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PURPOSE-BUILT MOSQUES IN COPENHAGEN: VISIBILITY, PUBLICITY AND CULTURAL DISPUTE

**MAJA DE NEERGAARD, LASSE KOEFOED AND
KIRSTEN SIMONSEN**

Abstract

The paper comes out of a case study within the framework of a larger project titled “Paradoxical spaces: Encountering the Other in public space”. The case is developed around the cross-cultural encounters provoked by the enhanced public visibility of Islam occasioned by the recent construction of purpose-built mosques in Copenhagen. The public visibility is a manifestation of religious differences that cannot be thought independent of the materiality of culture; namely aesthetic forms, dress codes and architectural genres. Cultural encounters are mediated through the materiality, the aesthetic form and the location of the mosques.

In the paper we explore both similarities and differences in the way the material culture of the mosques are planned and received by the public. Today, three purpose-built mosques exist in the Copenhagen area, and they differ in terms of architectural form, age and history, neighbourhood types and planning process. This variation seems to have consequences to the degree and form of cultural dissonance and political dispute. The paper provides a qualitative, comparative exploration of these differences in order to understand the ways in which these mosques are received in public, how this reception varies, and what lessons that can be learned from these meetings as regards possibilities/limitations for, and co-existence in, the city.

Keywords:
mosques, visibility, architecture,
planning, public debate

Introduction

The building of purpose-built mosques, moving Islam from the private to the public sphere, is a contested issue in Denmark as well as in many other European countries. Purpose-built mosques are buildings that have been built to function as mosques and whose architectural expressions also enhances the visibility of Islam in public space. In the public debate, the constructions of domes and minarets have given rise to conflict, stereotypical imaginations, islamophobic feelings and cultural dissonance. On the one hand, the visibility of Islam illustrates a process of re-territorialisation of Muslim signs and symbols in the urban landscape; on the other, it demonstrates various ways the public deals with religious and cultural differences in the city (Göle, 2011).

Conflicts over the building of mosques can be seen as negotiations and politics of identity fought over design, location and architectural form. Domes and minarets represent the imprint of Islamic cultural heritage and they have become a “structural metonym” of Muslim identity. However, in many European cities, it is also these visible elements (and the audibility of call to prayer) that have generated conflicts (see e.g. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2005). These religious buildings possess an affective power: they may evoke feelings of emotional security and sanctuary among their congregation as well as rouse feelings of insecurity, anxiety and hostility among opponents. Other studies have shown how these feelings can be connected to the location of the mosque – whether it is constructed in the city centre or the outskirts, in residential areas or abandoned manufacturing areas (Gale, 2005; Galambert, 2005; Göle, 2011). Galambert points at how one of the preconditions for enhanced visibility of Islam consists of being marginalised spatially. Another contested issue is the semiotics of religious architecture in the architectural style, in public imagination oscillating between the picturesque exotic and modern design, and design elements such as domes and minarets (Gale, 2005; Gale and Naylor, 2002; Hatziprokapiou and Evergeti, 2014; Naylor and Ryan, 2002). An iconic example of this issue is the Swiss referendum on minarets on November 29, 2009 (Göle, 2011).

Until recently, many attempts to construct purpose-built mosques in Copenhagen have failed. Islam was more or less isolated, discreet and invisible in urban space. Praying and worship was hidden in places with no public visible signs. In Copenhagen, only one small mosque, the *Nusrat Djahan Mosque*, has existed since 1967 in the suburb Hvidovre. A new mosque – the first big purpose-built mosque with a community centre, the *Khayr El-Barriya Mosque* and *Hamad Bin Khalifa Civilisation Center* – opened in Copenhagen in June 2014, and in September 2015 another purpose-built mosque was opened – the *Imam Ali Mosque* and community centre.

In this paper, we explore similarities and differences in how the mosques were planned and designed, and how they were encountered by the public at the time around their opening. The transition from invisibility to visibility is mediated through architecture and materiality and through different symbols, signs and public imaginations attached to them. How are the mosques experienced? How is the process of planning and building of the mosques? How is it received in the surrounding areas? The three mosques are located in Copenhagen but in very different parts of the city. They are different in terms of aesthetics and architecture as well as history and planning processes, altogether making them an interesting case for comparison.

