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*Published in:*  
Social & Cultural Geography

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/14649365.2017.1373144](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1373144)

*Publication date:*  
2019

*Document Version*  
Peer-review version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Simonsen, K., Neergaard, M. D., & Koefoed, L. M. (2019). A Mosque event: the opening of a purpose-built mosque in Copenhagen. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 20 (5), 649-670.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1373144>

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## **A Mosque Event: the Opening of a Purpose-built Mosque in Copenhagen**

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Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the Danish Research Council under the Grant DFF 1327- 00077.

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the opening of a purpose-built mosque in Copenhagen, treating it as a case of cross-cultural encounters in urban public space. The encounters explored, then, take a specific form; they are mediated through the architecture and materiality of the mosque and the symbolic signs and public imaginations attached to it. And they are connected to a specific event – the opening of the mosque. In the first part, a conceptual framework is presented bringing together literature on three notions: encounters, visibility and the event. Following this, the paper explores the opening event, the public debate that surrounding it, the process leading up to it and some reactions in the months that followed. The paper concludes by showing how the opening event expresses several paradoxes. The controversies over the visibility of Islam in public space push stereotypical imaginations and Islamophobic feelings to the extremes. At the same time, however, they bring together different groups in unprecedented ways and create new constellations over political, religious and cultural boundaries.

**Keywords:** Encounter, visibility, event, Islam, public space, mosques

## **Introduction**

Thursday 19 June 2014 the first big purpose-built mosque with a community centre, the *Khayr El-Bareya Mosque* and *Hamad Bin Khalifa Civilisation Centre*, opened in Copenhagen. The event attracted much attention from both written and visual media. In Denmark, like in many other European countries, the building of purpose-built mosques – moving Islam from the private to the public sphere and rendering it visible in urban space – is a contested issue. Many previous attempts have failed. The opening was a three-day event including a reception, inauguration ceremony, opening the mosque, exhibition in the cultural centre, Friday prayer, guided public tours, talks and a bazaar.

The mosque opened in Nørrebro, a neighbourhood located just north of the centre of Copenhagen and housing the most multi-ethnic population in the city. Around 35 per cent of the inhabitants of Nørrebro are either immigrants or the children of immigrants. A significant number have backgrounds in countries with a Muslim majority – such as Turkey, Somalia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan and Syria (Smith, 2011). Smith argues 'understanding the history of Nørrebro adds a fundamental perspective to the discussion of visible and active Muslims' (2011, p. 1221). For more than a century, Nørrebro has been a battleground for identity politics, whether based on ideology, class or culture. Diversity, based on migrant status or social class, has always been part of Nørrebro's identity and the neighbourhood plays a significant role in the intense national debate over multiculturalism and Islam.

This paper analyses the opening event as a case of cross-cultural encounters in the city. It is part of a wider project on *Paradoxical Spaces: Encountering the Other in public space* that explores how the complexity of cultural difference is experienced and practised in different public spaces in Copenhagen. The aim is to understand *how* the Other is encountered and *what* such encounters can tell us about possibilities and limitations for cultural exchange and co-existence in the city. We consider the opening event a good case for our general purpose because it constitutes a transformative moment that can push the question of cross-cultural encounters to extremes. We ask: how is the opening event launched? How is it experienced and what kind of emotions and atmospheres does it elicit? How is the process of building and design passed off? And how has the mosque been received in the surroundings?

After a short presentation of our research methods, the analysis is presented as follows. First, the theoretical framework is developed to set the scene for the presentation of empirical data, the interpretative analysis and an explanatory discussion. It consists of three connected parts: an understanding of embodied and cross-cultural encounters and their mediation through the material and symbolic forms of the mosque; a discussion of the conceptual pair of visibility and invisibility, which is crucial to questions of power relations and identity politics in connection to religion in public space; and finally the development of our understanding of the notion of event. The analytical part also has three sections. The central section directly addresses the opening event; activities and speeches, participation and non-participation, atmospheres and emotions and the encircling public debate. The other two sections frame the opening in different ways: one focuses on negotiations with the authorities framing the planning and building process; the other addresses the

encounters with the surroundings through an analysis of feelings and reactions among visitors and inhabitants in the local neighbourhood. Finally, our conclusion highlights paradoxes in the processes of becoming public and visible, both in relation to processes of identification and to conflicts and contradictions in the reactions from the surroundings.

## **Methodology**

Our research methods included participant observation conducted with inspiration from sensuous ethnography (Pink, 2009), on-the-spot interviews, key-person interviews and a review of the media coverage in national television and major newspapers up until, and after, the event. We carried out the on-the-spot interviews with single persons or small groups during the days of the opening and in visits in the two following months – 35 in all. We also interviewed five key-persons: the mosque's spokeswomen; the mosque's person responsible for the building process; the architect; the interior designer; and the relevant planner within the municipality.

The aim of the empirical work was to obtain multi-faceted information about the different practices, emotions and power relations at play in the encounters of the opening event. The methods were chosen with the purpose of interpreting the encounters as they take place in their immediate temporal-spatial settings. Our own position in relation to Islam is one of informed strangers. We have worked with Muslims in former projects, but none of us have a personal affiliation to the religion. As such, we, in the words of Schuetz, are strangers performing as a 'visitor or guest who intends to establish a merely transitory contact with the group' (1944, p. 499).

As part of the participant observation, photographing and recording of short videos were conducted. Photography served as ‘visual note-taking’ (Pink, 2007; Dant, 2004) and helped register the general scenery, gestures and bodily interactions. Another aspect of the observations was the use of a voice recorder; recording on-the-spot interviews and making small ‘soundscapes’ of voices, traffic noises, and ambient music. The soundscapes were particularly interesting during the opening of the mosque and at the beginning of the first Friday Prayer.

In practice, combining participant observation and interviews proved difficult. It is difficult to be both immersed in a situation and simultaneously keep track of the general development of the event. As there were always at least two researchers present, sometimes we divided up the roles. Or we divided the day, allowing ourselves complete immersion in some periods and conducting on-the-spot interviews in other ones.

