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The tale of the miracle of Duisburg: A miracle or an illusion?

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Abstract

On October 2008, the biggest mosque in Germany at the time was opened in Duisburg's Marxloh district. In addition to its size, what distinguishes this building from other mosques in Germany was the lack of protests against the construction of this building. For this reason, the mosque is also referred to as "the miracle of Duisburg". The reason construction of the Marxloher Merkez Mosque went so smoothly was due to the participatory approach that the city government adopted during the planning process. The representatives of the Turkish community, German politicians, church and community leaders were all invited to contribute to the mosque project early on. The mosque did not become a symbol of social division in Germany but rather a symbol of religious, cultural and social interaction ("The Miracle of Marxloh: Bringing a Community Together around a New Mosque", 2008). This paper presents the success story of the DITIB commissioned Maxloher Merkez Mosque. Through this analysis and a theoretical framework based on the notion of visibility, I aim to investigate the factors that contribute to the successful reception of the mosque by the public. I theorize that three factors enabled this positive reception of the mosque. These factors are: (1) the architecture and urban design process of the mosque, which was a participatory process bringing many different actors together (2) local context, which contributes to the visibility of the mosque and (3) the politics of visibility which was framed through the self-presentation and the reception of the mosque by the media. I argue that although the Marxloher Merkez Mosque project is perceived as a successful project that managed to overcome the risks associated with social conflict, this "Miracle" of Duisburg only provides social cohesion on the surface and leads to "self-orientalism" and further alienation.

Keywords

Mosque; Duisburg; Marxloh district; participatory process; miracle.

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1. Turkish Diaspora in Germany and the Mosques Beyond the Visibility-Representation Nexus

Today, wherever one looks, Islam - and whether it belongs to Germany or not – stirs a heated debate ("Is Islam Changing Germany", 2017). Before 2015, Germany had already been home to over 4 million Muslims, most of whom came from Turkey after World War II. Even before the start of the contemporary refugee crisis, the debate on Islam and its place in Germany was framed around a Turkish population that had not been well-integrated into the German society. Today, many Turks prefer to live in social (and spatial) enclaves within big cities, where the dominant language is Turkish rather than German and attend mosques that are operated by Türkisch-Islamische Union der Anstalt für Religion (DITIB - Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs), an organization linked directly to the Turkish Government Authority for Religious Affairs (Su, 2017). This involvement of the Turkish government - and its self-defined role as the administrator of Islam in Germany - has been shown by scholars and politicians as one of the most important factors preventing Turkish Muslims from integrating into German society (Kern, 2017).

The involvement of the Turkish government in the administration of Islam is closely related to the legal status and accommodation of Islam in Germany. European nation-states' handling of Islam, the minority religion, differs substantially as the institutionalization of any religion builds upon the pre-existing patterns of church-state relations (Bader, 2007; König, 2007). Especially in Germany, compared to other European nation states, the institutional position of Islam is very underprivileged. Christian churches and Jewish synagogues in Germany have formal status as corporations according to public law. This status allows them to profit from the taxes collected by the state. As Muslims living in Germany do not have such an organizational structure, German authorities do not grant Islam the same legal status (Fetzner & Soper, 2005). For this reason, Islamic organizations in Germany remain disadvantaged compared to the established churches as they lack legal recognition and financial support (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2012). Nielsen (2004) explains the operational structure of Islam in Germany. Since Islam is not a formal religious community recognized by the state, the religious associations operate under the category of registered associations (eingetragener Verein, e.V.). Unlike the Jewish, Catholic and Protestant communities that work closely with state authorities and are included in the decision-making process in the areas of education, welfare and health, the lack of a legal recognition prevents Islamic associations from taking part in the policy making process (Tol, 2008).

Although the Turkish government has been sending imams to Europe since 1975, it was not until the establishment of DITIB in 1984 that efforts to organize the religious life of Turkish immigrants took effect (Pederson, 1999, p.26). DITIB denies links to any official or private organizations and defines itself as an independent umbrella organization, however, it is the Turkish government's extension for religious affairs abroad and relies on financial support from the Turkish government. DITIB works under the Directorate for Religious Affairs, which is a part of the Turkish prime minister's office. The organization is responsible for delegation of imams and employees abroad ("Hakkımızda", 2017) and these employees have the status of civil servants of the Turkish Government (Tol, 2008). The imams are sent abroad temporarily and replaced every four years.