The study is part of a wider research project titled “Paradoxical spaces: Encountering the Other in public space” exploring cross-cultural encounters in public space. Theoretically and empirically, we explore paradoxical spaces as composed of both conflicting and dialogical spatial practices. The aim in this study is to discuss how we might understand the role of the visibility of the purpose-built mosques in cross-cultural encounters and, secondly, to reflect on what the similarities and differences between the three Copenhagen mosques might mean for their public reception and for the cultural exchange and co-existence in the city. The case study is based on observations, interviews and media representations and it is structured as a qualitative, comparative analysis of the history, architectural form and reception of the mosques. The observations consist of two connected parts. One is participant observations in different kinds of activities and events in the mosques such as opening ceremonies and Friday prayers. The other one is visual observations of architectural forms and the material design of the mosques. The interviews are conducted with key figures in the Muslim communities – e.g. spokespersons and imams – and with municipal authorities, architects and planners involved in the planning process. Finally, the empirical material consist of media representations of the public debate on the mosques around the time of their opening.

Within this framework, the rest of the paper is structured as follows: first we present a two-fold outline of the theoretical background for the analysis around ideas of visibility and material culture; second, we provide an empirical presentation of the three mosques – one by one; and finally, a combined comparative analysis and conclusion.

Visibility

The issue of purpose-built mosques is largely a question of the *visibility* of Islam in public space. In the present case, this notion is embedded in an overall understanding of cross-cultural embodied encounters. Briefly outlined, this understanding is theoretically based on a combination

of third generation phenomenology, practice theory and post colonialism that takes inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body and emphasises the interrelational structure of our embodied existence (see e.g. Simonsen, 2007; Koefoed and Simonsen, 2010). The constitution of others, Merleau-Ponty says, does not come after that of the body; "others and my body are born together from an original ecstasy" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.174) – that is, an original intercorporeality already functioning as a pre-personal form of communion. In this understanding, the embodied encounters set an ontological interdependence between seeing and being seen – it is our own visibility, our embodiment in the world, that grounds the possibility of our seeing.

In the present connection, however, the seeing/being-seen and the cross-cultural encounters take a specific form as they are mediated through the materiality, the architecture, and the symbolic signs of the purpose-built mosques. Again, following Merleau-Ponty, encounters involve social bodies sensing and intertwining with the world (and its materialities) in a way that belongs neither to subject nor object but produces attunements and emotions in their interspace. Accordingly, as material and visible signs, the mosque becomes an interface among citizens of different confessions or secularities.

The theme of visibility has been employed in many studies of migrants and ethnic minorities, although often quite descriptive and in a variety of ways (for a recent discussion see Nordic Journal of Migration Studies, 2014). Brighenti (2007) by definition nominates issues of recognition and control as being the two most important social outcomes of visibility. At the same time she underlines their oppositional character, referring to the ambivalences of visibility and its effects. In this instance, we will emphasize the aspect of recognition, seeing the question of appearance of purpose-built mosques as a question of recognition.

There is a close connection between vision, visibility and *identity*. Alcoff (2006) explores that connection in the social identities of race and gender that operate through visual markers on the body. She describes some of the mechanisms by which they are identified, enacted and reproduced. Her approach is mainly phenomenological and emphasises how social identities are transcultural, historically fluid and grounded in social contexts. These social identities, she argues, implies a recognition of bodily difference. We might imagine subjectivity as mind and imagination, but the social identities of race and gender operate ineluctably through their bodily markers: "they do not transcend their physical manifestation because they are their physical manifestation, despite the fact that the same features can support variable identities depending of how the system of marking works in a given culture" (Alcoff, 2006, p.102).

Hence, to a large degree, the constitution of the social identities occurs through negotiations in public space, over mobility and home, (imagined) communities, boundaries and bridges, rights to urban space, etc. Part of that process is the negotiation of difference. “Like bodies” and “unlike bodies” do not precede encounters of inclusion or expulsion. Rather, likeness and unlikeness as “characteristics” of bodies are produced through these encounters – a process where oppressive visions are marking the “unlike” bodies. Fanon (1967) describes the phenomenology of incorporating *Otherness* and the development of a “double consciousness” due to the enculturation of the body. Men and women of colour, he says, develop a third-person consciousness trying to reconcile their own experiences with the operation of a “historical-racial schema” within which their corporeal schema is supposed to fit. In this way, he is arguing that for all coloured people in the “colonial” world, it is the self-consciousness about being a body-for-others that dominates their consciousness in public settings.

Now, racial identity as well as race and racism are contested terms in European/Danish contexts (e.g. Goldberg, 2009; Bech and Necef, 2012; Rabo and Andreassen, 2014; Leinonen and Toivanen, 2014). Goldberg has convincingly argued how the history of Holocaust has rendered the notion of race unspeakable and invisible, but also how the notion is “buried alive” (2009, p.157). The denial of (biological) race does not erase racism. Racism is not simply a matter of biology; it has always also been cultural. Race has always had to do with sets of views and predispositions concerning culture, or culture tied to colour.