### **Theoretical framework**

In the following, we present the theoretical considerations framing the construction of the empirical data as well as the interpretative analysis. We discuss in turn the primacy of encounters, the question of visibility, and the concept of the event.

#### ***The primacy of encounters***

The theoretical starting point is a practice-based understanding of social life giving ontological priority to interrelations or encounters (Simonsen, 2015). Among others, this takes inspiration from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the lived body, emphasizing the interrelational structure of our embodied existence. The constitution

of others, he 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. When we here talk about (cross-cultural) *encounters*, however, we add to this idea of interrelation. The term suggests meetings with two characteristics: surprise and time-space (Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Ahmed, 2000). It involves surprise (and maybe conflict) because of its inevitable content of similarity and difference, inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion that constitutes the boundaries of bodies or communities. Cross-cultural encounters, then, are not about different pre-existent ‘cultures’ meeting each other. On the contrary, difference is produced in the encounters.

At one level, encounters therefore refer to face-to-face meetings as we experience them in everyday life. They are, however, also temporal and spatial through historical-geographical mediation. They presuppose other encounters of facing, other bodies, other spaces and other times. In this way, they reopen prior histories of encounter and geo-political imaginations of the Other and incorporate them in the encounters as traces of broader social relationships. Encounters between embodied subjects always dwell between the domain of the particular and that of the general, with the encounter framed by broader relationships of power and antagonism. As such, this understanding of encounters adds to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of the social body as a body opening up and intertwining with the world (other bodies and materialities) by accentuating that this is not a general but rather a differentiated world, and in such a world what is meant by the social body is more often than not



‘precisely the effect of being with some others over other others’ (Ahmed, 2000, p. 49).

Hence the constitution of Others involves *spatial negotiations* over mobility and home, (imagined) communities, boundaries and bridges. ‘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. Part of that process is the experience of being exposed to oppressive visions or emotions. 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.

Encounters, then, are deeply charged with emotions. The ‘strange encounter’ (Ahmed, 2000) is played out *on* the body, and it is played out *with* emotions. As a basis for interpretation, we suggest a phenomenologically inspired understanding of emotion starting from Heidegger’s ideas of *moods* (Heidegger, 1962; Guignon, 2003). Moods or our Being-attuned are, according to Heidegger, basic human attributes, but they are not inner physical and psychic states. We should rather see them as attunements – contextual significances of the world, associated with practices, lifemode and social situation. The same ideas of situatedness and the collapse of the distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ we find, in a much more embodied form, in Merleau-Ponty’s visions on emotion. As a first approximation, we can condense his view as *situated corporeal attitudes*, understood as ways of acting in relation to the world (Crossley

1996). This account gives occasion for a double conception of emotional spatiality (Simonsen, 2007, 2010). One side of emotions is an *expressive space* of the body's movements, which should be seen as a performative element of emotion. Emotions are something practised and as such connected to the expressive and communicative body. The other side of emotional spatiality is *affective space*, which is the space in which we are emotionally in touch – open to the world and its 'affect' on us. This means that emotions are not just active bodily actions, something our bodies express or articulate – another aspect is how we are possessed by them or swept into their grasp. It is the *felt* sense of having been moved emotionally, the more passive side of emotional experience. This active-passive doubleness of emotions is what we shall see played out in the concrete encounters analysed below.

In this sense, the paper inscribes itself into an emerging literature on 'geographies of encounters' (e.g. Amin, 2002; Leitner, 2012; Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2016). The encounters explored in this paper take a specific form; they are mediated through the materiality, the architecture and the symbolic signs attached to the mosque. They involve social bodies sensing and intertwining with the world (and its materialities) in a way that belongs neither to subject nor to object but produces attunements and emotions in their interspace. The mosques as material and symbolic forms become an interface among citizens of different confessions or secularities. It is about the affective power of these religious buildings and their capacity to inspire feelings ranging from emotional security and sanctuary among congregations, to insecurity, anxiety or hostility among opponents. Former analyses have shown how these feelings can be connected to the location of the mosque – whether it is located in the centre of the city or the outskirts, in residential areas or abandoned manufacturing

areas (Gale, 2005; Galambert, 2005; Göle, 2011). Galambert asserts that one of the preconditions for enhanced visibility of Islam is spatial marginalisation. Another contested issue is the architectural style of the buildings, often seen as exotic elements in the urban profile, in particular when it comes to religious design elements of domes and minarets (Gale, 2005; Gale & Naylor, 2002; Hatziprokapiou & Evergeti, 2014; Naylor & Ryan, 2002). An iconic example is the Swiss referendum on minarets in 2009 (Göle, 2011).

### ***Visibility and invisibility***

These symbolic conflicts draw the attention to the question of visibility. As a start, Brighenti (2007) identifies recognition and control as the two most important social outcomes of visibility. At the same time he underlines their oppositional character, referring to the ambivalences of visibility and its effects. Here, we will emphasize the aspect of recognition, basically following Honneth (1995) in his suggestion that intersubjective recognition is a necessary condition for intact identity-formation.

Linda Alcoff (2006) provides a useful take on the relationship between visibility and identity. She explores race and gender as visible identities and 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, she argues, 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 on how the system of marking works in a given culture' (2006, p. 102).

Such markings have successfully been explored in discussions of *whiteness* (e.g. Dyer, 1997; Ahmed, 2004, 2006; Shaw, 2007, and in the Nordic context Loftsdottir & Jensen, 2012) that emphasise 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 it possible to talk about 'white spaces', in the sense that spaces are orientated around whiteness through the repetition of acts, allowing the passing of some bodies and not others (Ahmed, 2006). And yet, non-white bodies do inhabit white spaces. However, 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'. In practice, however, the social relations of (in)visibility are more complex. (Leinonen & Toivanen, 2014). Brighenti (2007) characterises visibility as a double-edged sword – it can be empowering as well as disempowering. There is a built-in *ambivalence* in the notion of (in)visibility, in particular when it refers to issues of identity and recognition. The term hypervisibility, for example, represents visibility as an undesirable condition imposing cultural and racial stereotypes on minority groups. But it can also be part of a 'politics of identity' claiming recognition in public space through visible manifestations of difference. Similarly, invisibility can relate to the powerlessness of the overlooked as well as to the possibility of passing or even the strategic performance of successful integration (Juul, 2014).

