

## MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE FOR THE BOSNIAK COMMUNITY IN EUROPE: CHALLENGES OF MODERNITY

DOI : 10.36909/jer.ICMA.20207

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### ***Abstract***

The construction of modern Islamic, religious and cultural centers is one of the increasingly present architectural themes in Western Europe. In their visual identity and basic design principles, these centers seek to harmonize the recognizable elements of the vernacular cultural and historical heritages with the environment of contemporary life. In recent years, the Bosniak community in various European countries has been ever more confronted with this open question. The topic brings together complex social, political, and cultural issues related to the representation of the religious and national identities of a minority ethnic/national group within the wider globalization processes. As growingly present in some European countries, the issue of attitudes towards Islam has recently become particularly sensitive. The international architectural competition for the project of the Islamic religious and cultural center for the (dominantly) Bosniak community in Ljubljana, Slovenia, was evaluated by the public as the most important European architectural competition in 2011.

The paper will analyze the modalities of dynamic understanding and defining the concepts of Islamic art and architecture and contemporary mosque architecture in Europe where mosques become multifunctional centers with religious and socio-cultural content of wider importance. The paper will focus on the mosque architecture for Bosniak communities, within the time frame that stretches from the construction of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Zagreb / Croatia (1987) to the recently opened Islamic Religious and Cultural Centre in Ljubljana / Slovenia (2019). The Ljubljana project was awarded the 2020 *Plečnik Award*, which is given for the greatest successes in shaping the Slovenian environment as well as the European cultural environment. Special emphasis will be given to the Islamic Religious and Cultural Centre in Ljubljana and the analysis of its formal and stylistic determinants, including their harmonization with the models and patterns of traditional architecture on one hand and with the challenges imposed by the necessity of integration into local environments and search for a new style on the other.

### ***Key words:***

Islamic art and architecture, contemporary mosque architecture, *Euro-Islam architecture*, identity issues, Muslim diaspora

### ***Introductory remarks***

Parallel to the growing interest in Islamic arts and architecture after the 1970s, incited by major global events after which *the study of Islamic art changed dramatically* (Blair and Bloom, 2003:156-8), there has also been a growing number of scholars and academics calling for its revision (Shalom: 2012). These critical voices have underlined the necessity for questioning basic terminology commonly used while speaking about Islamic arts and architecture, as well as the necessity for re-examining a cultural context in which Islamic art is discussed, especially regarding “the myth of monolithic Islam” frequently used when speaking about Islamic arts and architecture (Shalom: 2012). Trying to respond

to the contemporary challenges in this “unwieldy field”, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom formulated the basic questions:

*What exactly is Islamic art? How well does this category serve the understanding of the material and does a religiously based classification serve better than geographic and linguistic ones? (...) To what extent does the Islamic art and architecture of a particular region owe its distinct qualities to religion, ethnicity, or geography creation?* (Blair and Bloom, 2003: 152, 159).

According to Blair and Bloom, *although it looks similar, "Islamic art" is not comparable to such concepts as "Christian" or "Buddhist" art, which are normally understood to refer specifically to religious art* (Blair and Bloom, 2003:153) since Islamic art generally encompasses various domains: from congregational mosques to metal and textile works produced by anonymous craftsmen. When speaking about mosque architecture, there is no doubt that this specific topic can be defined as “Islamic art”. However, the challenges of finding a contemporary definition of this specific area of Islamic arts and architecture have been growing. Some of them can be outlined in the following questions:

- What is the relation of “Islamic arts and architecture” to (the generally presumed notion of) “Contemporary arts and architecture”?
- Is there any canon/ principle by which contemporary mosque architecture should be designed and judged?
- How to harmonize the symbolism of vernacular forms with the challenges imposed by living in dominantly non-Islamic societies?

#### ***Contemporary mosque architecture in the frame of contemporary culture***

Trying to answer the question *What Is the Islamic Architecture Anyway* (2012), the Aga Khan Professor and the Director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT, Prof Nasser Rabbat, remarked:

*Questions still abound in academic circles and in the world of practice about whether there is an Islamic architecture or not in the first place. Some of those who doubt the validity of the term raised the following rhetorical challenge: what is Christian about European architecture? And the ready - and correct – the answer is usually, ‘very little, except for the architecture of churches. The parallel conclusion for Islamic architecture thus becomes, ‘Islamic architecture is mosque architecture’.*