The most conspicuous example is here the current imagination and role of “the figure of the Muslim” in many European countries. In the dominant European imagination, Islam seems to represent a collection of lacks: of freedom; of civility and manners; of love of life; and of equal respect for women and gay people (Goldberg, 2009, Lentin and Titley, 2011). “The Muslim”, in this view, is seen as a threat that ferments violence, militancy, terrorism and cultural dissension. One element of this imagination has been a racialization of visible signs of Muslim religious affiliation such as long beards, Muslim clothing, female headscarves and buildings with Islamic characteristics.

Such processes have fruitfully been explored in recent ideas of *whiteness* (e.g. Dyer, 1997; Ahmed, 2004; 2006; Shaw, 2007; and in the Nordic context Loftsdottir and Jensen, 2012) that emphasises how the notion is not just a characteristic of bodies; it is an ordering device getting its power by becoming habitual. Whiteness is invisible and unmarked, as an absent centre against which other groups appear only as deviants. We do not see white bodies as *white* bodies, just as bodies. This normalisation renders possible to talk about “white spaces” in the sense that spaces are orientated around whiteness through the repetition of acts,

allowing passing of some bodies and not others (Ahmed, 2006). And yet, non-white bodies do inhabit white spaces. However, the theory says, such bodies often are *made invisible* when spaces are seen as white. At the same time, non-white people can become *hypervisible* when they are not capable of passing, they “stand out” and are seen as “out-of-place”.

Similar conceptualisations could be materialized and applied on the mosque-case when we consider the transformation from indistinguishable and invisible prayer rooms to purpose-built mosques including “hypervisible” Islamic signs such as domes and minarets. The concept of whiteness gives an important contribution, also to the understanding of the Danish society (Simonsen, 2015). In practice, however, social relations of (in)visibility are more complex (Leinonen and Toivanen, 2014). Brighenti (2007) characterises visibility as a double-edged sword – it can be empowering as well as disempowering. In this sense, there is a built-in ambivalence in the notion of (in)visibility, in particular when they refer to issues of identity and recognition. The term of hypervisibility, for example, interprets visibility as an undesirable condition imposing cultural and racial stereotypes on minority groups. However, it is also part of “politics of identity” claiming recognition in public space through visible manifestations of difference. Similarly, invisibility can relate to the powerlessness of the overlooked and unnoticed as well as the possibility of passing or even strategic performance of successful integration (see e.g. Juul, 2014).

This visibility, with its load of identity and ambivalence, is also significant when it comes to material form, architecture and aesthetics. Göle writes:

The “visibility” of Islam in public is ... a form of agency, a manifestation of religious difference that cannot be thought independent of the materiality of culture, namely aesthetic forms, dress codes, or architectural genres (Göle, 2011, p.383).

This agency takes the form of negotiations and politics of identity fought over design, architectural form and location.

Materiality and “hypervisible” buildings

To address the role of materiality in relation to the encounters around the mosque, we have turned to material culture studies and its concern for the materiality of cultural life. As Tilley describes it, studying material culture means, “taking material worlds as seriously as language or socio-political relations” and to understand material worlds as “a medium” through which people “know and understand themselves” (Tilley, 2011, p.348).

In geography during the late 1990s and the early 2000s, social and

cultural geography was marked by a renewed attention to problematics about matter and materiality (Jackson, 2000; Philo, 2000; Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004). As Anderson and Tolia-Kelly summarise, this development witnessed a great heterogeneity – studies which may be grouped as revolving around landscape, embodiment and the *more than* human (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Anderson and Wylie, 2009 also reflect this heterogeneity in their review of material studies in geography). Central to this renewed interest and its heterogeneity is that it does not operate with any singular definition of materiality. The emphasis is on “what matter does rather than what its essence is” (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004, p.672). In another vein, Bille and Sørensen (2012) emphasise how matter and materiality must be defined along the theoretical lines of thought and the empirical phenomenon under study. The variety of topics and the differing (and sometimes conflicting) notions of matter and materiality represent “a renewed questioning of matter (...) in the development of concepts that attune to the openness of matter and therefore refuse to speak of matter as an undifferentiated externality standing apart from the social or cultural” (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004, p.672).

In parallel with the interests of this paper, Tolia-Kelly (2004) has argued for the link between materiality and visibility in her studies of the material dimensions of landscape. She explores the translation of past and present landscapes of British-Asian migrant women, and shows how landscapes that the women had engaged with prior to migration are extended into the present through domestic material culture. “These visual cultures refract, represent, and are metonymical signifiers of other environments and landscapes. They also refract sensory engagements with other places, landscapes and natures” (Tolia-Kelly, 2004, p.676). Through visual, material cultures, it is possible, therefore, to establish and maintain an experienced connection between past and present landscapes. This type of connection is similarly discussed in D’Alisera (2001) who focuses on work sites. In this study, material objects are used to inscribe religious identity into the present work site by Muslim Sierra Leoneans that have migrated to Washington. These objects “are physical manifestations of experience, a means of situating individual and community in transnational space” (D’Alisera, 2001, p.91). In both studies material objects are used to make, maintain and express the worlds of their users and thereby they become physical and visible manifestations of experience.

