in the urban structure is conflictual: the coexistence of different communities is challenged on the ground of land management and rights of use. The elements of conflict are multiple and relate to the political and technical choices of local governments. Classified into the three categories of urban planning, architecture and perception, the frequently advanced oppositions are shown in Table I.

Table I: Elements of conflict of urban significance in the construction of a mosque.

<i>urban planning</i>	<i>architecture</i>	<i>perception</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • traffic • parking • priority given to equipment other than the neighbourhood mosque • privacy and public peace (in relation to crowding and the adhan) • depreciation of neighbouring land and properties • financing of the project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presence of symbolic elements (dome, minaret, etc.) • decorum and architectural/constructive quality • insertion in the urban/architectural context • projection of shadows and closing of visual cones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamization of the district including the mosque • local (micro crime) and general (terrorism) security

Regarding the alleged Islamization of the neighbourhood, if it's shown that the implantation of a mosque often attracts service activities related to the Islamic religion (e.g., Koranic schools and Islamic educational centres, youth centres, nurseries, morgues, ethnic shops), the hypothetical impact in an already densely built and actively occupied area appears to be lower. Following the chosen categories, some relevant aspects in the European context are presented and specifically the story of the proposal for the construction of a central mosque in Florence.

Urban planning

In most cases, the insertion of the mosque in European cities occurs in recent times and in already structured tissues. The construction of a new mosque is a later stage to the period when the local Muslim community reuses existing spaces not designed for prayer. The location of the building depends on several factors: the role of the mosque respect to the faithful communities and to their spatial distribution; the availability of land and buildings, both public and private; the relationship with the local government and the reaction of the public opinion to the project; the desire for visibility of the Muslim presence in the territory.

A large congregational mosque in a central area can mark a point of reference and a space of representation. If the project falls within a framework of international relations, the commitment of state and foreign bodies can be substantial. It's the case of the Great Mosque in Rome and other capitals, but also of cities where the Muslim presence is traditionally strong, such as Cologne or Marseille. In some cases, the desire to produce a tangible sign of the return or arrival of Islam in the region is prevailing. The mosque is then placed in a prominent or very visible position, near to sites belonging to other religious denominations or to

¹ The paper presents the partial results of the research conducted by the author on behalf of the Fondazione Giovanni Michelucci on the theme: "La moschea e il centro culturale islamico nelle città europee, analizzato nei diversi profili comparativi con la situazione italiana. Il caso di Firenze e delle altre città toscane a significativa presenza islamica", in preparation.



urban sectors of Arab-Islamic past (Allievi, 2010). More frequently, the dynamics of marginalization prevail, pushing the location of the mosque in the suburbs, either for its proximity to the areas with the greatest density of immigrants, or for the greater availability of land and residual spaces located in industrial areas, subject to urban recovery plans, degraded or unhealthy. In some cases, a mosque of significant size is in the perimeter of relatively small cities because placed at the service of a larger area, such as inside of important manufacturing districts, where there is a large community of immigrants: this is the case of Colle di Val d'Elsa in Tuscany or of Pedro Abad, in the Cordoba province.

The study on the situation of the main mosque² in a sample of twenty-six capital cities shows that only 15.4% of the mosques is located in the central areas, while the 30.8% is in the intermediate zones and the remaining 53.8% in fringe areas of the city. The average distance of the buildings from the municipal centre is four kilometres; mosque's locations within a radius of two or three kilometres from the centre are prevalent (Fig. 1).