Following this challenging conclusion, the very essence of contemporary Islam should be detected in the architecture of contemporary mosques. When Prof Rabbat offered to *change the tense in the first question and ask ‘what was Christian about European architecture?’*, the accepted answer has taken into account an epistemological break that had happened in Christianity first with the Renaissance and especially with the rise of Enlightenment values. While Medieval Christianity had heavily contributed to shaping not only faith and rituals but also various patterns of life in Europe and consequently architectural manifestations and cityscapes, today, just like in the Islamic world, it is not the case anymore. However, to understand and explain the mixed, and perhaps paradoxical, but definitely dynamic character of the cultures of the Islamic world today, as Prof Rabbat suggests, it is necessary to take into account how religion interacts with and modifies the effect of Western, secular

modernism on those cultures and vice versa. The role of the modifier 'Islamic' in framing the term 'Islamic architecture' could be consequently understood as a sign of its contemporary, dynamic character. It is not necessarily the formal or stylistic attributes that Islam produces; it is rather the persistence of religion in defining many aspects of life in the Islamic world which is not a value judgment, as Prof Rabbat pointed out, but rather a historical fact (Rabbat, 2012).

Islam came out of its encounter with modernism changed but not defeated. It has remained a major force not only in dictating the ethics and beliefs of Muslims today, but also in shaping their social relations, their individual behaviour, and their collective imagination, even if its adherents had to adapt to modern means and methods. Religious motives, interpretations, and inhibitions still transpire in the Islamic world in many aspects of modern life. The study of Islamic art and architecture is relatively new; it was invented at the end of the nineteenth century and was of interest primarily to European and American scholars. It seems that artistic expressions were such an integral part of everyday life and religious experiences in the countries with dominantly Islamic culture that *there is no indigenous tradition in any of the Islamic lands of studying Islamic art, with the possible exception of calligraphy, which has enjoyed a special status since the seventh century* (Blair and Bloom, 2003:153). In short, Islamic art in the early twenty-first century is largely a creation of Western culture. This all-embracing view of Islam and Islamic art was a by-product of European interest in delineating the history of religions, in which the multifarious varieties of human spiritual expression were lumped together in a normative notion of a single 'Islam', which could be effectively juxtaposed to equally normative notions of 'Christianity' or 'Judaism'. However, there never was, nor is, a single Islam, and so *any attempt to define the essence of a single Islamic art is doomed to failure* (Blair and Bloom, 2003:153). While emphasizing the necessity to investigate the art of the Muslim diaspora since Muslim populations emigrated in the twentieth century from their traditional homelands to Western Europe and the Americas, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom underlined the complexity of the study of Islamic arts and architecture in the contemporary context (Blair and Bloom, 2003:152).

In the last few decades, Islamic art history *began to open its folds to a burgeoning area of inquiry: the study of contemporary Islamic art; although the juxtaposition of the two terms still carries a paradox* (Rabbat, 2018:1) and the notion of "Islamic arts" has generally been seen as incomparable to the very notion of "contemporaneity". Until at least the 1980s, the chronology of Western architecture, from its presumed Classical origins to its triumphant culmination in modern times, constituted the living core of architectural discourse and relegated the architecture of other cultures to marginal places in its prescribed hierarchy. Furthermore, the authoritative historiography of Western architecture promoted and even required the study of other architectural traditions to be confined within clearly prescribed and exclusive time frames, spaces, and cultures (Rabbat, 2012:12-13). The history of Islamic arts and architecture is usually presented as a separate unit in the history of the Western world and, according to Prof Rabbat, *the relationship with Western architecture is indeed the main problem that Islamic architecture has still to resolve in order to acquire its rightful place as an active and contributive component of world architecture* (Rabbat, 2012:12). The creation of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT in 1979 has been one important step in this ongoing mission. It somehow coincided with the publication of Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism* in 1978, after which students of Islamic architecture *began to question the received methods and conceptual structures of their discipline and to extend their domain of inquiry, reaching back in time to points of convergence between Islamic architecture and the architecture of other cultures, and forward to the modern and contemporary scenes* (Rabbat, 2012:12).

***Contemporary Islamic Centres in Western Europe: how to shape a new paradigm?***

The construction of modern Islamic religious and cultural centers is one of the increasingly present architectural themes in Western Europe. The growing public visibility of Muslims in Western Europe and the United States conditions an increasing fear of and preoccupation with “the other”, often revealing xenophobic and orientalist thinking. Having analyzed these processes for many years, Prof Azra Akšamija<sup>1</sup>, an Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture and the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology, remarked without hesitation:

*What the conflicts over the newly planned mosques in countries such as Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Italy, and the United States have in common is the attitude that it is acceptable to build a new mosque, as long as it does not look like one. (Akšamija, 2009)<sup>2</sup>*