In regard to the visual, material cultures that circumscribe architecture, it is also possible to trace experienced relations between material, social and symbolic aspects. Focusing on the agency and materiality of Arab houses, Copertino describes them as “objects in a mutual relationship with people who build, restore, buy, sell and dwell in them” (Copertino, 2014, p.327). Through material practices and social relationships architecture is a dynamic constituent of the actor’s sense of identity and

belonging, and their material practices of building and restoring become an active part in the construction of social groups and their collective identity. In emphasising the intertwinement of the social/cultural and the material, it is important how architecture forms part in developing and translating social and material relationships. Krenk (2004, p.8) speaks of architecture as “a cultural meeting point” and outlines the mosques’ role as conveying tradition and identity as well as the scope for regional translation in the mosque-architecture in the cultural encounter with the Danish context.

In this work, we approach the purpose-built mosques as visual and material manifestations of religious, symbolic and cultural practices. We approach the mosques as manifestations that are able to connect its users with past and present experiences as well as with individual and collective identities. The key aspect of visibility becomes paradoxical as it potentially facilitates for both community and distance. Depending on the specific context in both time and space, the encounters circumscribing the mosque may simultaneously contain agreement and conflict. It is this paradox that we wish to emphasise by the term “hyper-visibility”. In the present-day Danish context, the visibility of (especially the two recent) purpose-built mosques has proved to be significant (i.e. “hyper”) as their construction and opening has evoked compounded and contested reactions.

The Nusrat Djahan Mosque in Hvidovre

The *Nusrat Djahan Mosque* is a small mosque built in the 1960s in a suburb to Copenhagen called Hvidovre. It is located in an area with detached family houses and other small institutions (e.g. a private school; a Christian parish hall). Inside the mosque, there is space for about 100 persons. In 2015, the construction of some extensions to the mosque was finished with more room for meetings, visiting imams, etc. It was the first purpose-built mosque in Scandinavia, and it was built by the Ahmadiyya-movement – a Muslim reform movement originating in India at the end of the 19th century and in Pakistan after 1947.

The Ahmadiyyas perceive themselves as Sunni-Muslims, but at the same time they are on bad terms with both other Sunni- and Shia-Muslims. For theological reasons these groups do not consider the Ahmadiyyas to be part of the Muslim Umma (the global Muslim religious community), because, among other things, they claim their founder was the promised Messiah and, as such, a prophet after Mohammed. That is why they have suffered from discrimination and persecution in Pakistan over the course of the 20th century (Jeppesen, 2012). To the Ahmadiyya, missionary work is central to their movement. That is likely the reason why it established congregations rather early in Europe – in England in 1914 and spreading out from there. In Denmark an Ahmadiyya communion was

established in 1956. Also, in many European cities, the first purpose-built mosque was initiated by the Ahmadiyya-movement: in London in 1926 (Naylor and Ryan, 2002), in Berlin in 1927 (Jonker, 2005) and in Copenhagen in 1967, all located in the suburbs and all roughly the same size. Since the 1950s the congregation of the *Nusrat Djahan Mosque* has developed from a religious minority primarily consisting of Danish converts into an ethno-religious minority with members of mainly Pakistani heritage (Jacobsen, 2014).



The *Nusrat Djahan Mosque* gives the impression of a building in harmony with the surroundings, probably because the proportions are well adapted to the neighbourhood. The mosque has no towers or minarets. It is a circular white-bricked building with narrow, stained-glass windows in different colours. The roof is a characteristic dome with tapers nearly reaching the ground. It was originally covered with blue mosaics but they were later replaced with copper sheets due to weather damage. The mosque was supposed to have had a minaret, but the architect (himself a Danish convert), in cooperation with the congregation, judged it out of proportion with the surrounding buildings. The mosque has a little extension housing the imam and some offices. Grass areas encircle it and at the rear there is a little garden.

This unique form also results in an unusual inner shape. The prayer room takes the form of a rotunda with a recess oriented towards Mecca that contains a pulpit for the imam. The glass windows form a symmetry allowing daylight into the mosque. The inside of the dome is white and the

Figure 1
The Nusrat Djahan Mosque.

PHOTO: ANDERS GIVERSEN

top “disappears” into the atmosphere. An important element of the room is the carpet that incorporates traces of former generations’ activities. In interplay with the praying bodies, it is part of the atmosphere of the room. The physical acts, and the meditative moments performed on the carpet through generations, create an embedded narrative that together with the rituals influences the lived experience of the members in the mosque (Butt, 2014).