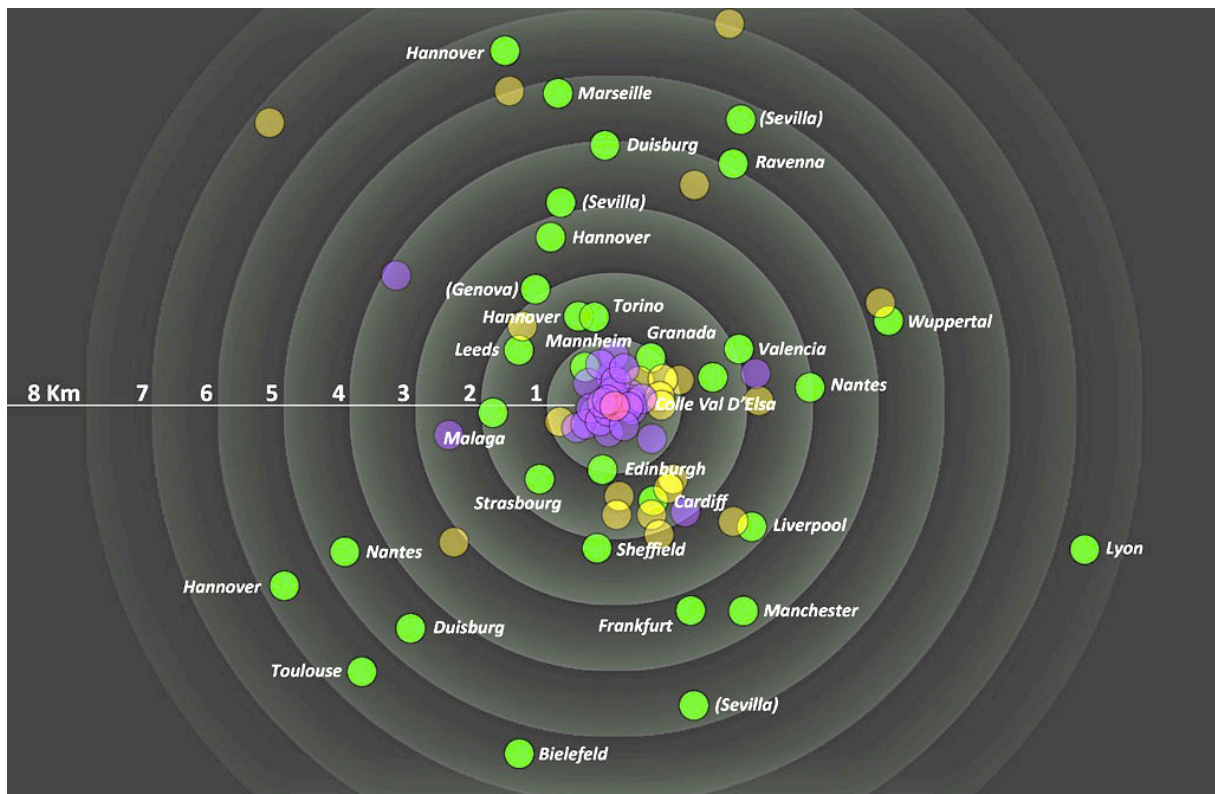


Figure 1 | The distance of places of worship from the municipal centre in twenty-six European cities: in green, the central mosques; in purple, main cathedrals and churches; in yellow, the central synagogues.

In addition, about two-thirds of the mosques are near a major way of communication and, in 46.1% of cases, local or supra-local governments participated in their realization in different ways: by providing alternative premises for the celebrations during the progress of works; by identifying a public property area for to sale or lease; by directly financing.

The inclusion of the mosque in the city is often episodic, not programmed by government and planners, entrusted largely to the activism and economic possibilities of the religious community. Added to this, is the need to contain or accommodate the possible reactions of the public opinion at the city or neighbourhood

² By using this term we intend to mean the congregational mosque, the largest in terms of places for prayer, the most ancient, the one located in the most central location or the one belonging to the most important local Islamic community.

level: the erection of many large central mosques dates back to a time prior to the period of strong conflict between Europe and Islam of 1990s and 2000s (Allievi, 2010), in which the production diminishes. Normally, the location of the temple seems to respond to a policy of non-interference with the existing organization of the urban space, with no real integration of the building into the neighbouring fabric and, at most, the concern to set the mosque near to major road infrastructures allowing easy access and parking. All these conditions lead to place the mosque in peripheral and marginal areas of the city. This widespread solution, while reducing the possibility of conflicts, cannot, however, enhance the mosque as a socio-cultural institution.

