

Exploring Religious Spaces through Architecture

in David Macaulay's *Mosque*

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to discuss the notion of religious space in David Macaulay's¹ *Mosque* through the exploration of the architecture of the mosque not only as a structure serving religious purposes but also a space of social activity bringing together the members of the community. Macaulay created *Mosque* as a response to the 9/11 attacks and its complex political and socio cultural global impact. Through the deployment of the mosque as a conceptual framework the notions of mobility, displacement and belonging are addressed as intersecting factors forging communal and individual identities.

Keywords: religion, mobility, belonging, mosque, architecture.

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Introduction

The official separation of state and religion in the Western world has not diminished the influence of religion on social and political institutions. Processes related to modernization such as modern communications and technologies, industrialization and urbanization have resulted in the globalization of religion and accentuation of its importance on a universal level (Fox 56). Questions of religion, mobility and belonging are at the centre of contemporary political debates in European countries and the US which, since the beginning of the global financial crisis and the ensuing refugee crisis, have received the majority of asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants.

James V. Spickard and Afe Adogame insightfully point out that religion, very much like politics, does not exist as “a vague abstraction” in the world but is found in places of worship such as churches, mosques and synagogues (1). The end of colonial rule and the rise of independent states in the Islamic world coincides with the initiation and development of large-scale projects for mosques in non-Muslim countries serving a double function as places of expression of the Muslim presence and a space for social exchange, education and the organization of community action (Farrag 613-14). David Macaulay's *Mosque* uses the architectural construction of the Muslim place of worship as a conceptual framework in order to address questions regarding the power balance between religion and secular reason and the

¹ David Macaulay is an award-winning writer and illustrator of children's picture books but also non-fiction books such as *Castle* (1977), *Unbuilding* (1980), *The Way Things Work* (1988) and *Building Big* (2000), aimed at thoroughly analyzing the complexities of ancient and modern marvels of design and architecture. As Jack Zipes insightfully comments Macaulay's diverse works exemplify “to what purpose the fantastic has been put to use” in the process of creating machines and architectural structures, or picture books (85).

impact of mobility on forging identities around flexible rather than exclusive boundaries which permit various degrees of belonging.

Macaulay's *Mosque* and Mosques as a Visual Representation of Religious Identity in the Public Space

In his 1991 Caldecott Medal Acceptance speech² Macaulay states that he uses “pictures and words to emphasize the common sense behind the design of any object in an attempt to demystify an increasingly complex and detached world” (“Caldecott Medal Acceptance” 410). His series of architectural books including *Cathedral*, *Pyramid*, *Castle*, and *City* makes the art of large-scale architectural projects accessible to his audience through the detailed illustrations and accompanying comprehensive text explaining with precision the construction process of emblematic buildings whose cultural value endures time. As the artist himself admits, sacred buildings always inspired him in writing and illustrating picture books of an architectural content but it was the attacks of 9/11 that motivated him into writing *Mosque*. In Macaulay's own words, “there's this hunger for information about this other culture that we seem to be battling, but we don't know anything about it, and they don't know really anything about us. So my contribution was “Mosque,” a glimpse into a civilization of the past that might shrink the world a bit” (Zernike).

The fictional story of *Mosque* transports the reader to the city of Istanbul, the center of the Ottoman Empire of the sixteenth century. The patron-admiral Suha Mehmet Pasa is confronted with the boundaries “of his own mortality” (9) which he sets out to surpass with the creation of a charitable foundation. He commissions the also fictitious architect Akif Agha to build an architectural complex called a kulliye which would host the mosque, the spiritual centerpiece of the construction, as well as several other buildings such as a soup kitchen, a hammam and a fountain for public use, and a medrese, a college for religious education. The design of the mosque is based to a large extent on the tradition set by the architects who preceded Akif Agha. The decorations which play a key role in shaping the religious atmosphere of the interior space of the mosque draw from the Koran, natural vegetation and geometry. A vast number of artists and craftsmen are involved in the construction of the complex; representatives of different religions are to be found among them, Christian bricklayers and blacksmiths, Muslim stone masons and carpenters and Jewish supplying the large quantities of ore required. Cooperation among these diverse groups of workers flourishes demonstrating that this intricate construction “motivated by faith, but guided ultimately by common sense” (Macaulay, *Mosque* 4) brings together and in many ways integrates the religious and the secular and creates the context for a productive interaction among people of different backgrounds. Macaulay's much earlier *Cathedral* (1973) also takes the place of worship, the Christian cathedral in this case, as the focal point in order to disrupt the perception of the religious and the secular as oppositional binaries