In the beginning of the 1960s, the congregation was looking for a location for a mosque. Their first submission in another suburb (Brøndby) failed because of neighbourhood objections, but they found a location in Hvidovre and the foundation stone was laid on May 6, 1966. The mosque was financed by a collection among women in Ahmadiyya-congregations all across the world, which is the reason why it was named after the wife of their founder. Everybody characterizes the planning process and the negotiations with the municipality as having been smooth. At the same time, however, there is another story that a few days before the opening they received a message that they could not proceed because of some neighbourhood objections – a panic-raising message that was only countered through an approach to the Prime Minister.

Despite these wrangling’s the mosque was inaugurated on July 28, 1967. The opening was met with local curiosity and media attention but went unnoticed by national politicians. Hvidovre Avis (1967b) wrote: “Last Friday Muslims all over the world prayed for Hvidovre’s mosque. Guests from 11 European countries headed by the leader of Islam opened the first mosque in Scandinavia and with that made Hvidovre the Mecca of the North” (our translation). The inauguration had around 200 guests, both Muslims and non-Muslims, among them some ambassadors from Muslim countries, the Caliph of the Ahmadiyya movement al-Hafiz Mirza Nasir Ahmmad, and imams from 11 European countries. The Caliph also visited the Town Hall where he was welcomed with the words:

It is unusual for Islam to build a mosque so far north. We in the municipality can only express delight at the mosque being built here [...] Religious divisions can sometimes bring emotions to the boil, but in this country we are fortunately very tolerant. Therefore we greet Islam and the new mosque in Hvidovre welcome! (Svend Aagesen, Mayor, in Hvidovre Avis, 1967a, our translation.)

In the years since its opening, the mosque has managed to maintain good relations with the surrounding community, with a continuous range of open house arrangements, discussion evenings, and events such as “the night before Christmas Eve in the mosque”, etc. In 2007 it celebrated its 40-year anniversary, with participation of two ministers. In the whole period, the movement have had an adaptive strategy in relation to the environment, in architecture as well as activity. It is expressed in our interview with the former imam through his recurring phrasing of

the way in which they have always strived not to “ask too much” of their community.

The Khayr El-Barriya Mosque in Nørrebro

The *Khayr El-Barriya Mosque* with its extensive community centre, the *Hamad Bin Khalifa Civilisation Center*, opened in Copenhagen in June 2014 in the neighbourhood called Nørrebro.



The *Khayr El-Barriya Mosque* is Sunni Muslim but intends to be a place of dialogue between different religious communities. It is located in the working class neighbourhood Nørrebro, which houses the most intense multi-ethnic population in Copenhagen, and is situated next to some small industrial units. The mosque and the community centre are redeveloped from two existing industrial buildings. The main redevelopment consisted in adding one and a half extra floors and making a combined staircase and terrace connecting the two.

The building has a minaret and a dome on top, and even though the developer wanted the dome to be taller, they compromised and decided to keep the height within the existing regulations. From the outside, the mosque appears modest with white unadorned facades, signalling simple, modern architecture and familiarity with Nordic minimalism. Conversely, the interior of the mosque displays lavish ornamentation and interior decoration that reflects the affiliation with components of Islamic traditions. The design and the idea behind the *Khayr El-Barriya Mosque* is the result of a deliberate strategy from the developers of being non-provocative, deciding that the architecture should be a hybrid of Islamic and Nordic culture.

Figure 2
The Khayr El-Barriya Mosque.

PHOTO: ANDERS GIVERSEN

In the case of the *Khayr El-Barriya Mosque*, the planning process leading up to the opening was relatively unproblematic. The development of the community centre was possible within the existing building regulations of the area. However, objection in the public hearing arose when it came to the minaret. It deviated from the existing local plan both with its height (about 8 meters) and its potential function for the call to prayer. The public hearing gave rise to numerous objections coming from all over the country. As seen in other European countries, the potential audibility of the minaret's call to prayer was a central point of contention. Other objections were concerned with the fear of increased crime in the neighbourhood and fear of the minaret being used for surveillance. The public hearing resulted in a compromise that the minaret would remain silent. The municipality handled the objection based on fear of crime and surveillance by arguing that it was a matter for the police and not building legislation.

The mosque's three-day opening festival in June 2014 was tainted by the fact that the political establishment and royal family refused to participate. The most common objections focused around the mosque's sponsorship by the Emirate of Qatar and a newspaper citation from the spokesman of the mosque saying that in Islam homosexuality is *haram*, forbidden, and viewed as an illness. These issues were debated intensely in the media and perceived by commentators as being potentially dangerous and in conflict with Danish culture.