Now, racial identity as well as race and racism are contested terms in European/Danish contexts (e.g. Goldberg, 2009; Bech & Necef, 2012; Rabo & Andreassen, 2014; Leinonen & Toivanen, 2014). Goldberg (2009) has convincingly argued that the Holocaust has rendered the notion of race unspeakable and invisible and that the notion is now ‘buried alive’ (2009, p. 157). However, racism is not simply a matter of biology and skin colour, it is also cultural. Race has always involved sets of views and predispositions concerning culture, or culture tied to colour. Racial significance can for instance exist implicitly in terms such as ‘ethnicity’, ‘immigrant’ or ‘refugee’ – all implicitly associated with ‘non-white bodies’ and ‘non-Western origins’. Such a signification is exactly what appears in the current imagination of ‘the figure of the Muslim’. In dominant European imaginations Islam represents a collection of lacks: of freedom; of civility and manners; of love of life; and of equal respect for women and gay people. ‘The Muslim’ is seen as a threat that foments 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 and, not least, female headscarves (Al-Saji, 2010). In particular the headscarf or *hijab* is a contested item of material culture, and it contains many of the ambivalences of questions of (in)visibility – from being an instrument of invisibility in Islamic societies to becoming politicised as a signifier in a meta-discourse of nationalised liberalism versus Muslim illiberalism in European societies (Lentin & Titley, 2011; Andreassen & Lettinga, 2011) and, conversely, a visible marker of identity politics or even anti-imperialist struggle (Bilge, 2010, cf. Fanon, 1965).

Such ambivalences are also involved when it comes to the physical and symbolic *materiality* of the mosques. This is what our analysis of the opening event explores: a transition mediated through materialisation in architectural form that transforms Copenhagen Muslims from invisible migrant-workers into visible Muslim citizens.

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)

Such material transformations have happened all over Europe, much later in Denmark than many other European countries. Until the opening event in question, mosques have mostly been discreet and indistinguishable. In this sense, strategies of invisibility, as much as visibility, have been working among Muslims. Nevertheless, architectural form is important. Purpose-built mosques with domes and minarets represent the imprint of Islamic cultural heritage. The dome and the minaret have become a ‘structural metonym’ of Muslim identity. It is, however, these very visible elements that have also generated conflicts in many places (*Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2005), in particular if the audibility of the Call to Prayer from the minarets is added to the situation (Gale, 2005; Göle, 2011).

#### *The conception of the event*

Since the object of our case is the transitional event of opening of a purpose-built mosque, an understanding of the event is needed. One place to start that effort is existential phenomenology and subsequent theories of practice (Schatzki, 2002, 2007; Jackson & Everts, 2010; Kirkeby, 2013). For example, Heidegger called on the concept of the event to mark the shift of attention from ‘being’ as the being of entities,

to 'being' as the clearing or unconcealedness of modes of being. Whereas entities *are*, the unconcealedness *happens*. The notion of *Wesen* is transformed from essence to happening. In this sense, there is a close connection between practice and events:

Doings are a subset of the general category of events. Whereas events are units of occurrence, doings are incidences of accomplishment or carrying out. (Schatzki, 2002, p. 191)

More recently, what has been announced as a 'return of the event' (Bassett, 2008) draws on, amongst others, the works of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou. Even if their conceptualisations are, in many ways, different both among themselves and from practice theory, we argue that both of them can, in a pragmatic way, add to the construction of a useful understanding of the event.

Deleuze connects events to philosophical concepts and talks about 'pure events' as 'incorporeal entities which subsist over and above their spatio-temporal manifestations' (Patton, 1996, p. 320). They are at work in the present but point towards a different future. He follows Whitehead's process philosophy in the identification of four components of the event (Deleuze, 1993). It is (1) 'extensive' in the sense that it expands over time and space: it is a connection of whole-parts that forms an infinite series which are unlimited in time and space. It is (2) 'intensive' because it has intrinsic properties (e.g. height, timbre, tint, value) which are drawn together into intense conjunctions. It is (3) 'individual' or rather individuating in the form of creativity, the formation of something new; and it is a subjective form. Finally, the event involves (4) 'eternal objects or ingressions'; qualities, figures or things that enter into the event and gain permanence, but only within the limits of the

flux that creates them. Generally speaking, events are fluvia or becomings to Deleuze; they are pure abstractions that in history are effectuated in states of affairs or people's lived experience.

Badiou takes a more material stand towards the event; to him, 'an event is something that brings to light a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable' (Badiou, 2013b, p. 9). Despite affinities to both Marx and Heidegger, Badiou insists on organising materialism on the basis of mathematics. His central work, *Being and Event* (2013a/orig. 1988), starts from two fundamental propositions. The first is that 'mathematics is ontology'. From that thesis he develops a 'meta-ontology' using mathematical set-theory and mathematical axioms to argue for being as infinite multiplicities. The second proposition is that 'the new happens in being under the name of the event'. Events, then, happen in certain times and places and, unlike the minor contingencies of everyday life, they rupture with the established order of things. Badiou thus argues for an 'absolute contingency', in this way challenging the historicism and determinism of Marxism. This idea of rupture and absolute novelty has led to criticism of Badiou's conception of the event as mysticism (Osborn, 2007), though others argue this problem is partially remedied by a later phenomenological twist (Bassett, 2008; Wright, 2008; Shaw, 2010 a, b) making him include a situation or 'world'. The event is situated, always relative to a situation. It cannot change everything, only disrupt local situations. The event is something that happens which is not a thing or an element of the present situation; it is something that is capable of disrupting the situation – a sudden irruption within the state of affairs of the present. Humans assume the event and find themselves changed because of it; they become 'subjects' of the event or 'incorporated' within it.