These new Islamic centers belong to different national communities that, in their visual identity and basic design principles, seek to harmonize the recognizable elements of the vernacular cultural and historical heritage with the contemporary context of life and work. *While mosques were once quietly accommodated in old school buildings, factories, or churches, today the construction of new mosques is up-one of the factors literally increasing the visibility of Islam in Dutch (Western European) society*, as stated in the foreword to the study on political, social, and architectural transformations of contemporary mosques.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, the art historian Christian Welzbacher wrote an essay on the architecture of the so-called *Euro-Islam*, in which he pleads for an architectural awakening and advocates a "quality debate about the new form of Islamic architecture in Europe".<sup>4</sup> Welzbacher's interest is above all in current and international construction activities. The headings of the three sections: "Europe and Islam", "Islam in Europe" and "A Euro-Islamic Perspective" reveal an intention to speak about the contemporary understanding of Islam and its integration in the European context. "If", as Welzbacher writes, *"something like Euro-Islam is emerging, a corresponding Euro-Islam architecture must develop with it, which differs in its appearance from previous Islamic traditions"* (Wittmann-Englert, 2010). The author seeks or demands a *"new, independent form of building culture that is reflected in the planning of the new mosques"* (ibid.) - and finds it in the Islamic Centre in Penzberg, a small Bavarian town, not far from Munich. This mosque, designed by the Bosnian architect Alen Jašarević (b.1973) in 2005, is often cited as a good example of contemporary mosque design in which the principles of local and universal are respected. Jašarević was guided by the principle that a mosque must have neither a dome nor a minaret: the only requirement set in the Qur'anic text is that the space must be directed towards Mecca (Photo 1). With this fundamental, minimal requirement, the creative space for experimentation and reflection has become much wider. In an effort to redefine the established and quite exclusive interpretation of mosque architecture in Bosniak communities, in which recycling of the forms from the classical period of Ottoman architecture is generally expected, Jašarević united various elements in his project: from decorations inspired by ornamental motifs of Spanish, southern Italian, and Indian architectures

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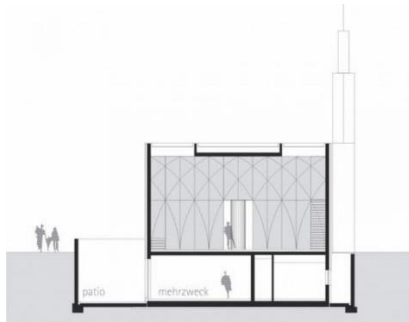
<sup>1</sup> Azra Akšamija is an artist and architectural historian of Bosnian origin. She is the Director of the MIT Future Heritage Lab and an Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture and the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology.

<sup>2</sup> Azra Akšamija (2009), *Echo of Islam in the West: Reactions to the Wearable Mosque*, Arte East, Spring 2009  
<http://arteeast.org/quarterly/echo-of-islam-in-the-west-reactions-to-the-wearable-mosque/>  
(01.02.2021.)

<sup>3</sup> *The Mosque: Political, Architectural and Social transformations* (2009), ed. Ergün Erkoçu and Cihan Bugdaci, NAI Publishers

<sup>4</sup> Christian Welzbacher, (2008), *Euroislam-Architektur. Die neuen Moscheen des Abendlandes*, Amsterdam.

to the elements of the local mining tradition of this Bavarian, subalpine town. The whole concept of the Penzberg mosque design could be summed up in the following words: to design from the centre to the outside space. Through sophisticated lighting of the mosque, with a blue light reflected in the outdoor space, Jašarević wanted to highlight the connection of the Islamic community with its social surroundings (Photo 2).



1. *Islamic Forum Penzberg, section*

2. *Islamic Forum Penzberg*

© Architectuul (<https://architectuul.com/architecture/islamicforum-penzberg>)

The mosque is Islam's most emblematic building and therefore mosque architecture is very important in expressing identity issues. What is recognized as a mosque depends not only on cultural traditions or regional building traditions, but is also based on a certain interpretation of religion in which Islam should model its architectural expression as a living faith. *Can one recognize a building as a mosque without domes or without minarets?* questions Prof Khan, a Distinguished Professor of Architecture and Historic Preservation at Roger Williams University, RI (Khan, 2008:53). The easy use of the familiar — domes and minarets—is more common, as it is in many mosques all over the world, from Indonesia to North America. Is this the only representation of Islam that we are willing to accept in the world we live in today? These (unchangeable) models have already been questioned in contemporary mosque architecture in Turkey, as, for example, in the 1989 project of the eminent Turkish architect Behruz Çinici (1932-2011) for the 1995 Aga Khan awarded Mosque of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara. Udo Kultermann wrote that the oeuvre of Çinici would inevitably have to be found in all modern architecture manuals (Kultermann, 2010:315). The Aga Khan Award Jury found of particular interest *the manner in which elements from traditional mosque architecture have been abstracted and fragmented(...)* as well as *design strategies* (by which), *the mosque acknowledges its secular environment* but brings, through a fully glazed qibla wall, *worshippers closer to nature*.<sup>5</sup>