² Macaulay won the Caldecott Medal Award in 1991 for his picture book *Black and White* published in 1990. According to Macaulay the creation of *Black and White* was based on “the idea of a journey through a book ... people taking journeys and meeting and crossing paths” (“In-Depth Interview”).

and highlight their interrelation. The decision of the people of the fantastical French city of Chutreaux to build a cathedral is primarily attributed to their desire to thank God for their prosperous and tranquil lives, but, as the narrative reveals, the cathedral would also offer a resting place for the sacred remains of Saint Germain, so worshipers from all over Europe would be attracted to visit the city (Macaulay, *Cathedral* 5). In other words, the cathedral functions as a cultural site which would be beneficial for the town's economical life as well, which is not very far from what Zahraa Alkhaled points out about the potential function of the mosque as "a visual attraction and landmark in metropolitans" (37). In both picture books, the building of a mosque and a cathedral, respectively, acquires a religious and a social/local political dimension which elucidates the symbolic importance of the place of worship in the public space.

Concentrating on the mosque and locating it in the context of the contemporary urban public space in the Western world, significant questions emerge regarding the centrality of the mosque in Muslim community life as well as its impact on Muslim urban visibility (Cesari 1017). It would be useful at this point to elaborate on the notion of the 'Muslim' and its use in different contexts before tackling the issue of the visibility of the Muslim populations in the West. The demographic portrait of Muslim Americans clearly depicts a largely immigrant population as more than seventy-five percent of American Muslims are second-generation Americans or first-generation immigrants coming from at least seventy-seven different countries (Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans").³ According to recent research fifty-five percent of the US Muslims identify as Sunnis, sixteen percent as Shiites and a significant fourteen percent as "just Muslims" (Pew Research Center, "U.S. Muslims"). Muslim communities in Europe are equally if not more diverse including immigrant Muslims who came to Europe as labor migrants before the 1970s, indigenous Muslims mainly occupying the East and the Southeast, European Muslims born to migrant parents, and refugees and immigrants of the past few years (Khader 308-09). This article focuses on the mosque as a visual, symbolic representation of the religious identity of the immigrant population in the West, still, the absence of uniformity in the ethnic, social and historical features shaping the identity of the Muslim is a factor to be considered in the wider discussion of the mosque as a point of reference for the members of its religious community. This diversity is a significant structural component of the mosque as a living religious and cultural body in the same manner that ethnic, cultural, religious and social diversity among Americans and Europeans of different origins and backgrounds in the Western world has never ceased to change and redefine the public space in terms of action and mobility rather than stasis and uniformity.

Chantal Saint-Blancat and Ottavia Schmidt di Friedberg examine the conflict around mosque construction in European cities as largely dependent on "the extent to which Muslims are seen as 'legitimate' members of public space" (1100). The issue of visibility arises as crucial in the discussion concerning the function of the mosque in the urban landscape and its impact on the

³ The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan American think tank which provides information on contemporary social issues and demographic trends with an impact on the United States and the world. It also conducts social science research through demographic research, public opinion polling and content analysis.

dialectic interplay between groups of different religious and wider cultural backdrop. The two researchers argue that the local population tends to perceive groups whose cultural codes “are a mystery” as a threat, a representation of the unknown and, therefore, dangerous Other, which provides an explanation as to why mosque construction projects are very often met with suspicion and, finally, rejection; the construction of a mosque is tangible proof that the new community is ‘here to stay,’ and that prospect can have a disruptive effect especially when presented through stereotypes which distort the writing of history (1101). Also focusing on the controversies stirred by the construction of mosques in Europe, Oskar Verkaaik analyzes these conflicts as material and political shedding light on them through the perspective of “creativity and architectural design that emphasizes material processes” and relating them to broader political issues (118). Verkaaik refers to specific examples of the anticipated mosque construction causing concerns and ensuing protests of the residents due to preconceptions regarding the design of the building and its effect on the aesthetics of the area.⁴ As Verkaaik notes both Muslims and the protesters share the anticipation of form and, in fact, in ways which are “often remarkably similar” (119).