Beyond the official political and administrative positions, the role of the planner is decisive with respect to the capacity for the inclusion with which the urban context is endowed. Leonie Sandercock (1998) highlights how planners have acted in the modern era as controllers of urban space on behalf of the local government, 'accomplices of the dominant culture', rather than as coordinators of the different needs of individuals, groups and communities. Often, the planning choices or the assessments on the suitability of selected areas are used to forcibly deny the approval of a mosque, by allowing to disguise discriminatory policies and to subordinate a fundamental individual right to the control of the local authority (Fiorita, 2010). More generally, when the construction of a new mosque is proposed, there is a lack of impartiality on the part of government or planners for reasons of political expediency. Added to this is a shortage of appropriate cognitive and interpretive tools intended to plan and manage the balanced development of the affected urban area, with regard to the interests of different community residents and stakeholders (Mourad, 2006). The result is a significant, albeit partial, denial of freedom of worship: Muslim communities fail to get adequate space for prayer, for the observance of religious holidays and the exercise of other rites (OSI, 2002).

In the case of Florence, the Muslim citizens, estimated to be approximately 20,000 individuals³, currently have three places for prayer. The largest and most central is the *musallah* in Via Borgo Allegri, in the district of Santa Croce, under the leadership of the Islamic Community of Florence and Tuscany. The prayer room and the service spaces, however, are insufficient to accommodate the faithful who gather weekly for prayer on Friday. These are the premises of an former garage leased by the community, thus they are architecturally totally alien to the purposes of worship, except with regard to the decorations and adaptations made by the community. The second meeting point is the Islamic Cultural Centre in Via Tagliamento, in the suburban district of Sorgane. Opened in 2001, the *musallah* is located on the ground floor of an apartment building and has a prayer room and a small library. Finally, a little building in the Roma village in Via Poderaccio, built in 2004 to accommodate families coming from a dismantled gypsy camp, is hosting the prayer of the local faithful.

The inadequacy of existing structures is the primary cause of the need for a place of worship capable of fulfilling the function of congregational mosque. The location of the new mosque is a central node. The lively debate about this point has meant that the city acquired a certain awareness about the role that the new mosque would take: towards the Muslim community, as the first building specifically dedicated to Islamic worship; towards the urban history of Florence, with all the implications of urbanism, landscape and symbolism; and finally towards the local society and its actual capacity to face and manage its own change. The trend of the citizens' feeling with respect to the location issue is revealed by the series of proposals and comments reported by newspapers, radios and TVs. The medias have been the main forum for debate before the advent of the participatory process that will be discussed later. Since September 2010, when the first draft of the mosque was presented, to April 2012, the supposed location has fluctuated from exclusively peripheral areas towards solutions within the historic centre. Meanwhile, the identification of specific lots to be built or buildings for reuse replaced the initial general guidelines. The participatory process has played

3 The estimate made for this research offers the result of over 23,500 units, taking into account all categories of Muslim presence in the municipality; the estimate made by Sociolab in preparation for the participatory process is approximately 11,000 regular Muslim residents.



a key role in this trend and in the deepening of the collective and technical evaluations of different opportunities. This was made possible thanks to a widening of participation, to the intervention of experts from the Faculty of Architecture and to the approach to the topic by architects and urban planners. In contrast, the launch of the participatory process has provided a cushion to the local authorities to persist in their reserve position, only interrupted by occasional and sometimes contradictory comments expressed at the political level.

Architecture

The examination of over a hundred mosques built in Europe, mainly in the last sixty years, allows detecting two major trends in the architecture of mosques in new construction.