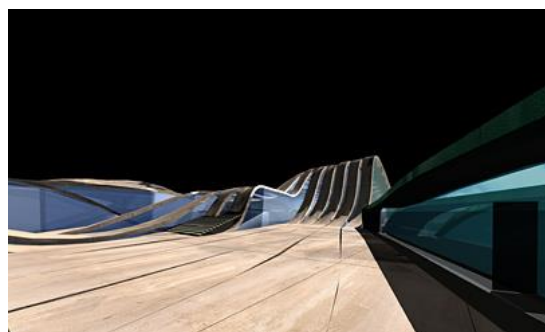
<sup>5</sup> *The mosque is composed of a triangular forecourt, and a rectangular prayer hall overlooking a large, triangular, terraced garden and pool. Of particular interest to the jury was the manner in which elements from traditional mosque architecture have been abstracted and fragmented. Instead of a full courtyard with porticoes, for example, the architects have cut the courtyard in half along a diagonal line connecting the southern and northern corners. Bordering the courtyard porticoes, and taking their place within the structural module, are column bases without shafts or capitals, intended as echoes of traditional sheltered promenades. Other consciously incomplete references to the past include the truncated minaret, and the stepped pyramidal roof in place of the expected dome. The qibla wall opens onto the terraced garden, and this unorthodox arrangement completely transforms the act of prayer. The customary orientation of the qibla wall and mihrab toward Mecca is maintained, but by conceiving these elements in glass, with a landscaped garden*



2. Mosque of the Great National Assembly, Ankara © mosqpedia (<https://mosqpedia.org/en/mosque/298>)

Rare are those architects who manage to inject *fresh thinking into an ultraconservative subfield of design that has not been able to liberate itself from the cube-with-a-dome idiom since the codification of the Ottoman mosque typology by the great architect Sinan at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century*, as Prof Nasser Rabbat defined tendencies in contemporary mosque architecture. As one rare example in the opposite direction, he emphasized Zaha Hadid's entry in the Strasbourg competition (in 2000) which he described as *her most cutting-edge project*. In this entry, as Rabbat explained

*she used her signature fluid forms to wrap the entire complex, comprising a mosque and various spaces for a community center, endowing them with a deep symbolism that translates Islamic sonic rituals into undulating shapes based on the visualization of the actual sound waves of the voice of the mu'adhin chanting the call to prayer (Photo 4). Coupled with these allusions is a metaphoric association with the curvilinear flow of Arabic calligraphy, suggested by the buildings' fluid contours and materialized in actual calligraphic carvings inside. This reference in turn resonates with the wavy curves of the Rhine running nearby, lending the mosque a sense of place. Finally, the rippling concrete strips that define the entire complex alternate with open, glazed slits that drench the whole space inside with natural light, another powerful—and universal—symbol of the divine. It is indicative of the conservatism entrenched in mosque design that Hadid's lyrical submission was not selected. Instead, the competition went to the postmodern Italian architect Paolo Portoghesi, whose project is but a pale rehashing of the magnificent Grand Mosque of Rome, completed in 1995. (Rabbat, 2016)*



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*beyond, worshipers are brought closer to nature. By means of these design strategies, the mosque acknowledges its secular environment while new centre for worship is an important step in the development of a suitable architectural vocabulary for the design of contemporary mosques.*

Source: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Grand National Assembly Mosque, Ankara, ArchNet [https://archnet.org/sites/781/media\\_contents/27684](https://archnet.org/sites/781/media_contents/27684) (22.2.2021.)

4. *Strasbourg Mosque Competition*, 2000. © Zaha Hadid Architects

These Strasbourg entries represent the two paths that contemporary European mosque concepts generally follow: on the one hand, in line with integrative Euro-Islam, European and contemporary in design, on the other hand, traditional and exotic through the importation of foreign forms (Wittmann-Englert, 2010).