In principle, these two authors present us with post-humanist ontologies that abstract practices into planes and fluxes, or mathematical axioms and procedures, respectively. But they also pursue possibilities based on (admittedly rather opposing) philosophies of immanence and transcendence. Furthermore, they both – in their more ontic unfolding of the concept – provide aspects of the event that we find useful for our purpose and consider compatible with our practice thinking. It is from these ontic unfoldings that we seek to translate the philosophical discussion to more social and practical elements.

From here, we identify four significant aspects of the event:

- Badiou's idea of *break/transformation* – a break with everyday life that is changing the established order of things – is important to our case. The opening of the mosque initiates a new symbolic order of urban space. The transformation from invisibility to visibility of Islamic signs and symbols in public spaces has become a major source of cultural dissonance and political dispute (see e.g. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 2005; *Social and Cultural Geography* 2014).
- The *intensity* of the event (Deleuze) is another significant aspect – in our case it appeared in the performance of the opening where intrinsic properties such as people, sounds, lights, architecture, atmosphere, moods and emotions are drawn together into intense conjunction.
- Another issue is the *subjectification* (both authors) and the affective forces of the event. It is about the (positive or negative) emotional registers emerging out of the mosque event, but also about the politics of identity and citizenship

involved in it, since ‘citizenship is not prior to public appearance but one becomes a citizen as one makes oneself visible to others’ (Göle, 2011, p. 390)

- *Finally* there is the question of *context*, situation or eventual site as Badiou talks about (Badiou, 2013a,b; Shaw, 2010a,b). The mosque event relates both to the situation of religious and secular knowledge-power relations in Danish society and to the local particularities of the Copenhagen neighbourhood in which it is occurring.

(Picture here: The *Khayr El-Bareya Mosque* and *Hamad Bin Khalifa Civilisation Centre*)

### **The opening event**

The opening event should be seen in the *context* of the general atmosphere surrounding Islam in Denmark. The presence of Islam in Denmark is primarily related to three phases of Muslim immigration, in turn a function of Danish need for labour power and the result of political disturbances in predominantly Muslim countries (Brun & Hersh, 2008). The first influx in the late 1960s and early 1970s was ‘guest workers’ coming from Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco and Yugoslavia invited by Danish companies. This ended in the late 1970s with increasing unemployment. The second wave occurred in the 1980s, with political refugees coming predominantly from Iran, Iraq and Palestine. A third wave of political refugees arrived in the 1990s mainly from Somalia and Bosnia. Today we should add a new group of asylum seekers predominantly from Syria. The category of asylum seekers accounts for about 40 percent of the Danish Muslim population including the reunification of families and marriages. Politically, the climate around refugees and immigrants since the 1990s

has gradually deteriorated, assisted by the Danish People's Party taking advantage of a latent xenophobia in the Danish population. In the aftermath of the Cartoon Crisis in 2005 (see e.g. Eide, Kunelius & Philips, 2008; Hervik, 2012), the Danish social landscape has evolved into one of those most hostile to Muslim immigrants.

In the analysis we use the concept of event on different levels of abstraction according to the different aspects identified above, referring to both the general transformations in the urban order and the more specific elements of intensity, subjectification and contextualisation. The opening consisted of a three-day festival, including the opening ceremony, Friday Prayer and a range of cultural activities. The major happening, however, is the first day's activities, including the official inauguration.

### ***Participation and non-participation***

The event in effect commenced the previous evening, through the media. The main headline was 'The official Denmark opts out', highlighting the absence of the Royal Family (TV showed two chairs made especially for them that were never used) and that of the Government and party leaders. Already in February, the Prime Minister announced that, if she were invited, she had no plans to turn up. If the Prime Minister rejects the invitation, the Royal Family will also not appear. The grounds for the absence of other leading politicians varied, but all their excuses were connected to what we earlier called 'the figure of the Muslim' and the perception of Islam as a threat. The most dominant voices of opposition came in reaction to a big sponsorship deal with the mosque (from Qatari Emirates) and a newspaper interview where a mosque spokesman described homosexuality as *haram*, forbidden, and as an illness. The Minister of Integration could not find room in his diary, and a left-wing party

leader would not attend because she was ‘not religious’ The Chief Burgomeister of Copenhagen also referred to a busy diary, but he compromised by sending the Mayor for Social Affairs who is also Social Democrat. A few politicians – interestingly from parties of different political orientation – argued differently, expressing that if you want dialogue with Danish Muslims, you have to turn up and engage. In the end, two politicians participated, one from the Christian Democrats, the other from the Socialist People’s Party. The latter made her opinions clear by wearing a LGBT rainbow badge during the event. From the municipality only three out of eight mayors turned up. So, the political elite were sparsely represented, as were the leaders of trendsetting media. In this sense, the dominant secular power regime in Danish society managed to put its mark on the event.

Within the ecclesiastical establishment, however, the strategy appeared different, leaving the impression that religious communions recognise each other’s existence. The Bishop of Copenhagen was represented, and the local vicars were there to congratulate their Muslim brethren. The leader of the Catholic Church was there as well as the leaders of the Shia Muslim community. In this sense the mosque’s desire for dialogue between different religious communities was successfully realised.

The question of participation or non-participation, then, reveals contradictions in the will to dialogue between the political and the clerical establishment, between national and local politics and inside political parties.

### ***The opening ceremony: representation, emotion and subjectification***

During the opening ceremony, the mosque was symbolically ‘dressed’ for the event. There was a festive atmosphere and a red carpet led up the stairs to the terrace connecting the mosque with the affiliated Cultural Centre. On either side of the entrance was an elevated flowerbed representing the Danish and Qatari flag. An affective space of excitement, pride and, most of all, joy, was created. The participants were radiant with expectancy and everybody acted openly and obligingly. A large group of women dressed in black dresses and bordeaux coloured scarves, who met new arrivals with a smile, particularly contributed to the good mood. Not even the presence of a large number of security guards and police could spoil the warm atmosphere. Eventually, the official guests arrived, followed by two buses carrying the Qatari delegation. For this occasion, prominent representatives of the mosque and a group of the helping women were lined up along the stairs.