DITIB functions through 14 state level organizations and 930 registered cultural associations (e.V.) that also act as mosques and follow the official Turkish view of Islam ("Hakkımızda", 2017). Being the largest structured Islamic organization, DITIB serves as the main administrator of Islam in Germany. The role of the Turkish government as a major religious organizer in Germany has served to further

alienate an important section of the Turkish immigrant population who still lack basic citizenship rights despite their long presence in the country. Because Turkish immigrants do not have the right to vote unless they have acquired German citizenship, Islam and Islamic organizations have become the only platform to voice social grievances within German society (Tol, 2008). Within this context, mosques mark the unmistakable presence of Islam in Germany.

Despite the deep involvement of the Turkish government on the administration of Islam in Germany, mosques within this context cannot be equated with their counterparts in Turkey as the transformation of Muslim communities followed different historical and social paths in each country (Göle, 1999). Although the design of mosques in Germany is heavily influenced by trends in Turkish mosque architecture, the meaning and use of the mosques differ substantially in these two contexts. While mosques in Turkey only serve the purpose of religious practice, their counterparts in Europe become social and physical spaces where Turkish immigrants can organize around a common identity (Tol, 2008). Muslims in Europe often redefine themselves as minorities which in turn changes the religious practices and subjectivities of Muslims and repositions them in secular Europe. From the point of view of certain European collectives, this process is far from a quiet process of immigration, adaptation and accommodation and the increasing Islamic presence in public life changes their collective memories and self-perceptions. Islamic signs and symbols in the European landscape become more and more visible, and become major sources of cultural and political controversy. Disputes surrounding the increasing visibility of Islam in the urban landscape through the construction of diaspora mosques signals the reterritorialization of Muslims and reveals how the European public deals with cultural and religious difference (Göle, 2011, p.383-384). This visibility of Islam is occasionally seen as shocking and shifts the public discourse from social and economically related problems to religion and citizenship issues. It is exactly this visibility of the purpose-built mosque that makes it the material symbol and center for conflict over whether Islam can ever be a part of European public life (Landler, 2006).

With the increased visibility of mosques in European public space over the last three decades, the conflict over the place and meaning of mosques stems from the politics of visibility (Göle, 2011; Jonker, 2005; Bowen, 2007). Muslims in Europe have started to move from their private backyard mosques to the visible public cultural frontiers of society marked by increased mosque construction activities in the late 20th and 21st centuries (Becker, 2017). In the past, the religious activities of Muslims in Europe were confined to invisible and private prayer rooms, while today mosques publicly and visibly mark the presence of Islam (Es, 2012). The public visibility of Muslims is informed by negative cultural associations related to Islam (Fekete, 2004). Cheng's research on the discussions of minaret bans in Swiss parliament shows how these negative feelings attached to Islamophobia combines with national identity (2015). Islamophobia has been analyzed through paradigms of radicalization to explain cultural differentiation between Europe's Muslim religious minorities and its mainstream (Becker, 2017; Bayoumi, 2006; Elver, 2012; Meer, 2013). According to recent studies, the fear of Islam and Muslims among certain European citizens stems from a number of notions: presumed failure of prioritizing democratic values and ideals (Tyrer and Sayyid, 2012, Romeyn, 2014), different and unequal understandings of gender (Ewing, 2008), perceived ethnic differences (Khosravi, 2012) and expected inclination towards extremism (Fekete, 2004). In media, representations of Islam are dominated by these notions, creating a "publicly available" and shared grammar that might be understood as equating Islam with threat (Becker, 2017, p. 4; Said, 1981; de Galembert, 2005, p. 190).

Although for Muslims, a mosque with its dome and minarets is not only a place of worship but also a cultural space of religiosity and sociability that is reminiscent of a familiar landscape, Göle refers

to the "loss of innocence" of the mosques. Politicization of the mosque, especially after the 1979 Revolution in Iran, from where the revolutionary fervor spread, made mosques visible sites for the contestation of urbanism, pious politics and political Islam. In other words, mosques as religious public spaces cannot be confined to the boundaries of its community of believers. The mosque claims its visibility both in national and global contexts, contesting the existing separation between private religious and secular public fields; "between personal piousness and secular publicness" (2011, p. 384). To conclude, mosques and their visibility signify a process of spatial transgression of Muslims into the European public which contests the secular and cultural norms of the host country. In this context, Islam does not only cross the geographical boundaries through immigration but also transgresses the invisible cultural borders of the European public space.