When talking about contemporary mosque architecture, Prof Khan reminds us that *it is its symbolism that conveys what the mosque is about*. The importance of mosque architecture lies not only in the forms or architectural language but also in the collective meanings transmitted over time. *Architecture is*, according to Prof Khan, *not about buildings, it is about people*. The dome of a mosque built in the year 2000 in Shanghai, China, is used as a sign of the presence of Islam. It has no relationship whatsoever to the buildings' interior spaces or structure—it merely sits atop the flat roof. The community was conscious that it is needed to proclaim the presence of Islam (Khan, 2008:53). Sometimes, the symbolic capacity and quality of architecture is degraded by poor political compromises. In her studies on the influences of mosque architecture on the creation of a cultural memory<sup>6</sup>, Prof Azra Akšamija mentioned two negative examples of contemporary mosque architecture in Austria - the mosques in Telfs and Bad Vöslau. According to Akšamija, there is often hostility towards foreigners behind the recent discussions about mosque architecture in Austria. In arguments such as: “mosques do not fit into the local environment” there is, in fact, a simple thesis: “we do not want you here”. A similar attitude echoed in the kindly formulated words of the Mayor of Graz, mag. Siegfried Nagl who, at the presentation of the Graz mosque project – *Islamisches Kulturzentrum Graz* (done by the architectural bureau from Graz - GSP Architektur), highly appreciated it as “a modern solution that fits into a Central European city of the 21st century”.<sup>7</sup>

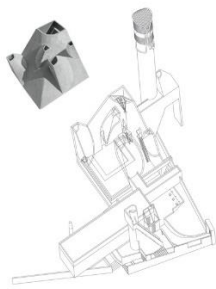
***Islamic Centres for Bosniaks in Western Europe: from Zagreb (1987) to Ljubljana (2019)***

The majority of the recently built mosques for Bosniak communities in Western Europe (in Zagreb, Graz, Rijeka, Ljubljana) are multifunctional centres, including libraries, youth clubs, conference halls, restaurants, sales areas, nursery schools, and multipurpose halls for various cultural and sports events. These centres have consequently gained wider importance in the life of Western European cities. When the Islamic Cultural Centre was opened in Zagreb (1987), it was then the most important and most modern multifunctional Islamic centre in former Yugoslavia, located at the very entrance of Western Europe. Almost simultaneously, an exceptional project of contemporary mosque architecture put Bosnian architecture on the world map: it was the prestigious Aga Khan Award for the project of Sherafudin's (White) Mosque in Visoko by Zlatko Ugljen (Photo: 5, 6, 7).

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<sup>6</sup> Azra Akšamija, "Our Mosques Are Us: Rewriting the National History of Bosnia-Herzegovina through Religious Architecture", PhD Dissertation, 2011, Aga Khan Program, MIT. Her articles on this topic also include essays 'Die Welt als Moschee', in the exhibition catalogue *Kunstmoschee* (Secession Vienna, 2007); 'Generative Design Principles for the Contemporary Mosque' in the book *The Mosque. Political, Architectural and Social Transformations* (NAi Publishers, 2009); and 'Echo of Islam in the West: Reactions to the Wearable Mosque' in *ArteEast Online* (2009).

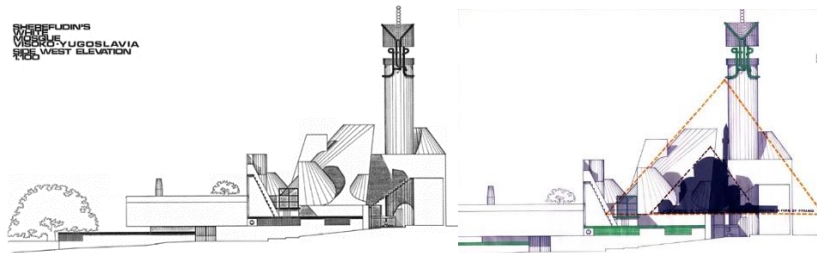
<sup>7</sup> <https://islamgraz.org> (03.02.2021.)



5. *White Mosque in Visoko*  
Courtesy: Ugljen Studio, Sarajevo



6. *White Mosque in Visoko*  
Courtesy: Ugljen Studio, Sarajevo



7. *White Mosque in Visoko*, elevation  
Courtesy: Ugljen Studio, Sarajevo

As it was explained by Aga Khan Award for Architecture jury, in the award cycle 1981-1983:

*The archetypal Bosnian mosque has a simple square plan crowned by a cupola and entered by means of a small porch. The White Mosque's plan conforms to the archetype, but its roof is a freely deformed quarter of a cupola pierced by five skylights, themselves composed of segments of a quarter cupola. The effect is one of confrontation between the elementary plan and the sophisticated hierarchy of roof cones. (...) Commending the mosque for its boldness, creativity, and brilliance“, the jury found it „full of originality and innovation, laden with the architect's thought and spirit, shared richly with the community, and connecting with the future and the past.“<sup>8</sup>*