After an opening reception on the terrace, the inauguration ceremony took place in the cultural centre. Following a recitation from the Quran there were several speakers. The chairman of the Danish Islamic Council emphasised that the centre was open to everybody, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and was part of an international chain of similar centres in cities around the world. He thanked the municipality of Copenhagen and the Qatari Emir, while emphasizing that the centre is Danish, and based on Danish values of freedom. The Qatari Minister for Religious Affairs emphasised similar issues with his focus on ‘bridges between civilisations’. He also indirectly addressed the contested question of donations and foreign influence by stating that their involvement was ‘in order to fulfil a wish from Danish Muslims’. In this way, these speakers tried to defuse, rather than evade, points of critique. Another important speech was given by a representative of the Bishop of

Copenhagen. He expressed his delight with the new mosque, saying ‘It is obviously inspired by Nordic architecture and gives it new beautiful expression. It unites the Nordic with the traditional Islamic’. In this way, he touched on the visibility and the importance of architectural form. The official inauguration closed with a film called ‘40 Years Dream’ illustrating the long route travelled towards the opening of Copenhagen’s first big purpose-built mosque – then leading to the reveal of the mosque itself.

Let us illustrate that experience by an extract from our field notes:

After the first part of the ceremony everybody is invited into the mosque. I do not know what is most overwhelming, to go in there or to feel the seriousness and admiration by which the Muslim participants go inside, maybe mostly the latter. Focus is on the Qatari group. They sit down under the dome in the middle of the room. The rest of us take our places in a ring around them. Suddenly a light show starts in the dome. It is completely wild: several colours, formations, projections... After the show daylight is slowly let into the room through small windows in the dome whereupon automatic blinds are drawn to the big windows of the facade. The ornamentation of walls and ceiling appear. The panels are cut in wood and the rest of the walls are cast in plaster. It is spectacular. The floor is covered by thick, red carpet with broad stripes of golden vine ... The decorations of walls and ceiling manifest themselves with cultural and historical references. (Field notes, June 19th, 2014)

The experience of the day underlines the strong emotions and *intensity* of the event. It shows how intrinsic elements such as participating body-subjects, speeches, sounds, lights, architecture, decorations and (religious) emotions are drawn together into an

intense conjunction. The participants, Muslims and non-Muslims, are (bodily and spiritually) affected by this conjunction of bodies, materialities and expressive emotions. We have several times used the notion *atmosphere*. Gernot Böhme defines atmosphere as ‘the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived’ (1995, p. 34). It is about how specific contexts or material forms can put us in a particular mood by influencing our senses and feelings. The atmosphere is located neither in the subject nor the object but in the interspace or interaction between them. It obviously makes sense to grasp the atmospheres perceived throughout the ceremony through this concept even if we have to give it a twist. While Böhme and his geographical followers (Anderson, 2009) predominantly connect the concept to material elements, in our case it equally involves the human bodies, their interconnections and their emotions.

The same could be said about the first Friday Prayer in the mosque. People were extremely expectant and the rooms became crowded to bursting point. Two of us participated in the women’s section. It is located like a shelf under the roof of the mosque with a balustrade against the main part. The room became very hot, but the women told that it was spacious compared to what they used to have. The atmosphere was happy and expectant, the women sat on the floor and children were running amongst us. The sermon was delivered in Arabic by an imam from Jordan. Midway, a young woman asked us if we needed translation, and provided a careful simultaneous translation for the rest of the sermon. The sermon focused on charity and on the duty to follow both the precepts of one’s religion and rules and laws in the country in which one lives, in this way continuing the themes from the previous day.

Another important issue is the processes of *subjectification*. Theoretically, we have pointed out how visibility is important for both politics of recognition and the public perception of Islamic difference. The same could be said when it comes to personal emotions and subject formation. In the on-the-spot interviews performed during the ceremony, participants generally expressed feelings of joy and happiness. Journalists also reported strong emotions – among them: ‘it is really great to come to a place where you feel at home’ and: ‘I can better feel at home and call myself a Danish Muslim’ (Trads, June 21-22, 2014). This demonstrates the close ties between the visibility of Islamic markers in public and personal identity and citizenship. One becomes a citizen as one makes oneself visible to others (Göle, 2011). However, another interesting comment came in the conversation with some young women in the crowd who told us they were most likely to use the fitness-room in the community centre. This illustrates what Es (2016) describes as the creative tension between the sacred and the secular, everyday use of the mosque.

In this framework it is also interesting to consider the role of the women in the mosque. In one of the most cited books on mosques in Denmark (Kühle, 2006), the women are assigned very few roles in the mosque environments. Apparently this is not case in *Hamad Bin Khalifa Civilisation Centre*. We have already seen the significant role of women in the opening ceremony, and in later visits for Friday Prayers the picture was the same. Even if the sermon concerned women’s duties in marriage, they also arranged debates, for example, on ‘The Muslim woman in Europe – reality/challenges’. And when, just before the opening ceremony, the then spokesman created a media storm due to his unfortunate opinion on homosexuality, it was a woman who replaced him. But it is not a position without ambivalences. When



we, for example, in our interview with the new spokeswoman, referred to the ongoing discussion on the possibility of female imams, it was a boundary she did not want to transcend.

### ***Encountering the media***

The opening of the mosque was followed closely by leading Danish newspapers, TV and radio broadcasts, and was met with heated debate around this new visibility of Islam. We can divide the debate into three main perspectives: the symbolic, security and fear, and gender and sexuality.