The opening event was followed closely by leading Danish media and created a heated debate on this new visibility of Islam in the centre of Copenhagen. The mosque was received by a broad spectrum of statements and reactions. Some celebrated the mosque as a symbol of "our" values: freedom of religion, democracy and openness – a material manifestation that has to be accepted in a democratic society. But it was an acceptance that was delivered in a negative way. Under the headline in *Politiken* "The mosque is welcome without Qatar" (Stormoské, 2014) the donation from Qatar was represented as something that "we" should fear because it could potentially affect the role of the mosque symbolically. Thereby the debate became characterized by reservations, doubts, anxiety and uncertainty. Dominated by statements like "Is there something hidden inside the mosque?" the mosque was received as symbolizing "them" – standing in contrast to "us" – lacking "our" values such as freedom, tolerance and openness. Thereby the symbolic discussion was predominantly sliding into stereotypical us-them binaries essentializing the differences between Danishness and Islam.

Another important part of the mosque's reception was the debate on security, mainly concerned with the mosque as being a place for Islamic radicalization and a potential terror risk – feared and constructed as a dangerous and violent place outside the boundaries of civilization and

thus turned into a threat to Danish society. For instance, an editorial in the leading conservative newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* linked the mosque to Islamic fundamentalism and the war in Syria, thereby relating it to the logic of what Gregory (2011) calls “the everywhere war”. A member of parliament made a similar comment, also in *Jyllands-Posten*, expressing his worries about what might happen inside the mosque: “I hope that PET [the Danish Security and Intelligence Service] will keep an eye on them”, he said, representing the mosque as a severe security issue requiring constant surveillance (Johansen, 2014).

Within the ecclesiastical establishment the mosque was received differently and welcomed by the Bishop of Copenhagen, the leader of the Catholic congregation, and leaders of the Shia Muslim community who were all present at the opening ceremony. In this sense, the ambition of the mosque of dialogue between different religious communities was complied with – at least on this festive day. Other positive reactions came from residents of the local neighbourhood. On-the-spot interviews on the opening days revealed reactions reaching from indifference to joy on the behalf of their Muslim neighbours who now had a worthy place to practice their religion.

The *Imam Ali Mosque* in Nordvest

The *Imam Ali Mosque* lies in the district Nordvest in Copenhagen. It opened in October 2015. The purpose-built mosque is located in a small industrial area (with old, two or three story factory buildings) surrounded by housing estates with schools, day-care centres and cultural facilities. Since 2001, in one of the old factory buildings, the place housed the *Imam Ali Islamic Center*. The mosque is Shia Muslim.

The architecture of the *Imam Ali Mosque* is the most expressive, and its size, shape and colourful decor makes it stand out from the adjacent buildings. The facades are built of yellow bricks decorated with tiles of Arabic floral patterns in blue, yellow and turquoise colours. In between the patterns are selected quotes from the Koran in both Arabic and Danish. The façade is 13 meters high, the dome is 24 meters high and the two minarets are 32 meters high. The dome and the minarets are painted in turquoise with yellow and blue decorations. The back of the building is shaped as an amphitheatre with full-length windows. The windows are regular, rectangular thermo windows with a white plastic frame. The outdoor surfacing is made with regular cement tiles. As a whole, the mosque represents a material encounter between the “Arabic” shapes and coloured tiles and the “Nordic” yellow bricks and cement, outdoor tiling.

Inside the mosque all of the floors (and the walls of the entry, corridors and basement) are covered in beige, brown and peach coloured marble. The prayer carpet was not in place yet. The walls in the prayer room



are painted white and decorated with wooden panels with calligraphic patterns. The room is very light with daylight coming in from high windows, and a big cut-glass chandelier hanging from the dome roof. On the day of the opening, the praying room served as a hall for the opening ceremony, and the first of part of the opening ceremony took place in here. Upon arrival, visitors were encouraged to keep their shoes on, and on the invitation it read that non-Muslim women were welcome inside without the need of a veil or headscarf. Upon entry, everyone was standing, and the temperature was low, and most of the visitors kept their coats on. There were about a hundred visitors and a few members of the press. Many visitors were photographing the event, which culminated with the symbolic act of cutting a ribbon performed by a local vicar from the Danish state church.

The second part of the opening ceremony took place in the conference room at the back – the one shaped like an amphitheatre. All visitors were seated, and there were talks from a number of representatives and invited speakers. The program was international in its outreach, but at the same time it was clear that the imam and the people around the *Imam Ali Islamic Center* (and now mosque) are highly integrated with the local community. Many participants in the ceremony came from local religious organisations. The mosque has existed in that place for more than a decade, and the establishment and opening of the purpose-built

Figure 3
 The Imam Ali Mosque.

