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Roose, E.

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Euro Islam Architecture

19 January 2009 / Eric Roose
ARCHITECTURE

As public debate on the best way to integrate Moslems in non-Islamic society grows more intense, the critical debate in architecture on the best way to stimulate integration through design is also becoming more heated. In his book *Euro Islam Architecture: New Mosques of the Occident*, Christian Welzbacher tries to elevate the discussion to a higher level.



Euro Islam Mosque, Penzberg, Alen Jasarevic

Put simply, some critics propagate a preference for modern-looking mosques without embellishments; cupolas and minarets are deemed superfluous because they are out of sync with the climate or technology of their new surroundings. The visibility of such mosques in the cityscape can be blamed on the homesickness for the old country experienced by older immigrants, or for the unfortunate adoption of colonial stereotypes by the offspring of such immigrants. Then there are other critics who propagate a preference for postmodern mosques with embellishments; to them, cupolas and minarets give a human face to excessive modernism. Their visibility in the current cityscape could signal a fitting pride in the heritage of old immigrants or of the necessary emancipation of their offspring. In the modernist reality, mosques without cupolas and minarets stand unmistakably for physical integration by means of a 'Euro Mosque' chosen by young Moslems. In the postmodern reality, mosques without cupolas and minarets stand for a government-imposed physical assimilation by means of inconspicuous mosques. So totally different meanings are accorded to precisely the same objects, depending on the critic's stance in the debate on mosques.

It is within this context of stalemate that German architecture critic Christian Welzbacher wrote the book *Euro Islam Architecture. New Mosques of the Occident*, published as part of the 'Statements' series by Sun publishers. In response to what he rightly sees as the many misconceptions concerning Islamic architecture, the author sought a way to end the fruitless battle between mosques. After an impassioned appeal for sense, he shows how media reports are obscured by the cliché that a visible Islam is intended as a provocation in the West; soaring minarets, for example, are presented as expressions of 'fantasies of world domination'. In addition, our image of Islam is determined by romanticism, in the form of colonial buildings made to look like mosques. Although Welzbacher argues that most Moslems in Europe still opt for cupolas and minarets on account of their self-chosen adoption of these European clichés, we see an increasing number of

avant-garde designs by progressive Moslem architects and clients. Thus we come to the Mosque pictured on the cover of the book, located in Penzberg (Germany) and 'the self-conscious proof for the argument that mosques and modernity do not have to contradict each other'. The author concludes contentedly that the Bosnian architect chose a simple cube as the basic form, and that the building is scarcely recognisable as a religious structure, apart from the shortened minaret. Welzbacher is therefore of the view that this should be the prototype of a new, contemporary 'Euro Mosque'. What he wants to say is that if only we focused more on this type of reconciliatory solution instead of on the divisive contrasts, the situation would be so different.



Mevlana Mosque, Rotterdam, Bert Toorman

Does the author fulfil his promise to end what he sees as the fruitless battle between mosque designs? Not in the slightest. In fact, he enters the battle himself. Welzbacher's reality is undeniably modernist, and here and there he even uses the word 'postmodernism' with almost palpable aversion. There's nothing wrong with that, but he deploys totally improper arguments to propagate his ideal in architectural criticism. We are to believe, for example, that the many western Moslems who prefer cupolas and minarets are guided by Western stereotypes given that Welzbacher, apart from gathering images, seems to have conducted no actual research into the motivations of clients. While he explains the design of Turkish-looking mosques in Europe as attempts by the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs to keep its subjects abroad Turkish, he doesn't mention that the Dutch 'HDV', which he says does allow modern mosques to be designed, is simply an abbreviation of the same Directorate. While he mentions the supposed role of Wahhabism in the 'historicising' Essalam Mosque in Rotterdam, he fails to mention that the chairman of the 'modernist' Penzberg Mosque had links with a fundamentalist organisation. And while he emphasises the financial role of the Sheik of Dubai in the Essalam Mosque, he doesn't write of the same role played by the Emir of Sharjah in the Penzberg Mosque. For a modernist mosque stands for a European Islam, while a historicising mosque stands for a conservative Islam. It's that simple. So by presenting his book to the Dutch Minister for Housing, Communities and Integration as the 'solution', Welzbacher doesn't just fail to solve the battle of the mosques. Rather, he only exacerbates the debate. It is to be hoped that the relevant policy-makers can summon up the necessary ability to relativise when reading this book.

info

Eric Roose is an architecture historian and cultural anthropologist. From 2004 to 2008 he attended the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) where he conducted doctoral research into Moslem clients for mosques in the Netherlands. His thesis will be published in May.

Christian Welzbacher, *Euro Islam Architecture: New Mosques of the Occident*, SUN Architecture, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 112. ISBN 978 90 8506 6378. *Euro Islam Architecture* is also available in Dutch and German editions.

On February 12 Christian Welzbacher will attend a debate on 'Euro Islam'. Venue: **Arcam**, Prins Hendrikkade 600, Amsterdam. Time: 4 p.m.

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De positie van islamitische architectuur in Europa

ARCHITECTURE

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