The new mosque is a symbol of freedom of religion... It is worth celebrating. It makes a difference that we have room for a mosque in our city. (Cekic, June 20, 2014)

Everyone has the right to practice their religion in Denmark. The problem arises if there are hidden ideologies behind the neat exterior. (Kadher, June 21, 2014)

There are good reasons for congratulating the Danish Muslims with the new mosque with both minaret and dome. It is not only good for Danish Muslims but also for the Danish broadmindedness, freedom of religion and pluralism. But the joy is tempered by disappointment that no private donations have been granted in Denmark. Instead it is financed from Qatar ... Many fears that the orthodox and conservative interpretation of Islam in Qatar will cast shadows all the way to Røvsinggade. (Stormoské, June 20, 2014)

One framing of the public debate concerns the *symbolic* content of what can be accepted in public space. The mosque here serves as a religious symbol for something

else; it is not about the mosque in itself, but about the significance and interpretation of it. In this case the appearance of the mosque is interpreted as a symbol of ‘our’ values: freedom of religion, democracy and openness. It is worth celebrating, as Özlem Cekic from the Socialist People’s Party says. The logic is that a moderate secular state such as Denmark should accept the visible presence of Islamic religious symbols in public space (Lægaard, 2010). But it is a special kind of acceptance, not respect or recognition but rather *tolerance* with the negative connotations this word has. An editorial from the newspaper *Politiken* (considered culturally progressive), under the headline ‘the Mosque is welcome without Qatar’, represents the donation from Qatar as something that ‘we’ should fear because it can potentially affect the orientation of the Mosque. Thereby the debate becomes characterized by reservations, anxiety and uncertainty and dominated by statements like: ‘Is there something hidden inside the Mosque’. The mosque symbolizes ‘them’ – in sharp contrast to ‘us’ – lacking ‘our’ values such as freedom, tolerance and openness. The symbolic framing of the public debate thus slides into stereotypical us-them binaries that essentialize the difference between ‘Danishness’ and Islam:

Mosques are unavoidable in a democratic society but dangerous. It has to be closely monitored ‘that nothing is taught or done that is against good morals or public order’, as the Danish constitution prescribes. Because Danish culture is incompatible with Islam and Islam is incompatible with Danish culture. (Hvorslev, June 11, 2015)

While the symbolic debate is preoccupied with discussions on secularism, values and culture, the *security* issue is mainly concerned with the mosque as a place for radicalization and potential terror. The security issue was prominent in the debate, and construed the mosque as a dangerous place, outside the boundaries of civilization and

a threat to Danish society. An editorial in the conservative newspaper *Jyllandsposten* linked the mosque to the war in Syria and Islamic fundamentalism, saying:

it is a regrettable but inescapable factum that Muslim worship places have been and are reasonably believed to be recruiting centres for Islamist radicalism, which among other things has led young people to take part in the so-called holy war in Syria. It also moderates the enthusiasm that the Danish Islamic Council is believed to have close links to the strongly conservative Muslim Brotherhood. (Dæmpet velkomst, June 19, 2014)

The construction of the mosque as a site of terror and war followed a predictable script. It immediately puts imaginative geography to work, constructing the mosque as something invading Danish territory and relating to a geopolitical logic of *everywhere war* (Gregory, 2011). The mosque not only brings Islam into the cityscape but also the war on terror. It is an imagined threat to society, linked to recruitment for Islamic radicalism, terror and violence. The mosque was not only linked geographically to Qatar but also to Palestine and Syria, inhabited by dangerous figures like Hamas and ISIS. Similar negative comments came from a central MP from a (neo)liberal party; ‘I hope that PET [Security Intelligence Service] will keep an eye on them’ she said to *Jyllandsposten* (Johansen, June 15, 2015).

(Figure here: Satirical drawing of the *Khayr El-Bareya Mosque*)

The debate was condensed in a satirical drawing of the mosque as inhabited by warmongering Arabs. In the image, a sign on the mosque directs us to the ‘caliphate’, and a trashcan is inscribed ‘for gay and lesbian infidels’. The drawing provoked

critical responses on Berlingske Internet Media, such as ‘really tasteless – have we not learned from the Mohammad crisis?’, as well as opposite comments like ‘great to see that Berlingske has courage and fighting spirit’. We earlier referred to how the ‘figure of the Muslim’ in the dominant European imagination represents a collection of lacks: of freedom, civility and equal respect for women and gay people (Goldberg, 2009). Here, it is visualised and racialized in a satirical way, connecting it to militancy and terrorism.

Another aspect of the cartoon is *gender and sexuality*, the third important framing in the public debate. The issue of gender was mostly discussed in relation to the physical separation of men and women in the mosque. The mosque and its material and architectural design were taken to stand for female oppression and traditional views on gender that are impossible to ‘modernize’. In this way, gender equality was represented as something *we* have and *they* do not, ‘they’ being Muslim believers deeply embedded in their backward culture.

Sexuality also became a central issue in the debate when the former spokesman for the mosque criticised homosexuality. The interview immediately created reactions:

It is extremely worrying that we have a new mosque that openly tells us that they hate homosexuals. It is not at all compatible with the values we have in Denmark where we have the freedom of sexual orientation (Johansen, June 18, 2014).

In the ensuing debate, some drew attention to the fact that Danish priests, and even members of Parliament, also make homophobic comments, culminating in a Danish People’s Party MP saying ‘what’s next? That we can marry a dog?’ These

controversial and degrading opinions among politicians and priests in the Danish national church could not, however, overshadow the media representation of Islamic homophobia as a special case, proving something suspicious about ‘them’.

Generally, the public debate was heated and showed how Islamophobia has a strong hold on the public consciousness in Denmark. In the national context, it intersects with, and is strengthened by, ‘welfare nationalism’, which is an egalitarian-liberal nationalism tied to the welfare state and based on solidarity, understood in terms of cultural homogeneity (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2007, Koefoed, 2015).

### **Planning process and negotiations**

Encounters with local authorities, in particular negotiations with the municipality during planning and building process, frame the appearance of the mosque. This process shows how the organisation behind the mosque negotiates its visibility through the material and symbolic form of the mosque. Such planning processes have been explored in many other European countries (e.g. Naylor & Ryan, 2002; *Journal of Ethnic and migration studies*, 2005). They have given rise to a number of social, religious and political conflicts as well as legislative, architectural and planning regulations. In Copenhagen, several former projects have failed because of such conflicts. Seen in this context, the planning process of the *Hamad Bin Khalifa Civilisation Centre* has been relatively unproblematic, even if the organization behind the mosque tells about previous failed attempts.