PHOTO: ANDERS GIVERSEN

mosque is the culmination of a long-hoped dream and a lot of hard work. The program emphasized the role of the mosque as a meeting place and educational establishment. The general message was that the mosque was open to everyone and that it should be a place for dialogue.

The process leading up the opening of the mosque has lasted many years. Ever since the opening of the cultural centre in 2001, the imam has worked on the plans. It has been particularly challenging to raise the necessary funds. The imam and the local Muslim association have Iranian origins. In the plans for the mosque the new building would replace the existing factory building and the mosque was envisioned to resemble traditional Shiite mosque-architecture. For different reasons it was necessary to make a separate local plan (the plan the municipality prepare to specify the authorized use of an area). In 2010, following a public hearing, the city council voted in favour of the plan; during the public hearing it was met with numerous responses and the debate was intense.

Overall, the debate can be summarised as dealing with the physical conditions such as noise, traffic chaos and parking, the general development of the local area, and, dominantly, religious questions and the possible involvement of the Iranian clerical regime. As regards the latter group of responses, the city council did not consider such questions as part of their jurisdiction. The physical issues were met, for example, by authorising that the mosque was built with an underground car park and that the minarets would be silent. The plan for building the mosque in traditional Shiite architecture was not restricted. Since then, the process faced many other challenges and especially the demand for raising the necessary funding, has been on going. The architect served as advisor along the way; he is also of Iranian origin and describes himself as a “cultural Muslim”. Due to his former employment, he knows the planning system well, and has been able to help steer the process along the way.

Analysis

The descriptions of the three mosques show how materiality is an issue in conflicts and debates over Muslim-Danish identities. The purpose-built mosques manifest an enhanced visibility of Islam in urban public space. With its domes, minarets and other Islamic symbols the purpose-built mosques form part in the negotiation of cultural/religious identities.

Common to all three mosques is how their architecture, although in different ways, represent a material encounter between materialities that we spontaneously reflect as Islamic and Nordic. In Hvidovre, the encounter is visible in the white bricks of the façade, the coloured glass of the windows, and the shape of the roof that leaves an impression of introversion or even asceticism. And its small size leaves an impression

of a modest adaptation to its context. In Nørrebro, the encounter is particularly visible in the straight white façade, the discrete, almost hidden dome and the very simple entrance. Even though the existing industrial buildings posed limits to the exterior design, the result is a play with discrete Nordic modernism. Finally, in Nordvest, the encounter is visible in the yellow brick facades (so similar from the average Danish 1970s single-family house), the average thermo windows and then the colourful tiles of the exterior decor with quotes from the Koran in both Arabic and Danish.

In different ways, therefore, the architecture of the mosques expresses an encounter between different material and cultural/religious elements. The domes and minarets stand out from the existing milieu (i.e. making them hypervisible) and activities like the weekly Friday prayer is likewise a hypervisible practice as it is conspicuous and foreign to the general Danish “cultural Christianity”. But common to the three mosques is how they express different adaptations of this “other” type of building in the Nordic context.

Meanwhile, as the descriptions of the three mosques have also shown, the mosques have formed part in the material and cultural/religious negotiations of Muslim-Danish identities in very different ways. As outlined above, the mosques have been received very differently by the general public and, as mentioned, this is due to a number of different factors; besides the mosque’s architecture and size, these were the mosque’s different strategies for financing, their individual planning processes and their different programs for their opening events. Finally, a key factor is also the context in which the mosques have been built – i.e. the temporal, spatial and social situation in which they navigate. In regard to context, it is useful to distinguish between two scales: one is the general secular/religious regime in Danish society; the other the specific conditions in the sites where the mosques are located.

Temporally, the mosques appeared in two different periods of Danish history. The suburban mosque opened in 1967. During this period, Denmark was a very homogeneous society, but with a general change in norms and values and an openness and curiosity towards the different. The mosque was received as an “exotic” element amidst the “normality” of the suburb. This exoticisation appears in the writings at the time in the local newspaper. In contrast, the two bigger mosques in the central parts of the city opened in the present-day context, which is heavily influenced by Islamophobia, xenophobia and fear of terror (Goldberg, 2009; Hervik, 2012). In this political climate we experience a politicization of issues around “other” sites of worship, in particular when it comes to Muslim sites.

