Counteracting the clash of cultures
Mosque architecture as an emancipating factor

The more insistent we are on the separation of cultures, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves and about others.
Edward W. Said[1]

Beyond right-wing rhetorics

According to Samuel Huntington[2] a new world political order began with the end of the Cold War. It would not be the great narratives of neo-liberalism or communism calling the shots in the twenty-first century, he declared, but conflicts between cultures. Wars between western nations and ideologies were a thing of the past; future conflicts would occur along the fault lines between cultures. Edward Said has argued, however, that with this notion of clashing cultures Huntingtdon has merely prolonged the Cold War's aggressive rhetoric:[3] instead of developing ideas that would facilitate a better understanding of cultural differences – how reconciliation or connection between civilizations might be effected, – Huntington has unfurled a political scenario of war and conflict, in particular that of the West against Islam.

Huntington and his neo-liberal friends have as little comprehension of what culture entails as the conservative political parties in the Netherlands – the VVD, Rita Verdonk's Trots op Nederland, the Lijst Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid. Problematic differences between cultures aside, it is essential to understand that cultures are perpetually changing. Culture cannot be one unadulterated entity, particularly in a globalized world where everything is connected with everything else. There is not one civilization that is homogenous in nature for this is at odds with the complexity of elements and radical hybridism characteristic of every culture. When one culture is set against other cultures and downgraded as anti-Western, the fact that Islam, like Western civilization, has its own internal dynamic and pluriform character is forgotten. Rita Verdonk may not know it, but the Sinterklaas celebrations she lauds as

typically Dutch have their roots in Turkey, for St Nicolas came from Turkey and died in Italy. The tulips for which 'we Dutch' are famous are also Turkish in origin.

What the right conveniently forgets to mention is that traditions are constructed ad hoc and are, in fact, far from stable. Right-wing groups in the Netherlands – like Islamic fundamentalists – produce a drastically simplified map of the world that emphasizes conflict. It supports the theory of a complacent, closed world in which every race has its own destiny and identity. It puts one's own culture first, at the expense of other people's culture. Researchers have recently established that young Muslims find this hard to handle,[4] for they feel they have to chose between adapting completely to Dutch morals and mores or returning to their land of origin; they would like to participate in society on their own terms but do not always know how to do so. This can lead to social isolation or radicalization, say researchers.

According to Edward Said, Samuel Huntington is really an ideologist: '... someone who wants to make "civilizations" and "identities" into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing. This far less visible history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that "the clash of civilizations" argues is the reality.'[5] Alongside the official (often homogenous) culture of institutions such as parliament, the judiciary and the church, a continual, *silent* exchange occurs, Said explains, in competition with official culture; an exchange that reaches far beyond the stance of 'own people first' propagated in national rhetoric. Various writers, and also architects (such as the initiators of this publication), engaged artists, local politicians, imams and priests, are indeed striving in daily life to achieve connection, harmony and maximum cooperation with 'the other'.

Propagating an exclusive civilization is in fact a perilous undertaking.[6] The real question we should ask ourselves as a civilization is whether we wish to work on cultures that are divorced from each other or whether we want to head in a more integrated direction; one that is probably more difficult but also more fruitful. Instead of propagating a 'clash of civilizations' we should, in my opinion, investigate what it can mean to be modern in a global world in which all cultures are inextricably connected with each other. Embracing difference can actually have an emancipating effect. And in

so doing we would give the concept of the Enlightenment a new opportunity to counteract the oppression of other cultures.

Architecture as a political instrument

Architecture interfaces with politics on many fronts. It accordingly confers form on the socio-economic constellation of a country, a city and its inhabitants. On the one hand, with its representative qualities architecture gives a public face to theatres, banks, parliaments, villas, churches, libraries, museums and mosques, on the other hand, it must also do spatial *justice* to mores and economic criteria. During the 1930s, for example, migration by the Dutch rural population to urban centres was absorbed in developments such as the Westerlijke Tuinsteden in Amsterdam. Today these urban districts still function as migrant neighbourhoods for people in search of a better life. Alongside students they still house the working classes and lower middle classes, although these no longer come exclusively from the Netherlands, but from countries like Morocco and Turkey as well.

While earlier generations of Muslims started mosques in backstreets, in premises such as a former grocer's shop, Dutch Muslims today rightly long for fully-fledged mosques on main streets and squares. This longing for a communal building at representative sites in towns and cities has unleashed a political debate in Europe, together with an unethical form of politics, which deploys architecture as a weapon to stir up conflict between cultures. Fundamentalist parties such as Leefbaar Rotterdam under the leadership of Marco Pastors have ranted and raved about a mosque with minarets and a genuine dome, driving Muslims into a corner by characterizing mosque architecture as a dangerous, orientalist cliché. In my opinion this fundamentalist form of politics, which reduces architecture to a representation of a monolithic ideal – as if there is such a thing as <u>one</u> Islam– and thereby stirs up conflict between cultures, should be counteracted by the development of a different concept of political architecture: one that <u>is</u> capable of producing change. Such a political architecture should be less about the creation of a unique, autonomous object, which merely confirms the status quo, and more about performative forms that facilitate emancipating relations between different cultures.