The following case study of the Marxloher Merkez Mosque shows the complicated notion of visibility, demonstrating how the public staging and performance of mosques within the local context can encourage inclusion and integration. The public reception of the mosque determines not only who is seen, but also how they are perceived (Becker, 2017). I argue that public acceptance of the mosque into the mainstream depends upon three factors: (1) the architecture and urban design process of the mosque, performed by the actors that take part in the process, (2) the local context in which the mosque is built and (3) the politics of visibility, which relates to how the mosque project was framed by the media and presented by the mosque organization itself and effected by their communication with the mainstream society.

2. The "Miracle of Duisburg": Marxloher Merkez Mosque

Marxloher Merkez Mosque, designed by the Turkish-German architect Cavit ahin, is a much more direct depiction of the Ottoman style compared to other Turkish mosques in Germany. The external structure of the mosque is dominated by a dome structure that includes a central dome and four half-domes around it (fig. 2). The entrance hall is covered by five small domes placed relatively lower than the level of the central dome structure. The 23-meter-high dome is complemented with a single 34-meter-high "pencil form" minaret typical of the Ottoman period (Korn, 2013, p.38).

Inside the mosque, there is a 40x28m praying area surrounded by a second-level mezzanine (Korn, 2013) (fig. 3). This second level mezzanine, mahfil, is reserved for the use of women for daily prayers and at important religious days, when attendance to the mosque by the congregation is much higher, it used by the men. The prayer room can accommodate 1200 people, 800 in the main prayer area downstairs and 400 in the women's section upstairs.

Due to its foreign style, the mosque stands out from the rest of Marxloh's urban landscape with its minaret and ensemble of domes and half-domes. Although mosques are becoming a more familiar element in German cities, according to Gorzewski three characteristics of the Merkez Mosque make it a unique one (2015). The first feature is related to the size of the mosque. At the time of its opening in 2008, Merkez Camii was the largest mosque in Germany with its 23-meter-high main dome and 34-meter-high minaret and its 1200-people prayer room. The event rooms and secondary rooms can also be used as prayer spaces for prayer during the celebrations of Ramadan and Eid, increasing the capacity of the mosque.

Figure 1.
Location of the Marxloher Merkez Mosque: a) (Ehrkamp, 2002) b) (Google Maps).
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Figure 2.
Marxloher Merkez Mosque (Baukunst, 2017)

The second characteristic of the mosque is related to the double character of the building, serving both as a place to practice Islam and as a community center. Although both of these functions are accommodated within the same space, they are run by organizations independent from each other. The community center is accessed via the Warbruckstraße, while the mosque can be reached from the other side of the building. The building has a total usable area of 2500 m2, 55% of which is used by the DITIB mosque organization for praying and the rest is attributed to the community center. While the community center functions to promote interfaith dialogue, it also serves as a community center for the local Turkish population, offering homework support for students, language courses and intercultural seminars (Gorzewski, 2015). This establishment the mosque as an educational and meeting place along with its religious functions, signals the opening up of the Turkish community and Islam to the general population (Yılmaz, 2010).

The third characteristic of the mosque that sets it apart from other mosque projects in Germany is related to its funding. The 7.5 million Euro budget of the construction project was equally shared between donations made to the local DITIB and the EU and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) (Yılmaz, 2010). Due to the fact that the construction of the mosque was financed partially by the subsidies of NRW and the EU (especially for the community center), the mosque project became one of the very few projects undertaken by an urban development agency (Winkel, 2012). This is very interesting considering the underprivileged position of Islam compared to other religious organizations. Since Islam is not legally recognized by the German government, to overcome the legal issues the construction of the mosque was funded by DITIB and donations from the congregation while local authorities and the EU incorporated the project into the urban and regional development plan and funded the construction of the community center (Topçu, 2009).