As described above, the two recent mosques have experienced this

politization during different stages of their planning and building processes. The *Kayr El-Bareya Mosque* in Nørrebro experienced the politization during the opening ceremony. The two other mosques primarily made their opening ceremonies a religious affair; *The Nusrat Djahan* mosque in Hvidovre by inviting leaders of Ahmadiyya congregations from all over Europe, and the *Imam Ali Mosque* in Nordvest by inviting Middle Eastern imams, representatives from local religious communities of all kinds, and local NGOs. The last one even underlined this local orientation by letting a local vicar cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony. The Nørrebro mosque had a more ambitious strategy for the opening; besides the religious nobilities, they invited the whole political establishment – the government, party leaders, members of parliament and local politicians and mayors – as well as the royal family. However, aside from a very few local politicians, all of the invited declined the invitation. With reference to the allegedly “suspicious” sponsorship from Qatar and a critical comment on homosexuality from the spokesman (who was afterwards replaced) the politicians distanced themselves from the event. The result was a heated and often hostile media debate circumscribing the opening. The *Imam Ali Mosque*, on the other hand, experienced the politization during the planning process. While the *Kayr El-Bareya Mosque* in Nørrebro managed to keep a low profile during most of the planning process – because it could be built within the frame of an existing local plan – the *Imam Ali Mosque* in Nordvest needed a separate local plan with a public hearing. The public exposure during the hearing gave rise to numerous objections and intense local debate. As described above, the debate expressed worries about the physical infrastructure, the cultural urban development and the possibility of religious radicalization.

Spatially, we have described the mosques’ differences with regard to their size, architecture and location. The question of location, however, is also important in terms of the mosques’ local milieu, or, more precisely, the public feeling that surrounds them in their local neighbourhood. While the public debate is largely a national concern, driven by national politicians and media, in all the three mosques there is a sustained emphasis of the importance of their relationship with the local surroundings. For example, the two new mosques have been constructed with associated community centres aiming at exactly such relationships, and what we found was how all three mosques seemingly have good relationships with their local milieu. The mosque in Hvidovre has been there nearly 40 years now, and the composition of its followers has developed in accordance with the development of the neighbourhood. Its position in the neighbourhood has changed from “exotic” to “familiar”. As regards the two mosques in the inner parts of Copenhagen, the positions are more composite. They both gain from their particular local context but it is too early to say how the local milieus will develop. The districts of Nørrebro and Nordvest contain the most intense multi-ethnic popula-

tion in the city. In many ways, and in much public debate, Nørrebro has become the epitome of multiculturalism in Denmark. Diversity, whether based on migrant status or social class, has always been part of Nørrebro's identity (Schmidt, 2015). Accordingly, most of its inhabitants have become skilled practitioners of diversity and conflict, in this way forming a somewhat promising local context for the mosques and their co-existence with their neighbours.

Using a theoretical framework that couples visibility with the phenomenological understanding of human corporeality the paper emphasises the fundamental condition between seeing and being seen. By way of the human corporeality and its material embedment (in which architecture forms part), the paper argues how the scope for negotiating cultural/religious identities is intimately linked with our seeing and being seen i.e. with corporeal and material visibility. This link, we argue, explains (at least) some of the intensity and vulnerability we have seen in the public encounters occasioned by the purpose-built mosques. Secondly, the corporeal/material visibility is guided by habitual norms and social hierarchies. One such norm that the paper addresses is described in the notion of whiteness. Habitual and often unreflective norms of whiteness functions as ordering principles of what to expect and what passes as normal (or in-place) vis-à-vis abnormal (or out-of-place). If an urban space is routinely and predominantly perceived as *white* the incorporation of 'other' architectures stand out. This is one possible explanation, we argue, of why purpose-built mosques can be received as out-of-place by general public opinion.

Conclusion

The modes of encountering purpose-built mosques in Copenhagen have generally followed the changing position of ethnic minorities in Denmark. They have changed from a broad acceptance of the 1967 mosque – as both an exotic curiosity and a modern addition to the suburb – to conflicts over the objectives and visibility of the two recently built ones. Largely, these are seen, and represented as, foreign and out-of-place intrusions to the “white” urban landscape. The long period that went ahead, and the obstacles that have met intermediate attempts to build purpose-built mosques, also attest to this development.

In the literature, this is characterized by an increasing fear of “Islamization of space” (Eade, 1996) in the city, but as the paper has also shown, this process is both supported and moderated by particularities characterizing the specific mosques and their contexts. Such particularities were: the mosques' architecture, their planning processes, their strategies towards surrounding communities and the local neighbourhood characteristics. Theoretically, the paper argued how the intensity and vulnerability in the cross-cultural encounters occasioned by the mosques is tied

to the way materiality and visibility is linked with human corporeality and identity. And secondly, how the corporeal/material visibility is guided by habitual and “white” norms making the mosques “stand out” as “other” architectures.

In this sense, visibility (as suggested by Göle (2011)) works as a form of agency in public. Visibility as agency may focus on issues such as dress codes, material cultures and architecture. It can take form of bodily as well as material and discursive practices, and it can certainly be both disruptive, transgressive and mutually transformative. Therefore, the construction of purpose-built mosques in Copenhagen have rendered the specific sites *paradoxical spaces* involving on going negotiations of material, symbolic and cultural form.

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