

The Mosque: Political, Architectural, and Social Transformations

Ergun Erkoçu and Cihan Bugdaci
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Refreshingly candid and at times contradictory, not to mention multidisciplinary and entirely provocative, this book's alternative and polished graphic and design immediately places it outside mainstream architecture texts on contemporary mosque design. Although specifically focused on the contemporary design of mosques in the Netherlands, its broader and more general understandings are easily grasped through its grounded arguments. Many of the chapters also contextualize issues of mosque design in that country within the larger scope of mosque design in the West. Each of the ten chapters is written by a different author: architects, architectural historians, philosophers, politicians, and other experts. Titled with a provocative question, the introductory short commentary ties together what may at first seem like disparate interpretations of the contemporary mosque's role and design.

The book also contains three photographic essays: Dick Barendsen's "Interior/Exterior," which analyzes the differences in presence and activity of mosques, and his "Everyday," which investigates the daily non-religious and religious activities that take place in them; and Christian Van Der Kooy's "From Construction Site to Mosque," which documents the processes of site inauguration, construction, and final contextual presence of some of the mosques in the Netherlands. Each essay is expertly finished, and the candid shots of users and contexts clearly render the related dialogues. A "Mosguide," which documents some of the most recent mosque designs in the Netherlands and Europe, is also provided. The ten chapters are so individual and unique that they do not need to be read in order or all at once.

The preface consists of Mieke Dings' interviews of the authors as to the book's purpose and evolution, which aptly sets the tone for the collaborative nature and diverse voices presented. This is followed by a "Mosguide" that displays statistical documentation on Muslims worldwide and in the Netherlands, as well as the (ethnic) type and number of mosques and property values in each of the country's regions. The ensuing time line/collages discuss the development of Amsterdam's Westermoskee (the Western Mosque) and Rotterdam's Essalam Mosque, two of the country's most con-

roversial proposed purpose-built mosques. Both have been plagued with delays because of bureaucracy and political debate regarding their presence and design.

Chapter 1, “Why Do People Suddenly Like Mosques When They’re on Holiday?” features former Dutch politician Frits Bolkestein’s “Ornaments of Humanity.” Although it briefly describes his enthrallment with mosques abroad, it is not grounded in the book’s debate or locality. Chapter 2, “For Who Do We Build Mosques: The Users or the Critics?” includes a pictorial essay and the “Back to First Principles” interview with Tariq Ramadan, a professor at Erasmus (Rotterdam) and Oxford universities. True to form, he calls on Muslims to reevaluate their attachment to forms (e.g., the dome and the minaret) and focus on the principles and potential activities of mosque space for Muslims in Europe.

Chapter 3, “If a New Variety of Mosques Can Promote Greater Understanding, Then Why Not Build It?” includes Shervin Nekuee’s “Throw Open the Doors!” This sociologist and political commentator criticizes “bombastic” mosques – those that superficially adopt historicist themes – and calls for innovative, age- and time-appropriate designs and functions that welcome all Dutch citizens. Chapter 4, “From Mosque to Religious Complex with Shop: How Far do We Want to Go?” features Nebahat Avcioglu’s “The Contemporary Mosque: In What Style Should We Build?” A research coordinator at the Paris-based Columbia University Institute for Scholars, she investigates the return of colonialist approaches to mosque design in Europe that, through regional/historical references, alienate local Muslims. She notes that this trend is being instigated not by colonialists, but by immigrant Muslims, and that non-Muslim Europeans interpret it as somehow “fundamentalist.” Her discontent with historical emulation is the formulaic assignation of Muslims as “Other,” although potential opportunities for “fruitful coexistence” are possible.

Chapter 5, “How Can We Shatter the Stereotype without Creating New Ones?” presents Erasmus University professor Willem Schinkel’s “The Production of Marginality.” His analysis of the physical and metaphorical marginal location of mosques in Dutch society involves examining why mosques are built on land with lower property values and have only a marginal impact on society. He also stresses the marginalized status accorded to both Islam and mosques in the Netherlands. The essay ends, however, with the utopian hope that one day mosques will be accepted and incorporated into the Dutch urban environment. Chapter 6, “When Will We Move the Mosque from the Margins to the Heart of Society?” offers the second picto-

rial essay and Wilfried Van Winden's "Freedom Equals Happiness: A Plea for Pluralism in an Open Society." A practicing architect in the Netherlands and the designer of Rotterdam's proposed Essalam Mosque, he calls for diversity and pluralism in society and architectural expressions. He then justifies his mosque design, which has been heavily criticized for its overt references to historical models.

Chapter 7, "How Can We Capture a Society's Diverse Identities in a Single Style?" features Roemer Van Toorn's "Counteracting the Clash of Cultures: Mosque Architecture as an Emancipating Factor." A practicing architect and professor of architecture in Amsterdam, he disputes the need for a completely new and innovative approach to mosque design in an attempt to create "Euro-Islam" and "normalize" the presence and image of mosques. Rather, he calls for a "radical democracy" in which "hybrid" forms and contradictions create liberation. Chapter 8, "Regional Identity and 'Conflicting Consensus': Recipes for Architecture?" consists of Eric Roose's "Mosque Design and Muslim Patrons in the Netherlands: The Quest for the Ultimate Islamic Construction." A post-doctoral fellow at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, Roose questions the usual rhetoric, presented by almost all authors of contemporary mosque design in the West, that there is some sort of progression from historicist models to hybrids to completely innovative designs. In his opinion, such narratives are created out of selected examples of mosques designs and do not reflect the countless mosques that are still being built according to historical models. He states that there is no "progression" of design and that the historical models remain popular because patrons wish to express "true Islam" via a historical model that may or may not correspond with their ethnicity. In other words, mosques are built like this to mobilize community members.

Chapter 9, "Is It the Architect's Job to Make the Client Aware of the Needs of the Target Group and New Concepts in Mosque Design?" includes the third pictorial essay and Azra Aksamija's "Generative Design Principles for the Contemporary Mosque." An architect and doctoral student at MIT's Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, she discusses basic mosque design principles related to creating appropriate space, cleanliness, direction, volume, and variety of functions. At this point in the book, however, all of these seem rather obvious, general, and even naïve given the avalanche of contemporary factors. Several interesting artistic installations, all designed by her, end the essay: a "Nomadic Mosque Project," a "Generic Mosque Project," and a "Kunstmoschee" installation at the Secession in Vienna. These

artistic projects do push some boundaries of what “mosque” and “worship space” can be, as well as the language used to express it.

Chapter 10, “Flexibility and Astounding Beauty: The Ingredients for New Concepts in Mosque Design?” presents Ole Bouman’s “The Cos-mosque.” This writer, educator, curator, and former director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute briefly describes his complete enthralment with a large and luxurious contemporary mosque located in Abu Dhabi. He asserts that such large-scale magnificence, with all of its “beauty and glittering kitsch” that welcomes Muslims and non-Muslims alike, can help ground the presence of Muslims and mosques alike. The book closes with “Mos-guide Outro,” eight proposed (some of which are built) contemporary mosques in Netherlands and Europe that demonstrate the different streams of design and expression (from historicist to innovative), and a biography of the authors featured.

The alternative and provocative views presented make this publication an excellent – perhaps essential – text for any student, practitioner, or educator involved in design and for anyone interested in mosque design in general. Lessons can be learned from the on-going debates in the Netherlands, thereby indicating fresh takes in an area of design that address far more than surface architectural idioms.

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