As one of the largest construction projects of DITIB, the Merkez Camii has a long history. Marxloh is characterized by its high immigrant population which is predominantly Turkish. Out of 20,500 people living in Marxloh, it is estimated that 13,500 of them have a Turkish background (Uslar, 2017). The Turkish influence in the neighborhood can also be seen from the neighborhood's main business streets which are dominated by Turkish hairdressers, döner shops, bridal wear shops, etc. In Marxloh alone there are over 10 mosques (41 in Duisburg), most of which are backyard mosques or mosques that were transformed from unused shops/apartments that are hardly recognizable from the outside. These small mosques and prayer spaces were regularly overcrowded on public holidays (Gorzewski, 2015). The situation was no different in Marxloh, the former DITIB mosque was established in an unused cafeteria space, which was not very favorable for religious use (Jenker, 2008) and was becoming inadequate for the use of approximately 500 households (Ehrkamp, 2007). The local DITIB was active in the area since its establishment in 1984, and decided that these makeshift prayer rooms were too small and they needed a new building.

In 1997, DITIB proposed the construction of a classical Ottoman style mosque with the support of the local Turkish community. As stated by the former chair of DITIB, Mehmet Özay: "Turkish people, who have been here for 40 years, have not seen a single dome and they wanted to see a dome again" (interview with Özay in Gorzewski, 2015). Being aware that such construction projects may become a source of anxiety in the district, the association's board of directors in Marxloh sought for cooperation with local administration, the Duisburg Development Union (der Entwicklungsgesellschaft Duisburg – EG DU), churches and other institutions. By 2002, an advisory council for the project was established with representatives from political parties, churches, local associations, neighborhood residents and businesses (Topçu, 2009). The ultimate aim was transparency and openness. Many meetings were organized for local residents and many critical questions were

raised. During the construction phase alone the project received 40.000 visitors, who wanted to learn more about Islam and the Muslim population of Marxloh. Although in 2006, this friendly and peaceful process was clouded by media reports on the involvement of the construction company's members in right-wing circles, the incident was almost forgotten by the time the mosque was opened in 2008 (Gorzewski, 2015). Despite these problems related to its administration, Merkez Camii still functions as a religious, cultural and social meeting place, and continues to provide educational and interfaith dialogue programs to bring together people from different backgrounds.

3. Discussion: The miracle of Duisburg or an illusion of miracle

Today, in Germany, the increasing number and visibility of mosques has become an undeniable phenomenon. The minarets of the mosques have started to join the cathedral towers and high-rise buildings in the German landscape and become a part of the urban silhouette. So far, this paper has presented the story of the Marxloher Merkez Mosque, located deep in the belly of North Rhine Westphalia, which presents an exceptional example of how Muslim identity became compatible with the German mainstream. Here the actors included in the design process accomplished a politics of positive visibility through three main factors.

The first factor that contributed to the positive visibility of the Marxloher Mosque is related to the local context and architecture. Although the mosque is much larger compared to other Turkish mosques in Germany, physically it remains quite invisible due to its location. Being located in an isolated area inhabited by a Turkish majority population undergoing a rapid urban decline contributed to the lack of public reaction (Alder, 2008). Compared to the DITIB commissioned Yavuz Sultan Selim Mosque in Mannheim that was constructed in 1995 and located in a central area which would provide high levels of urban rent (Figure 4) (Gorzewski, 2015), the seemingly unprofitable location of the Marxloher Merkez Mosque did not raise any questions from the public. Furthermore, the architecture of the mosque become symbolic of openness and transparency, thereby contributing to the positive public reception. The mosque provided transparency through very large windows on its façade, a detail that diverges from the traditional Anatolian style. "This is not typical of a mosque and it should provide transparency and openness" (interview with Mehmet Küçük in Gorzewski, 2005). Unlike disputes over the architecture of Cologne Central Mosque, whose dome and minarets would symbolically cast shadows over the Köln Dom (Figure 5) and whose central location would start a process of "ghettoization" of the neighborhood (fig. 6) (Becker, 2017). The construction of Merkez Mosque in Duisburg became an exemplar project showing successful communication between the builders, the city and the public, which can also be seen from the lack of resistance and reservations from the local German population, making the mosque "the miracle of Marxloh".