Macaulay definitely addresses the matter of the architectural form of the mosque through the vivid and detailed account of the step-by-step process of its materialization. Emphasis is placed on the challenges which the project poses and the high level of “ingenuity, ambition and craftsmanship rarely found in secular architecture” deployed towards their resolution (4). Further down in the story, when the mosque has been completed and the first prayer is about to take place, the text narrates how the eyes of the worshipers are drawn upward “past the sparkling tiles and radiant gilding, past the deeply cut panels of stalactite carving, to Agha’s great dome which seemed to float weightlessly above them” (83). There is an analogy between the image of the seemingly weightless, to the point of immateriality, floating dome and the emotionally and spiritually uplifting experience of the congregation who have entered the newly built mosque for the first time. The design and architecture of the building reflects through its very materiality the spiritual, metaphysical essence underscoring it and it is precisely this synergistic spatiotemporal coexistence of the material and the spiritual that the text pinpoints indicating the fragility and fluidity of the boundaries separating the two notions, thus opening up the space for questioning all oppositional binaries connected to the mosque and its functions. In this light, the text lends itself to a reading through the lens of Bakhtin’s notion of ‘chronotope,’ “the intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (258). In *Mosque* the design of the complex creates chronotopes of faith, religiosity and spiritual connection to God which simultaneously exist within the regular flow of everyday life. Venues of communication are created between the worshipers and workers inside the mosque and the members of the community living outside the walls of the building as well as between the religious aspects of the identity of the worshipers and their social roles and subjectivities. “While the mosque would join the hearts and minds of the faithful through their devotion to God, the

⁴ References include the mosque project which was initiated in August 2010 in the suburban town of Almere, near Amsterdam, and the new Aya Sofia mosque in Amsterdam-West.

imaret would link the community within the kulliye to the community outside through their stomachs” (61). The poor and needy would be fed alongside the students and workers in the mosque whose contribution to the life and well-being of the community emerges as of vital importance. The addition of a han and a caravanserai, the equivalents to a hostel, guest house or hotel of the time, to the whole construct of the kulliye would accentuate the role of the mosque complex in the social and economic life of the community as accommodation would be offered to passing out-of-town guests as well as local businessmen and artisans (91). The notion of mobility also emerges in connection to the architectural structure of the mosque which becomes a pole of attraction for temporary residents in Istanbul; the exchange developing between the more ‘mobile’ participants and the permanent inhabitants complicates, diversifies and constantly revives the compilation of the population and its cultural façade. The representation of the Bakhtinian chronotope in the narrative trajectory as a conception of the time-space relationship in a context of tension, interaction and, effectively, synergy is most emphatically highlighted in the last double spread in the book. The image of the place, the location of the complex, in comparison to the image in the fourth double spread of the same space as it was before the construction was initiated, eloquently illustrates the textual reference to the spatiotemporal connection between the past and the present which the mosque achieves. “When completed, the kulliye of Suha Mehmet Pasa ... filled the surrounding plots of land where charred timber and burned bricks had once been piled” (95); the memories of the fire that had long ago destroyed the entire area, as the text goes on to explain, would never be erased but their ashes were part of the soil upon which “new life was now thriving” (95). The ending in *Mosque* clearly circles back to the beginning bringing the story to what Lawrence Sipe describes as “a satisfactory closure” providing “resolution and a sense of completion” (37).⁵ This sense of closure and completion underpinning the inextricable link forged between the past and the present through the venue of the mosque directly impacts the reader who is shown how the emblematic structure of a religion “that many people see behind so much destruction” (Zernike) can make a constructive contribution to the social, cultural and economic life of the community. Considering that the book was published after the 9/11 attacks, Macaulay’s statement that *Mosque* is about “trying to equalize, in one tiny way, the playing field, in recognizing that we’re all people capable of amazing things when we are inspired” (Zernike) deserves further analysis.