Through our key person interviews, we can identify three possible explanations for this relative smoothness. First of all, the development of the community centre was

enabled by the existing building regulations of the area (the local plan), in this way avoiding a public hearing. The community centre is a redevelopment of two existing industrial buildings, primarily by adding one-and-a-half extra floors and making a combined staircase and terrace connecting the two. The redevelopment has a dome-roof, the height of which was kept within existing regulations. The moderate architecture of the community centre was an expressed wish of the developer, in this way materializing the ambivalence between visibility and invisibility (for a similar strategy see Naylor & Ryan, 2002). Their idea was that the architecture should reflect the combination of Islamic and Nordic cultures. As it stands, the community centre has modest, white facades signalling familiarity with Nordic minimalism. In contrast, the interior of the mosque has ornamentation and coloured walls, carpets and furniture that affiliates with Islamic traditions.

The second reason for the relatively unproblematic realization of the community centre is that the municipality has had a positive attitude towards the project. The left wing and social democratic political majority was interested in promoting possibilities for purpose-built mosques in Copenhagen, and the planning authorities entered the process with a helpful attitude. This partially happened in tension with national politicians and authorities, in this way (like in other European countries) unearthing complex relationships and conflicts between the local and the national levels (Landman & Wessels, 2005; Saint-Blancat & Schmidt di Friedberg, 2005; Hatziprokopiou & Evergiti, 2014). The spokeswoman of the centre expressed frustrations over the number of permissions required during the building process. However, and thirdly, that was partly counteracted by the fact that the architects played a key role in the negotiations between the developer and the municipality. The

architecture firm is small but experienced within the cultural and political debate, and it is also involved in the planning of a purpose-built mosque in Århus (the second largest city in Denmark).

However, problems arose when it came to the minaret. It deviated from the existing local plan regarding height (about 8 metres) and its potential function of calling the congregation to prayer. The public hearing gave rise to a great number of objections from all over the country. As seen elsewhere (see for instance Gale, 2005; Göle, 2011) the potential audibility of the minaret's speakers calling the congregation to prayer was a central point of objection. Another objection – unconnected to the minaret – was that the community centre would cause increased crime in the area. Other Muslim groups expressed fear that the minaret could be used for surveillance. The hearing resulted in a compromise that the minaret would be built, but remain silent. The municipality handled the objections of crime by dismissing them as a matter for the police and not building legislation.

Summing up, the process and negotiations have, by and large, taken place without significant attention or debate. The objections revolving around the public hearing of the minaret – like crime, noise and traffic – were a substitute for more direct attacks (similar to other European cities (e.g. Gale, 2005). In the present case, however, the involved parties have been able to negotiate and find a mutual stepping-stone.

### **Encountering the surroundings**

Through on-the-spot interviews with visitors and neighbours about the opening event, we met a range of different reactions and complex emotions. We can roughly divide them into four groups: positive, ambivalent, negative and indifferent.

*Joy and excitement* about getting a *proper* mosque were the general reaction among Muslims met in the neighbourhood. As one said, he was now able to ‘just cross the street’ to worship, instead of driving to a different neighbourhood. Many non-Muslims also expressed joy and appreciation; they were happy on behalf of their Muslim neighbours now having ‘a proper place’ to practice their religion – ‘we have our churches all over’, one said – and they expressed hope that the community centre would serve as a symbol of recognition and social accept. Other positive local residents were those who felt that the community centre brings more life to area and potentially keeps groups of youngsters off the streets. At the opening ceremony, we also found positive curiosity among people who have travelled from other parts of Copenhagen in order to ‘get a sense of it all’.

*What kind of place has Denmark become?* is a statement that combines positivity, with frustration over the public debate in Denmark and the wide-ranging Islamophobia. This comes from people who are delighted that the centre is here but feel angry that many of the official Danish representatives declined the invitation to the opening. They worry that the Danes are unable to conceive the community centre’s ‘signal of openness’ and express a feeling that ‘Denmark is turning into a terrible place – an inhuman place’. A special example was a woman outside the mosque waiting for her son and daughter who are both converts. She expressed her



fear over the nasty comments flourishing on the social media: ‘Who knows whether some idiot one day will act and throw a bomb’, she said.

The statement ‘*It’s okay, but...*’ expresses *ambivalence*, significant as a reaction where the person is navigating between different viewpoints. It often starts with a positive attitude, while counterbalancing certain reservations. A recurring objection was the financing of the community centre by funds from Qatar. As one man said, it is fine that the centre is here and it looks really nice but (reading the name on the façade) flagging up its ties to Qatar is ‘not so bloody clever!’ The means of funding is a delicate and suspicious matter that overshadows the event. A second reservation concerns gender. A couple of middle-aged women had travelled from outside the Capital and were eager to enter the mosque, but the gendered separation of the mosque upset them. It is really nice that ‘they now have a proper place’ but ‘their’ view on women is thoroughly discriminating and needs changing. Another approach is when people express themselves in reaction to the reservations of others and try to balance the pros and the cons. Regarding Qatari financing, some people try to come up with perspectives that offer counterbalance. Such statements include: ‘I don’t see the difference from when AP Møller and Maersk donate funds’, and ‘no one asks how the Catholic Church in Denmark gets funding’. Finally, regarding gender, a middle-aged man said that he could easily think of other religions that are ‘just as far out’.

*They don’t bother me.* Few reactions were straightforwardly negative. One example is the blunt reaction of a Serbian immigrant who said ‘they shouldn’t be here’, expressing dismissal of the very presence of Islam in Denmark. Similarly, another person speaks of how the centre represents ‘the wrong kind of Islam’. Much more

widespread was the reaction of *indifference*, taking the form of shoulder shrugs and no visible signs of engagement. Some expressed indifference with the phrase: ‘they don’t bother me’. However, this indifferent reaction also seems to involve some unspoken reservations or negative feelings about the centre.