After Zagreb, other cities with significant Bosniak diaspora, such as Graz (2011), Rijeka (2012), and Ljubljana (2019), have also got modern Islamic centers with interesting architectural projects, ranging from contemporary interpretations of Ottoman tradition (Zagreb) to abstract and minimalistic language (Ljubljana), reflecting in their formal elements the ongoing discussions on “visibility” of Islam in public space. Analyzing formal elements of the *Islamic cultural center in Zagreb*, Prof Khan recognized in the tall pencil-thin minaret, influenced by Ottoman tradition, *a desire to associate oneself with Islam within what was then socialist Yugoslavia* (Khan, 2008:52). The Ottoman influence (the most recognizable of such forms being the minaret and the dome) has been widely adopted because it actually fits well into modern construction technology and it is a pure modern geometric form. The central dome, according to Khan (*ibid.*), has a modernist image and reflects the aspirations of the inhabitants portraying themselves as “modern Muslims”. The narrative of multicultural

<sup>8</sup> Sherefudin's White Mosque, Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Cycle 1981-1983, <https://www.akdn.org/architecture/project/sherefudins-white-mosque> (2.8.2022.)



Yugoslavia with proclaimed values of *brotherhood and unity* certainly needed, in its symbolic architectural language, references to the Ottoman heritage, as a constitutive element of its multi-layered cultural history. The prevailing form of traditional, representative Ottoman-style mosques in Bosnia followed the type of a standard single-unit domed mosque with various typological variations. Many of the most representative ones, such as the Aladža mosque in Foča (1549), had a porch roofed by three small cupolas and one minaret adjoining the central cube (Photo 8).



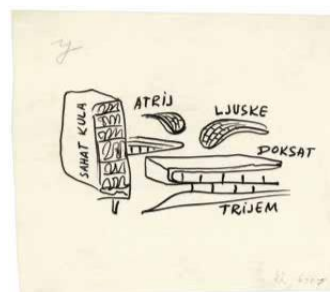
8. Aladža mosque in Foča, old photograph

mosque©The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Word and Picture Vol. 22: Bosnia and Herzegovina. Vienna 1901, p. 421

9. Hugo Charlemont, Interior of Aladža

However, the Zagreb project originally marked an innovative approach in the oeuvre of its first designers, Juraj Neidhardt and Džemal Čelić. Although the design had been chosen as the best and had won the first prize, it was not implemented according to the accepted solution. The competition started in 1969, and over the next 2-3 years, Neidhardt and Čelić created a design project for a center complex, along with a mosque, as recorded by Neidhardt in his conceptual design: “*Analogy: The Play of Sub-Domed Forms of the Past and the Concrete Shells of the Present. The Positive and Negative in Architecture.*”

During this period, Prof Neidhardt placed a greater emphasis on implementing shell-like reinforced concrete structures which are the dominant characteristic of molded architecture (Photo 10). In this project, Neidhardt followed his research in shell-like forms from other, secular compositions, such as his project for the National Assembly in Sarajevo.



10. Islamic Centre with Mosque in Zagreb, scale model vs. National Assembly of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, elements of the composition, 1954.

Courtesy: Neidhardt Archiv, ANUBiH, Sarajevo

According to the suggested form of the conceptual design, the Islamic Centre complex had a relatively low elevation, where the fifth façade is a wide horizontal line, perforated with small ovals and lacking a central spherical form. Years of fund-raising and program-changing followed and, after Juraj Neidhardt's death, Džemal Čelić and the architect Mirza Gološ began implementing an altered project, characterized by opting for the central accents of the complex: the cubes and the minaret on one side and the managerial-administrative block on the other. It significantly reduced the fragmentation of the fifth façade elements, providing the structure with a silhouette quality, now prominent in the city's panorama (Krzović, 2019: 242-243).

*Rijeka Islamic Centre* (2012), built after numerous controversies about its location and the height of the minaret, has more sculptural qualities since it was designed according to the initial project of one of the most gifted Yugoslav sculptors, Dušan Džamonja (1928-2009)/ D.Vlahović and B.Vučinović, co-authors (Photo 11). Although the construction of such centers significantly contributes to the image of these cities as places of coexistence of different cultures and religions with equal democratic freedoms and civil rights, these projects are entirely funded by Islamic communities and their members.