The Status of the Mosque as a Religious Symbol in the Western World Post 9/11

Jo Lampert identifies the surfacing of new discourses on notions of ethnicity and its binary perception as related to good or evil, racial profiling and border protection as one of the most powerful trends in the political aftermath of the 9/11 (2). Expanding on Lampert’s point I would argue that 9/11 ranks as a most crucial moment in history which marked a turning point for West

⁵ A scholar of education and literature, Dr. Lawrence R. Sipe was particularly interested in children’s texts and the complexity of the text-image interactive relationship in their context. In his analysis of the features of picture book as an aesthetic object, Sipe argues that the importance of the aesthetically pleasing symmetry between the ending and the beginning of a narrative lies in the fact that “it is so unlike the experiences of our everyday lives, where true closure and resolution happen so seldom” (37).

and its perception of religion and culture in connection to issues of religious mobility and immigration. Macaulay subtly, but decisively, approaches the matter by establishing through verbal and visual narration the complex role of the mosque in the public space; consequently, the issue of the visibility of the figure of the Muslim immigrant in the public sphere is raised prompting the discussion of the reemergence of religion in modern secular societies while simultaneously providing a conceptual frame through which the notion of religious agency in public debate can be revisited.

In his 2003 interview with Liane Hansen at the Washington D.C. Islamic Centre, Macaulay describes the structure and design of the Ottoman mosque pinpointing its dual identity both as an architectural construct responding to the “grit pattern” of Washington as well as a venue maintaining alive the worshipers’ relationship to their native land, its culture and tradition (“Macaulay Returns to Sacred Space with *Mosque*”). As Macaulay explains, the prayer hall inside the mosque only responds to the qibla, the direction of Mecca, which is why the qibla wall always faces Mecca. This imaginary line connecting the mosques in every corner of the West and the East with the sacred ground of Mecca allows the people who have migrated from their native land and find spiritual refuge and fulfillment in the mosque to ponder on the ways in which their faith becomes a medium to reconnect themselves to their country and its cultural heritage, and simultaneously to ground themselves in the realities of their new ‘home’ and make sense of their place in it. In this light, the notion of the mosque as *place* embodies the “lived entity that results from a dialogical transaction between a community and its material environment at a particular moment in cultural-historical time and which hence shapes and is shaped by the identity of the people” (Van Eijck and Roth 869). Once again the chronotopical nature of the identity of the mosque assumes a position of importance in the construction of the identity of the worshipers entering its space to exercise their religious duties. This interpretation is in line with Peter Good’s reading of the Bakhtinian chronotope as a community whose social form is shaped “by adding flesh to the way gatherings of people organize themselves around particular sets of timespace” (22). In Macaulay’s narration the mosque is located in the centre of the Ottoman empire, the construction is an integral part of the community, and the worshipers, either passing visitors or residents of the area, share a common religious identity. The mosques established in cities and towns of Western countries have to respond to a new environment and context determined by its own religious and cultural traditions (Farrag 620) and link this new reality to the culture and traditions of the country of origin. In this perspective, the mosque functions as an intersection of the past and the present, religion and mobility, belonging and connecting.