The second factor that made the Marxloher Mosque a successful project is related to its design process. According to Küçük, the participatory work of the advisory board, the "transparent funding" and the endorsement of the project by different parties created a friendly atmosphere and a sympathetic attitude around the construction project, in contrast to the ongoing mosque project in Cologne, Ehrenfeld (Gorzewski, 2005). According to Becker, during the design process of the mosque, neither a clear leader came forward to present the mosque project to the public, nor did the planning board engage in public debates to address to the public concerns that might arise from perceived differences (extremism, ethnic exclusion and the role of women). Becker (2017) even addresses the difficulties she encountered related to the "opaqueness" of this design process while researching. She failed to find any information related to the controversy around the Cologne
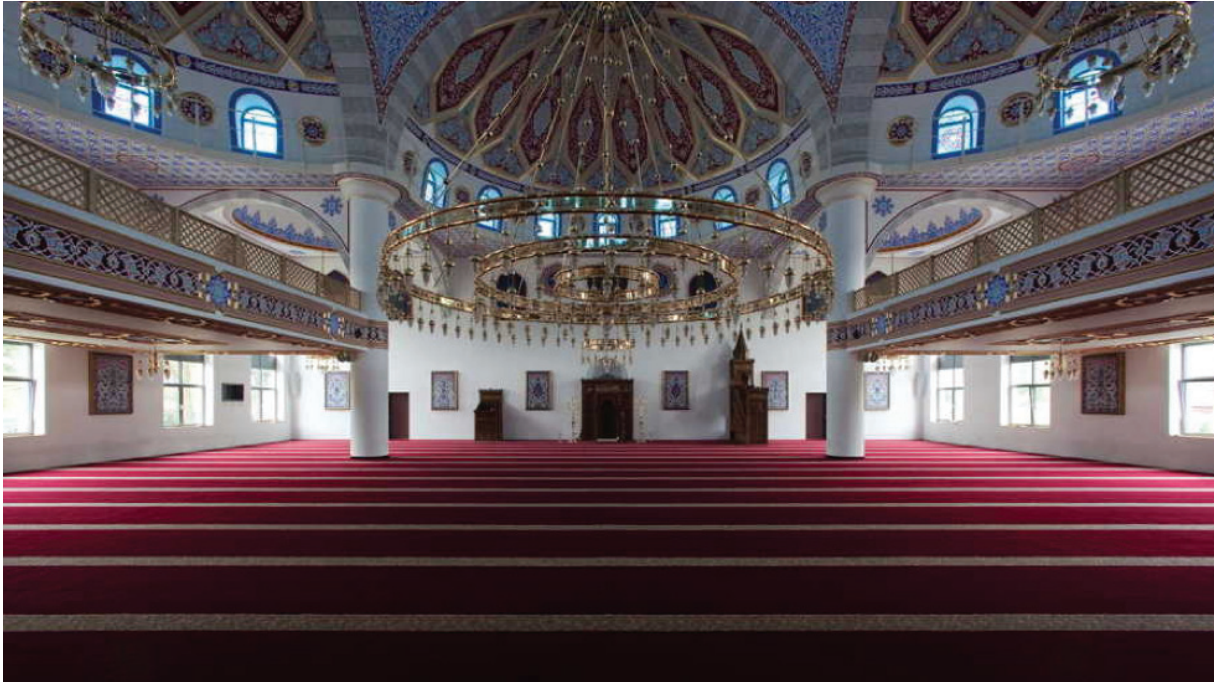
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Figure 3.
Marxloher Merkez Mosque (Poolima, 2017)

Figure 4.
Yavuz Sultan Selim Mosque (Ditib-ma, 2017)
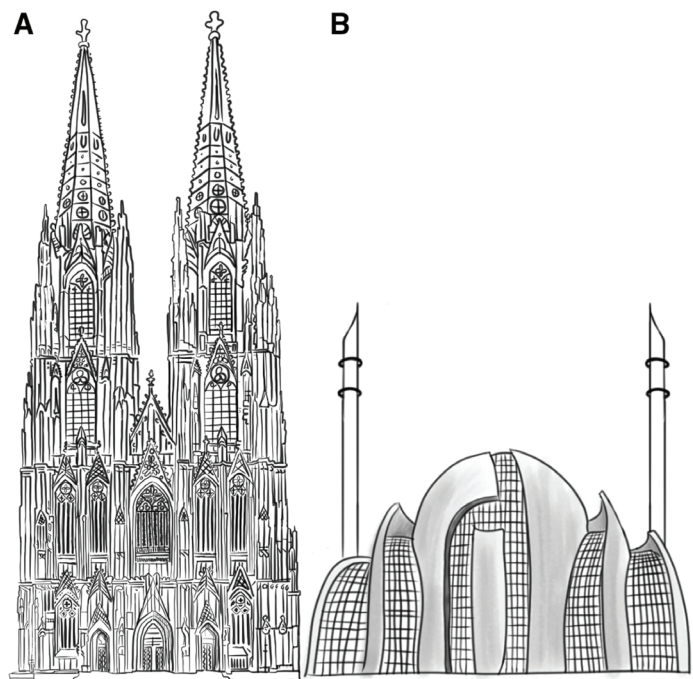
Figure 5.
Cologne Central Mosque.