The first is the common and numerically prevalent production, which is due to the direct intervention of the Muslim communities by recurring to the design skills and the technical and financial resources immediately available to the community. These buildings are generally built in the first phase of the spread of Islam in Europe, or of the first accomplishments of local communities within individual urban areas.

In such cases, in which the role of local and supra-local government has often been limited to approval procedures, the repetition of a stereotyped image of the mosque, referring to Ottoman or North African types, is predominant. The presence of typical features that allow the identification of the Islamic temple in built environment is constant: mainly the dome and the minaret, and other elements such as pointed and horseshoe arches and decorations derived from the architectural tradition of the Arab and Ottoman area.

In particular, the minaret and the decorations are factors that appear to be hallmarks of the Muslim culture, because on the one hand are chosen as identifiers by the religious community, on the other hand, they are often considered to be alien to the traditional landscape by the indigenous community. Only in a minority of cases, there is the presence of elements near to the local construction tradition and built landscape or, alternatively, to architectural models derived from periods of contact with the Islamic culture of some countries such as Spain, Portugal, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Avcioglu and Rabat (2007) state that this trend has spread throughout the Western world, where Muslim communities are mostly composed of immigrants or are otherwise newly formed, so in those places where Islam is a reality yet in way of definition.

In these cases, the desire for self-representation of the community in diaspora comes to coincide exactly with those aesthetic spaces conceded by the dominant culture as a sign of acceptance, but also as a condition of identification, restriction and control. Under these conditions, the original and alternative representation of the religious community is prevented by the stereotypes imposed from outside and inside, and the collective reflection on architecture and shared processing of semantic tools belonging to the different cultures do not develop.

The second trend is the development of a series of design experience aimed looking for original architectural forms for the 'western mosque'. Generally carried out by big firms or young architects, often second-generation immigrants or otherwise in contact with the culture of Islamic countries, these experimentations are promoted and well accepted by local governments that pursue less symbolic impact on the socio-urban context.

The slavish reproduction of the historic formal elements of the Islamic architecture is consciously avoided, as well as the attempt to adapt to the local traditional character (Fig. 2). Rather, these elements are redesigned to invent new forms, through allusions to the classical symbolic system: the hemisphere of the dome is deformed or fragmented (Central Mosque of Cologne); the minaret is dissolved in an ethereal verticality (Mosque of Tirana, Mosque of Ravenna, Mosque of Colle di Val d'Elsa); calligraphic, geometric or phytomorphic decorations are magnified and assume a structural function (Mosque of Penzberg, Bavaria; Mosque "Faste Batteri", Copenhagen).



Figure 2 | Project for the Mosque and Museum of Religious Harmony in Tirana, arch. Bjarke Ingels Group, www.big.dk

All spatial, formal and decorative devices contribute to the secularization of the place of worship and the concealment of its monumentality. The *sahn* takes a hybrid value contaminated by the idea of the European square, appearing as a multifunctional space open to the city. It represents even less a filter protecting the transition of the faithful into the sacred precinct of the prayer hall and even more a coupling element of the mosque in the neighbourhood: a material symbol of the integration achieved by the Muslim community in the secular urban space of the West.

With this in mind, the first proposal made by the Islamic Community in Florence (Fig. 3) appears to be extremely countertrend and *sui generis*. It's, in fact, an episode of classicist design based on the aesthetic principles of sacred architecture of the Florentine Renaissance. Both the experimentation of architectural language, and the presence of Islamic elements, such as the dome and minaret, are bent to adhere to formal canons of classical architectural tradition in the local declination. Only the disposition of the *sahn*, conceived as a colonnaded courtyard in front of the main façade, is away from the examples of the Renaissance composition and approaches certain solutions of Islamic architecture recovering the original function of a controlled space, preparatory for the prayer.