11. The main entrance of the Mosque in Rijeka / Courtesy of Islamic Community in Rijeka

*Islamic Religious and Cultural Centre* in Ljubljana was opened in 2019 and the international architectural competition was evaluated by the public as the most important European architectural competition in 2011. The authors, a pair of Slovenian architects, Bevk and Perović, managed to activate a neglected urban zone in the vicinity of the city center. What was also assessed as a special value of this project is the fact that *it does not repeat historical patterns* but tries to challenge the idea of what it is that makes up the very essence of Islamic sacred space. Bevk Perović's scheme comprises a mosque with facilities for ritual ablutions and a minaret, an educational building, an office, a residential complex, underground parking, a restaurant, and a sports hall. Providing more than simply a place for worship, the design also affords a venue for the local Islamic community to gather and socialize. Developed to cater to the needs of the Muslim community in Slovenia's capital, the huge complex covers approximately 129,167 ft<sup>2</sup> (12,000 m<sup>2</sup>).

The building is characterized by the muted material palette where the white of the façade and the light-colored concrete work in harmony. Terrazzo has been used for the floors and ceramics to create a richly textured space while the wood of the panels and doors form a distinct contrast to the architecture and gives a warm, human character to the project.<sup>9</sup> A distinctive accent comes from its blue dome, colored by IKB (International Klein in Blue) which proves the detailed preparatory studies

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/guilherme-da-rosa-bevk-perovic-islamic-center-ljubljana-10-29-2019/> (11.01.2021.)

of the architectural team (Photo 12). Searching for a color that would most perfectly manifest a state of absolute spirituality, famous French artist Yves Klein designed this color, in cooperation with chemists during the 1950s. It was the result of his long-lasting artistic research and encounter with the world of the East. The dome, as the dominant symbolic and visual accent, hangs suspended within a glass, structurally shaped, cube, like *a hanging textile construction in blue that unobtrusively evokes the memory of the nomadic tradition of the first centuries of Islam, as well as evoking a serjada (prayer rug) extended in the direction of Ka'ba*.<sup>10</sup>



12. *The Blue Dome of the Islamic Cultural and Religious Center in Ljubljana*, Photo: David Schreyer, Courtesy of Bevk Perovic Architects, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Although there are no direct references to the forms of classical Ottoman mosque architecture and the project is “acceptable” for the European context, being described by the Jury as *a mix of the abstract language of contemporary European architecture that reflects the modernistic cubic shape*, there is a subtle reference to the traditional patterns. The net pattern on the façade of the mosque is an allusion to the wooden ornaments found in traditional Bosnian houses (Photo 13, 14), separating the male from the female part of the house, and thus very evocative for Bosniaks who form the majority of the Ljubljana congregation.



13. *The Islamic Cultural and Religious Center in Ljubljana traditional Muslim house*

Photo: David Schreyer,  
Courtesy of: Bevk Perovic Architects, Ljubljana, Slovenia



14. *Wooden partitions on the*

*Begovina, Herzegovina, 19<sup>th</sup> c.*  
Photo: Mirza Hasanefendic

This exceptional project was awarded *The 2020 Plečnik Prize*, the highest recognition for achievements in architecture, landscape architecture, urbanism, and interior design in Slovenia. The jury found the project exceptional in both the national and the European contexts.<sup>11</sup>

*Architecture perceived as a catalyst for change and participation?*

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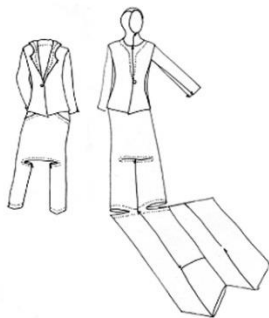
<sup>10</sup> According to Prof Janez Koželj, Jury President for Ljubljana Islamic Centre project.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.total-slovenia-news.com/made-in-slovenia/6483-2020-plecnik-prize-won-by-architects-of-ljubljana-mosque> (01.02.2021.)

The basic elements of a mosque are defined neither in the Qur'anic text nor in the *hadith*. In a way, the prayer rug directed towards Mecca could be understood as the smallest architectural space built and shaped by the believer in the act of praying. It unites and implies all the necessary and fundamental elements of a sacred place: purity, focus, and the idea of communication and communion. A question of mosque architecture in the West is obviously a question of the "visibility" of Muslims in public space. Architectural forms, such as domes and minarets, as recognizable design elements in mosque architecture have gained the power of symbolic markers. But let us try to think about this delicate issue in a new way by asking:

*Can art inspire and empower increasingly alienated Muslim communities? In what ways can an artistic and architectural representation of an Islamic community contribute to better cross-cultural understanding? (Akšamija, 2009)*

These challenging questions have inspired Prof Azra Akšamija over the past several years to develop a series of art projects entitled the "Wearable Mosques": clothes that can be fashioned into minimal prayer spaces. A wearable mosque is a portable religious device through which Akšamija has tried to deconstruct the prevalent image of a Muslim as an alien "other" while the variety of its forms challenged the prevailing monolithic interpretations of Islam. Different site- and person-specific 'individual facades' (*Nomadic Mosque, Dirndlmosque, Survival Mosque...*) represent the specific experiences and needs of the Muslim diaspora living in different geographical, cultural, and political contexts (Photo 15, 16). Akšamija's vestments are endlessly transformable, helping their users shift more fluidly between different identities: secular and sacred; traditional and contemporary; material and spiritual, addressing the complexities of an interwoven global world.