During our fieldwork in the neighbourhood we tried to get reactions at the local kiosk, pub and pizzeria. That did not turn out so well. People mumbled and evaded our questioning. A few weeks later we returned to the pub – this time without recorder. We patiently observed, and waited to see if it would be possible to talk with some of the patrons. When asked about the community centre, their recurring reaction was the one of indifference – ‘they don’t bother me’. But some people qualified that statement. They compared the new mosque with another one close by; a small mosque in an old warehouse, towards which one of the men pointed and suggested that ‘they are much worse’. He continued saying how ‘they’ wear long beards and ‘the women are completely hidden away’. The indifferent reaction apparently also involved some discomfort and mistrust.

### ***The relationship to the neighbourhood***

In the interview with the mosque’s spokeswoman, she told us how the vision of the centre is building bridges and ties with the neighbourhood. They are already part of different youth projects that help bringing local youngsters into the centre, and they intend to make arrangements that are vast in scope and reach out. She told that the mosque has visitors of many different ethnic origins, and that many of them are young. One reason, she suggested, could be that the sermon always closes with a summary in Danish – many of the young people do not understand Arabic.

The patterns of the on-the-spot interviews do provide hope for the possibility of connections between the mosque and the neighbourhood. Across the varying reactions there is a pattern in how people relate to the mosque and the centre that mirrors relations of proximity and distance. Locals emphasize the specific *local* effects – keeping the youngsters off the streets, creating more life and, especially, the significance of the project to Muslims in the neighbourhood. Those who came to the event from outside the neighbourhood/are more inclined to consider the role the centre may potentially play on a greater scale. They speak of the centre as a possible gathering point of ‘suspicious’ social relations and international connections.

The general positivity in most local reactions might reflect the local context of the centre in Nørrebro, which has the most multi-ethnic population in Copenhagen. In much of the public debate, Nørrebro has become the epitome of multi-culturalism in Denmark. Diversity, whether based on migrant status or social class, has always been a part of Nørrebro’s identity. Political activism is also a part of the narrative of the neighbourhood (Schmidt, 2011). Accordingly, most inhabitants have become skilled practitioners of diversity and conflict, in this way forming a promising local context for the opening event and expectations of the future role of the community centre.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored the opening of a purpose-built mosque in Copenhagen as a transformative event. Theoretically, the paper starts from a social ontology giving primacy to encounters, in this way emphasizing the importance of interrelationships and embodied encounters in the constitution of the social. In the present case,

however, our object is encounters mediated through the symbolism of materiality and architecture. The mosque with its dome and minaret become both sign and symbol of the presence of Islam in Copenhagen. The event, then, is a milestone in the process of the re-territorialisation of Islam in Denmark. In this process, Muslims face a range of challenges in following Islamic prescriptions in an environment with an ambivalent relationship to religion. Denmark claim to be a secular society emphasizing democracy and freedom-rights, but there is no separation of church and state: the Evangelical Lutheran church is subordinated and funded by the state. Additionally, values of secularism and freedom-rights are threatened by populist nationalism and Islamophobia, with the public divided along lines of political conviction, religious confession and cultural imagination. All these issues coincide in the opening event and generate a profound change in the symbolic landscape of the city. The new mosque becomes an interface between the urban environment, Muslim citizens and the possible existence of religious pluralism.

One result of seeing the opening event as a set of cross-cultural encounters is the unearthing of the intense emotional registers and affective forces generated by its performance. Internally, this is experienced during the different activities of the opening through the affective space and intense atmosphere created in the conjunction between bodies, materialities and expressive emotions. Externally, it is experienced through the strong emotional reactions, positive and negative, it elicited among different external actors.

The pivotal point is the public visibility of Islam. It includes religious practices that are embodied and spatial and performed in specific material and aesthetic forms. It

also encompasses personal identification as well as public manifestations of Islamic difference. An illustrative example is the man who could now, with confidence, call himself a ‘Danish Muslim’ because it was possible for him to worship in a ‘real’ mosque. Furthermore, we can see the movement between invisibility and visibility as one of several paradoxes that evolve around the event. It appears in the transformation of the material form of the mosque; housed previously in undistinguished buildings, and now purpose-built with a dome and minaret. But it also materialises in the architectural form of the building itself. One example is the difference between the simple, modern architecture of the exterior of the building and the highly-decorated interior, which is a deliberate strategy to be non-provocative; another is the compromise with the municipality on a mute minaret.

Other paradoxes arise in connection to the reception of the mosque. An obvious one is the difference in attitudes of the political and the clerical establishment to participating in the opening ceremony. While the majority of the politicians, both left- and right-wing, excused themselves, the different religious communities were present to welcome the ‘newcomer’. Another paradox contrasts the dominant attitude in the public debate with that in the local neighbourhood. While the debate in the media was dominated by stereotypes of ‘the Muslim’ – again expressed by commentators on both sides of the political spectrum – local residents mostly expressed either indifference or joy that their neighbours’ could practice their religion in a worthy place. The event thus highlights the complexity of the formation of cross-cultural public space. Controversies over the visibility of Islam push stereotypes and Islamophobic feelings to the extremes. They do, however, also bring different groups together in

unprecedented ways and create new constellations of political, religious and cultural boundaries.

When it comes to public debate and negotiating the planning process, many of our results parallel analyses of mosque conflicts in other European settings. With our phenomenologically inspired approach and our emphasis on embodied encounters, our aim is a more nuanced analysis of encounters between different actors and materialities, including the emotional and affective textures of the event. This strategy has revealed a number of paradoxes and ambivalences surrounding the event, uncovering cracks and contradictions in the dominating Islamophobic discourse in the public debate.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The paper was first presented at the Nordic Geographers Meeting in Tallinn, June 2015 and later at the Association of American Geographers conference in San Francisco in April 2016. We thank the participants in the two sessions for a fruitful discussion. The project was supported by the Danish Research Council under the Grant DFF 1327-00077. We thank the Danish Research Council for the support.