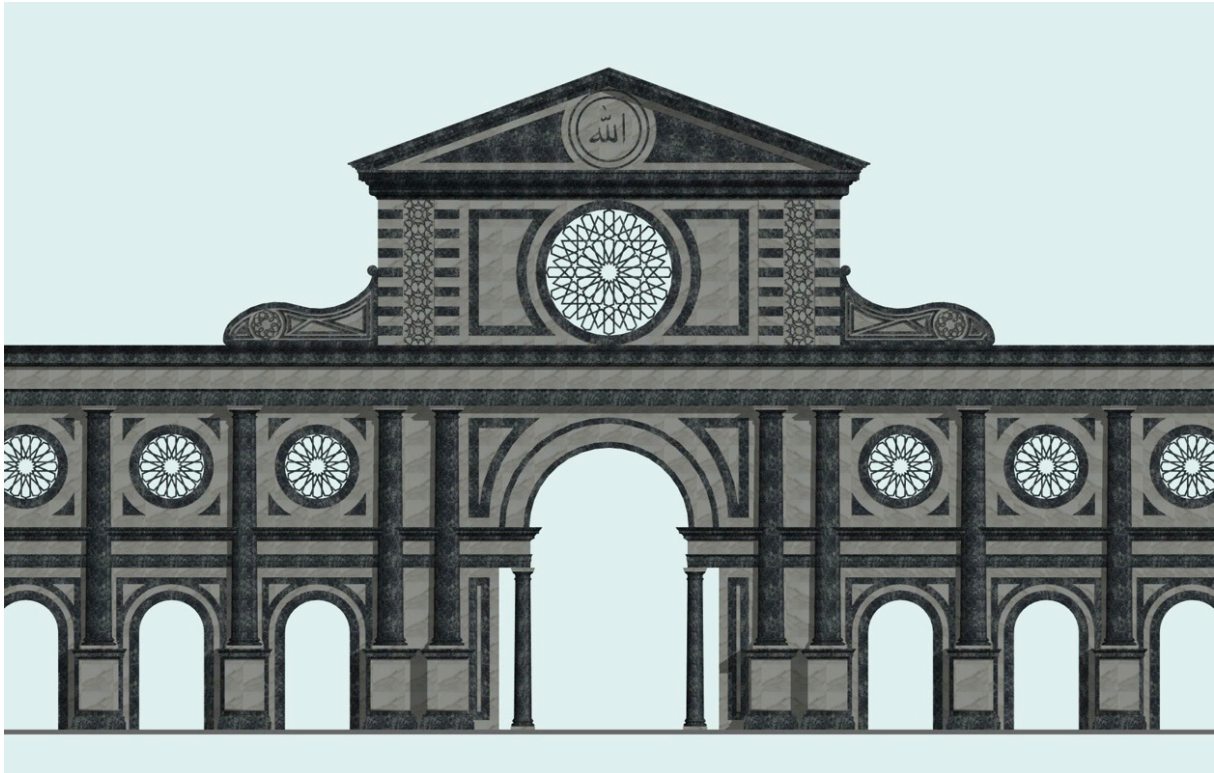


Figure 3 | The project for the Mosque of Florence. Detail of the façade, arch. David Napolitano.

Perception

Many European cities face similar difficulties in the search of a solution path. The debate is interwoven with the widespread and perceived theme of the Islam diffusion in Europe. On one side, it is frequently correlated with migration flows into Europe; on the other, with the dynamism and the fertility of immigrant communities; finally, and more rarely, with the gradual transformation of the system of cultural, institutional and religious values of the native populations.

The presence of an Islamic community seems to materialize only since the moment in which the new mosque is hypothesized. The community goes from being the subject of tolerance or indifference to be an uncomfortable presence because not respectful of local traditions. This attitude prevents the full recognition of freedom of religion and expression, sometimes finding support in an emergency approach that evokes the problems of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. The discovery and understanding of the difference are often circumvented and perceived as unnecessary, according to a supposed right of ‘first refusal’ on choices related to urban planning in the hands of the oldest communities. The mosque becomes the sign of the subtraction of a material and symbolic space considered of its own belonging.