15. *Nomadic Mosque*, 2005.

© Azra Akšamija, MIT

By making this heterogeneity visible, Akšamija wanted to contribute to a more complex debate about Islam in the West, understanding it as a dynamic process, which allows for its own change, in a more active and participatory way (Akšamija, 2009). In 2013, the artist won the prestigious Aga Khan Award for her contributions to a unique Islamic cemetery, the design of which was led by the Austrian architect Bernardo Bader in the picturesque alpine town of Altagh, Austria. For this project, Akšamija designed the interior prayer space — a golden, light-strewn room that combines the woodcraft of the region with Islamic aesthetics to create a serene, natural environment (Photo 17).<sup>12</sup> The cemetery was the result of a nine-year process of mediating between town officials, immigrant



16. *Dirndlmoschee*, 2005.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://news.mit.edu/2014/azra-Akšamija-creating-community-amid-conflict> (11.1.2021.)

communities, and longtime residents and it is a beautiful example of a creative synthesis between vernacular tradition and Islamic aesthetics. These projects, whether on the scale of a building or the body — create the space to imagine the world differently and are essentially hopeful about the role of architecture in building community and dialogue in the midst of conflict.



17. *Islamic Cemetery in Altach*, © Adolf Bereuter

### ***Conclusion remarks***

It has been frequently highlighted during the recent period that the construction of modern Islamic, religious and cultural centers is one of the increasingly present architectural themes in Western Europe. In their visual identity and basic design principles, these centers seek to harmonize the recognizable elements of the vernacular cultural and historical heritages with the environment of contemporary life. In recent years, the permanently growing Bosniak community in various European countries has been confronted with the challenging question of how to harmonize the dominant legacy of the Ottoman tradition in mosque architecture, which dominated the Bosnian landscape of sacred architecture for more than five centuries, with the contemporary context of Western European culture which, as a rule, shows resistance to the visible symbols of Islam in its immediate environment, often revealing xenophobic and orientalist thinking. Already from the end of the 1960s and first projects for *the Zagreb Islamic Cultural Center* and, even more radically, with the Aga Khan awarded project of Zlatko Ugljen for *The White Mosque* in Visoko at the beginnings of the 1980s, it started a dynamic and critical rethinking of the dominant model of traditional Bosnian mosque architecture. It was up-to-then, especially in its most representative forms, defined as a domed, single-unit mosque with a porch roofed by small cupolas and one minaret adjoining the central cube. This analytical research into vernacular architecture and the critical revitalization of traditional building practice, as shown in the projects by Neidhardt and Ugljen, echoed the spirit of the 'vernacularism' which was the most serious of the reactions against Modernism that demanded simple and functional forms. Modernism has been seen by many to promulgate a set of values and premises that fails to respect the cultural identity and historical continuity. These late modernist forms have been recently used in mosque projects for the Bosniak diaspora in Western Europe, such as in Graz (2011) and Ljubljana (2019). However, in some of their elements, they have remained subtle references to the autochtone Bosnian residential architecture, such as the wall pattern of the Ljubljana Islamic Center echoing the wooden partitions on the traditional Bosnian houses and the importance of the private and secluded place. However, to fully understand the dynamic character of the cultures of the Islamic world today, it is necessary to understand the role of the modifier 'Islamic' in framing the term 'Islamic architecture'

more as a sign of its contemporary, dynamic character rather than a formal or stylistic attribute (Rabbat, 2012).

The strength of Islamic architecture has arisen not only from the inherent cultural values of the societies that generated it but also from the fact that Islam has adapted itself to interacting with other cultures as it has spread. Islam came out of its encounter with modernism changed but not defeated. Some of the recent studies of contemporary mosque architecture for Europe, re-examine the very essence of Islamic art as well as of the Islamic, dominantly mosque, architecture. Some of these studies, such as the „Wearable Mosque“ (2005) project by Azra Akšamija seek to deconstruct the prevalent image of a Muslim as an alien “other” and to challenge the prevailing monolithic interpretations of Islam, highlighting the complexity and simultaneity of different identities of its followers in the Western cultural context, reminding us of a role of architecture as a catalyst for change and participation.

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