The integration of the mosque in the Western public sphere is inextricably linked to the ideas of democratic pluralism and multiculturalism underpinning the notion of the public space as a non-fixed, dynamic process in the context of which “the democratic possibility for discord allows space for the voices of the excluded” (Göle, “Islam’s Disruptive Visibility”). Nevertheless, the events of 9/11 as an encapsulation of urban terror disrupted and destabilized the concept of the public space as a place of democratic resilience, social flexibility and

inclusion. Setha Low points out that the trend towards escalated surveillance of public spaces in the city was accentuated by 9/11 (“Lessons from Imagining the World Trade Center Site” 395); the enforcement of the Patriot Act in the name of public safety is a characteristic example of what Low refers to as “neoliberal clampdown” on public space in the US (“Public Space and the Public Sphere” 154). The impact of increasing regulation, policing and control over public space has also become evident in European cities (Doherty et al. 290); frequently evoking the notion of the security from the terrorist threat European city governments justify the implementation of restrictions on the public space (Doherty et al. 293). The unstable position of the mosque and all it symbolizes in this new, post 9/11 reality is amply demonstrated in Jihad Milhem’s⁶ 2019 play *Mosque*, the story of a young Muslim and his family striving to go on with their lives in a post 9/11 America; the play was inspired by the conflict which tore apart the community in lower Manhattan over the 2010 construction of a mosque close to Ground Zero (Froyd). The actual project to which the play refers is the “Ground Zero Mosque” or “Park51,” an Islamic community center proposed to be developed in the late summer of 2010 four blocks from the destroyed World Trade Center site. Supporters of the project viewed the development as a manifestation of American multicultural inclusion, freedom of speech and religion, while opponents labeled the proposed religious space a tribute to Islamic terrorism and the domination of Islam on the West (Bowe 181-82). The trauma of 9/11 accentuated the social tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Europe, as well (Zorlu and Frijters 23), undermining multiculturalism and coexistence and fostering instead monoculturalism and nationalism against the prospect of “Eurabia” (Papagianni). In her analysis of Muslim Youth identity issues in the post-9/11 era, Cynthia White Tindongan contends that Muslim immigrants coming from former European colonies bring a “damaged social capital” which further problematizes and complicates their transition from the country of origin to the country of residence and their connection with the new social context in which they are grounded (72). The crossover of national boundaries becomes implicated in the formation of the identity of the immigrant as fluid, unstable and, in Nahidh Sulaiman’s own words, “at the borderlands of culturalism” (1101); the cultural identity of those traversing through borders can no longer be perceived “as an innate construct based on ethnicity or nationality” (Sulaiman 1101) because it is negotiated in the hybrid, in-between space of the culture of the homeland and the culture of the new country, the fragmented space of borderland.

The notion of liminality also sheds light on the formation process of the identity of the immigrant as it signifies not only the transitional stage, the passage from one home to another, but also the phase of aggregation or integration into a new social state. Arnold van Gennep deployed the term “liminality” in order to refer to the second stage of the ritual transition (11), the rite of passage, from one state, cosmic or social, to another (Kirk et al. 2774). Based on van Gennep’s idea, Victor Turner defined this liminal phase as “a time and place lodged between all

⁶ Jihad Milhem, an actor and playwright, is the son of a Palestinian Muslim and a white American mother. After the terrorist attacks, his family suffered the severe consequences of Islamophobic prejudice, the central theme on which the artist elaborates in his play (Froyd).

times and spaces” (Turner 165). Although, in theory, liminal subjects enter a new state of stability and become “invested with a new identity and an elevated social position” (Tsoni 37), in reality, incorporation in the new social context is not necessarily guaranteed. The immigrants’ social status of liminality is often prolonged due to the substantial lack of support which they experience and which jeopardizes their sense of belonging in the host country. In this framework “the role that receiving societies play in supporting integration, and the ways in which they complicate or even stymie integration of persons experiencing liminality into new contexts” (Schöpke-Gonzalez et al. 39) cannot be ignored.