Figure 6.
Sketch portraying Cologne Central Mosque (B) size in relation to Cologne Cathedral (A) (DGB Köln, 2010).

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Central Mosque and whenever she could, the failure of the mosque was blamed entirely on outsiders, especially on the architect, Paul Böhm who was dismissed as the project construction manager in 2011. As can be seen, while the participatory design process of Marxloher Merkez Mosque made it a successful one, the reluctance to include representative actors from different segments of the community caused the failure of the Cologne Central Mosque.

The last factor that contributed to the social cohesion framed around Marxloher Merkez Mosque is related to the media reception and self-presentation. At the time of its opening, city marketing also contributed to bringing the community together by a media campaign and the slogan "Made in Marxloh" referring to the participatory planning process that brought different coexisting groups in Marxloh together (Winkel, 2012). Although the reaction that Merkez Camii received from the public and politicians was a positive one, as mentioned before this peaceful process was shadowed by the conflicts within the mosque association itself in the later years. The rising conflict between conservatives and liberals in Turkey also caused tension within the Turkish diaspora in Germany and the mosque association itself, resulting in the resignation of the chairman of the mosque association, Özay, and dismissal of the press representative Küçük in 2009. Özay's view of liberal Islam was criticized extensively by the conservative group within DITIB (Gorzewski, 2015). By 2010, DITIB declared that the conflict within the administration was settled (Klinkhardt, 2010). The effective staging and performance of civic ideals – loyalty, participation and transparency – in the case of Marxloher Merkez Mosque highlights the absence of these ideals in the case of Cologne Central Mosque even more. By being open about the disputes even within the advisory board of the mosque and its transparent self-presentation, the design process did not encounter much negative reaction from the media and public.

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Conclusion

Although the Marxloher Merkez Mosque project is perceived as a successful effort that managed to overcome the risks associated with social conflict, I argue this "Miracle" of Duisburg only provides social cohesion on the surface and leads to what Batuman defines as "self-orientalism" (2016). With its distinctive architectural style, transferred from the Ottoman tradition, the mosque stands out in the urban landscape, working as a signifier of the Turkish-Muslim presence in the area. The architecture of the building with strong references to 16th century Ottoman mosques has major implications for the people living in the area. For the Turkish people, the mosque connotes a Turkish-Muslim identity, not a Turkish-German one and due to its performative nature, the mosque causes Turkish people to identify themselves with their old Turkish and Islamic characters, not with the Turkish-German identity which was aimed to be achieved through integration, resulting in a self-othering process. In this way, rather than becoming a symbol of integration as intended, it remains a representation of Turkishness, causing Turks to identify themselves as others in the Marxloh landscape. The other implication is related to the perception of the mosque by the German population living in the area. Although the mosque was designed to promote integration, because it embodies only Turkish elements in its design, it pushes the German population further away as it fails to address the German audience. For the German people living in the area, the mosque remains a foreign building due to the lack of familiar architectural elements. Such a distinct representation is only attractive for the Turkish population living in the area, pushing the German population further away both physically and socially. In addition to this, because the mosque represents a conscious identification with the stereotypical Turkish Muslim identity it disrupts the shared collective imaginaries and self-perception of Germans (Göle, 2011). Seyran Ate , a Turkish born lawyer and women's right activist also warns against the exaggerated expectations regarding the integration-promoting effect of the mosque in Duisburg. She takes a critical position towards the promotion of intercultural and interfaith dialogue and she argues that such dialogue cannot be attained by meeting once or twice a year, during religious festivals. Parallel to Batuman's argument on self-Orientalism, she expresses her fear that such a community center would function as a socialization center among Turkish people, thereby contributing to the consolidation of a parallel Turkish society and provide no social and cultural exchange with Germans.

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