The effects of the matter ‘mosque’ on perception in the Florentine case can be evaluated through the reactions of citizens to three significant facts.

The first is the presentation of the project for the mosque, which has actually opened the public debate. The proposal of the Islamic Community attracts heavy criticisms from opposite sides. Opponents of the Islamic culture judge the project as an offensive imitation attempt of the sacred Christian architecture. The supporters of multiculturalism consider it as a fallacious expedient of camouflage with the predominant culture. Because of what said about the architectural implications, these positions are understandable, even if inconsistent with each other, while the traditionalist and contemporaneist architectural criticism disagree,

with a predominance of the latter.

The dispute over cultural and symbolic differences develops in an unusual way: the topic of the invasion of Islamic signs in the urban landscape is reversed; at the same time, the trend towards secularization and demonumentalization of the place of worship through architecture is lacking. A misunderstanding had arisen about the hypothetical size of the building - and therefore about its impact on the urban context -, mainly due to the monumental appearance that it acquires from its classical forms. In fact, if compared with the major bell towers in Florence, the thirty-two meters high minarets would be small thing, and the same goes for the modest elevation of the façade and the dome.

A second relevant fact dates back to April 2011, when a survey on the topics 'immigration' and 'mosque' (Freni Ricerche di Marketing, 2011) shows that the majority of residents is informed, but only about a fifth of respondents know in detail the project. Of these, two-thirds do not appreciate the outlined architectural solution. According to a little more than half of the respondents, the most suitable location is outside the city centre, both for practical reasons (lack of space and car parks), and to protect the identity of the historic cityscape. 46% of respondents would favour the creation of smaller neighbourhood mosques rather than a large central mosque; about a fifth refuses totally the municipal area to host such a building. Finally, more than 70% of the sample stated they were not interested in a public debate on the subject. At this stage, the citizens' judgment seems to focus merely on whether the mosque is suitable or not in itself, in one or more areas of the city, and only partly on technical and aesthetic solutions.

The participatory process promoted by the Muslim community⁴ offers a third opportunity to assess the public perception. The deliberative phase is completed in early 2012, involving one hundred and fifty selected residents, thirty of whom belonging to the Muslim community. Participation to the preliminary open meetings and to the final stage, however, is very limited⁵.

Participants perceive the appearance of the current *musallah* as improper, affecting both the feeling of security and the image of the whole city. Therefore, an institutionalization of the place of worship, through the construction of the new mosque, is recognized as necessary. Three criteria for its location are identified: interaction with the urban fabric (areas characterized by social openness and cultural vibrancy are preferable); accessibility by public and private means, that has to be ensured to avoid overloads; regeneration of a dismissed area, possibly inserted in a framework of quality urban elements that might enhance the new building. Other priorities are: high quality of design, to be achieved through an international competition; availability of spaces for exchange and encounter with the city; visibility and recognisability of the building and a short realization timeframe.

The 'interactivity' of the mosque is therefore of the utmost importance: while affirming the identity of the Muslim community, the place of worship should be an opportunity for the social-cultural development of a broad part of the city. Proper planning and design should produce a 'container', architecturally qualified and suitably located and equipped, able to host the meeting of the city and the Islamic community. The 'agreement' signed between citizens and religious minority recognizes and requires to the place of worship a significant urban role. However, it corresponds to the multi-functionality of the mosque in Islamic countries and is in line with the most advanced trends in Europe.

4 The process has obtained the financial support of the Tuscan Region by the Law 69/2007 on participation.

5 The summary report of the participatory process shows a presence of a total of about three hundred people at the preliminary open meetings, equivalent to 0.08% of the population. In the three final deliberative workshops, the presence of the one hundred fifty selected citizens was as follow: hundred at the first, eighty at the second; and sixty-five at the third. (Givone & Imbergamo, 2012).



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