A spatial conceptualization of the notion of liminality places a special focus on the mosque as a transitional passage in the course of which the sacred and the secular, or the urban, coexist, on the one hand, evoking the memory of the past, the place of origin and the cultural identity of the immigrant in that spatiotemporal context, and, on the other hand, binding it to the present which unfolds against a new urban socio-cultural backdrop representing immigrants as a minority group. The function of the mosque as a space of ambiguity and liminality has become increasingly complicated in modern times, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. Far from remaining confined within the boundaries of the religious public sphere as a monolith of faith, a site addressing the spiritual needs of the worshipers, the mosque “claims its visibility and participation in the public sphere at last, both at national and global scales” (Göle, “The Public Visibility of Islam” 384). In the same spirit, Armando Salvatore argues that Muslim immigrants’ inclusion and integration into public spheres, if not into receiving societies, presupposes that Islam is not taken for granted but considered as a tradition integrally complex and unceasingly transforming (1014). Salvatore’s position is in accord with John Berry’s approach to the issue of integration as a reciprocal process which “can only be ‘freely’ chosen, and successfully pursued by non-dominant groups when the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity” (“Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation” 10). Although Macaulay’s narration revolves around a mosque complex established in the historical and socio-cultural context of a Muslim capital city back in the sixteenth century, the writer’s comment regarding the significant role of the construct in bridging the gap which separates people of different backgrounds in the urban public space resonates the, admittedly, more complicated role of the mosque in modern times. Macaulay describes how the domes and minarets of the mosque serve as beacons for the worshipers exercising their religious duties; at the same time the author highlights the function of this site of faith as a space of “temporary refuge from the chaos of city life” providing “a reassuring sense of order in the midst of an often disorienting maze” (7) and, most importantly, profoundly impressing and emotionally and spiritually moving “even those whose personal beliefs they [mosques] do not necessarily serve” (4). These lines draw attention to the mosque as a symbol of liminality, the in-between space in which diverse, dominant or non-dominant, religious and cultural representations briefly meet and open up the prospect for the identification of shared elements as reference points for mutual acceptance and, ideally, peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

The religious architectural construct of the mosque lies at the core of this article. Macaulay's detailed verbal and visual analysis of the process of building a fictional mosque in the capital center of the Ottoman Empire five centuries ago demonstrates the dual identity of the site as a spiritual and secular space, a symbol of faith but also a pillar of the community founded on common sense, ingenuity and craftsmanship. The recontextualization of the sacred space for Muslim worshipers in the modern Western world reveals the complexity of the role of the mosque as a space of liminality reflecting the equally liminal and ambiguous position of Muslim immigrants in Western societies and simultaneously raising the issue of their visibility in the public space. In an age of transition and change, the individual identity is inevitably transforming as well (Shirazi 26); the transforming diasporic identity of the immigrant, its culturally hybrid character being most tangible proof of the heterogeneity of human action, points towards what Michelle Voss Roberts refers to as "our inherent multiplicity" which exists even prior to our individual choice regarding our identities and which "positions us on the margins in relation to various centers" (60). The tragic events of 9/11 and the subsequent reconfiguration of mainstream social space in Western-world countries had a powerful impact on Muslim immigrants who have experienced exclusion and alienation, their cultural hybridity and diversity ignored if not rejected in the transforming public space invested with "connotations of homogeneity" (Göle, "Islam's Disruptive Visibility"). The contribution of the mosque as a space of familiarity, a chronotope of the past and the present can accommodate the Muslim immigrant's need for belonging and alleviate the effect of fragmentation on immigrant subjectivities. As David Ley and Justin Tse remark in their analysis of the relationship between religion and immigrant subjectivities "in losing so much through displacement, the immigrant as stranger to the world is in a potentially favoured position to gain spiritual wealth" (11). The link forged between religion and immigrant identities emerges as crucial in the ongoing discussion of the pressing issue of integration and the challenges it poses for all participant subjects, the displaced immigrants and the receiving communities. In other words, cultural diversity is an inextricable feature of contemporary life and whether it is to be viewed as a source of problems or an opportunity for opening up our sense of belonging and the notion of the public space is the main question which the West is required to confront (Berry, "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures" 711). The answer to this tantalizing question, essentially, of integration largely depends on the correspondingly complex question regarding the maintenance of balance between making room "for a more diverse array of cultures and customs" and Muslims' adaptation to the new way of life in the cultural context of the host country (Archick et al. 43). The "in-between" space of the mosque can serve as point of reference for its Muslim visitors and create a connection with the members of the community whose personal beliefs it does not necessarily serve, therefore, it is a factor to be considered and assessed in the present and future agenda of examining the integrationist perspective in the rapidly evolving modern world.

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