More than Euro-Islam

Could what is known as Euro-Islam architecture, advocated by various western architects in recent publications on mosque architecture,[7] be a step in the right direction? At first sight their argument is a sympathetic one. Like Barack Obama they seem to be of the opinion that **'you should not establish antitheses – as if these are immutable - and play them off against each other, but you should recognize that a culture is changeable, and that a society changes, and that progress is also made.'**[8] As previously observed, this is a good starting point. Yet what change do these Euro-Islam architects actually represent? It is my belief that in Euro-Islam architecture the diverse qualities of both Christendom and Islam are levelled out. In *Euro Islam Architecture* Christian Welzbacher advocates mosque architecture without domes and minarets. It is a plea for modernistic architecture which deprives the mosque of its historical and potential character for being different. Regarding Islam as a pretext for design (as ornament) does not seem to me to be a valid point of departure, as too much is at stake. Euro-Islam architecture represents a kind of melting point of architectural styles, without engendering a new communal ideal for our global society. What it should be about, to my mind, is people coming together as one in precisely their ~~this~~ diversity. Our complex world with its mix of cultures should not be evened out. Differences should actually be retained, on the basis that fruitful radical differences can subsist between people who live in co-existence. Although giving architectural form to such micro-politics, as a counterweight to The Hague's official macro-politics, is no simple task, what I can offer a foretaste.

While neo-liberalism celebrates the individual (and private life), our society has lost sight of the communal. Neo-liberalism is unwilling to dwell at length on what a community can comprise beyond infrastructural efficiency and commercial logic. Neo-liberal politics is about maintaining order. Like the police, it endeavours to normalize things that contest or outbalance the status quo. Yet life in the public sphere is all about the appearance and exchange of differences. What is strange should not be normalized or banished but welcomed, precisely because it is the strange that could lead~~s~~ to innovation. In dialogue with the unknown a culture becomes aware of its preoccupations, and a newer, richer culture may arise, as in Dutch cuisine. Politics is not about stereotyping or normalizing differences – a matter we better leave to the police or management – but is about fruitful differences co-existing and appearing in

the public sphere. Architecture, the building of mosques can foster the creation of such a public sphere in various urban neighbourhoods, thereby offsetting further privatization and surveillance in our western culture. Unlike a church a mosque is not *just* a house to honour ~~for~~ God, but a place to come together, a collective space for the community. In short, a mosque as a space can provide a counterweight to the 'public' space of the individualized and consuming human being.

How we give shape to this public sphere depends to a large degree on our concept of democracy in spatial terms. As far as I am concerned democracy is not about achieving a simple consensus (a levelling out of ideas and cultures as in Euro-Islam), but about what Chantal Mouffe calls a conflicting consensus. Such spatial frameworks and situations provide for a dialogic struggle between different interpretations, whilst sharing consonant principles. It is, as Chantal Mouffe says, a 'consensus on the principles, disagreement about their interpretation'.[9] Through this form of 'radical democracy' it is possible, in my opinion, to do justice to our hybrid culture and to stop issues of ~~de~~nationalization, the prolongation of a single predominant culture.

Traces of such a Radical Democractic approach towards in architecture – not a mosque, incidentally – can be found in Café Una by the French architects Lacaton & Vassal in Vienna. Their design for the café in the Architekturzentrum Wien is an act of resistance in the face of official museum culture. The café has an informal, flexible floor plan and is tiled with motifs from Turkish culture in reference to the rich Turkisch history of ~~in~~ Vienna. It is a café as *mosque,* where historical and contemporary cultures are allowed to appear in a communal space. A second example that appeals to the imagination is Le Corbusier's Roman Catholic church in Ronchamp. It is another example of sublte confrontation where the unknown allows us to see beyond the conventional, and the familair. The Ronchamp church invites us to take possession of it and yet asks us to go exploring. We think we recognize Arabic influences in the church tower, monk's hood seems the inspiration for the roof fo~~o~~rm and yet we are unsure... much, much more possibilities are opened and questioned. Both inside and outside the building we find a communal space that goes beyond the usually strict, representative hierarchy of ~~in~~ church architecture. Le Corbusier may have made a spectacle of the church, but in no way one that we can simply consume or merely believe. He has created a hybrid spectacle that demands our participation, that elicits dreams determined by the public and given meaning each time we take possession of the building. It is here that architecture – with its unique language of space and

representative form – can be an emancipating factor of significance for a culture in motion, precisely because the many interdependent contradictions our modern culture is rich of are permanently contested and liberated.

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[1] Edward Said in his lecture 'The Myth of "The Clash of Civilizations"', University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1998.

[2] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Touchstone, 1996, p. 22 (originally published in *Foreign Affairs* 72 (summer 1993) no. 3, p. 22-49. Huntington observes: 'It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.'

[3] Edward W. Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', *The Nation*, 22 October 2001.

[4] Research by the Instituut voor Multiculturele Ontwikkeling Forum and the Verwey-Jonker Instituut. Janny Groen, Annieke Kranenberg, 'Jonge moslims worden vromer.' *De Volkskrant*, 13 November 2008.

[5] See note 3.

[6] Hannah Arendt has said of the struggle for a nation for a single predetermined people: **'I have never in my life loved a people or a collective – not the German people, or the French people, or the American people, or the working class or anything of that ilk. I "only" love my friends and the only love I know and in which is believe is the love for individuals. Secondly, this "love of Jews" strikes me as somewhat suspicious, given that I myself am Jewish. I cannot love myself or something which I know to be an indissoluble element of my own person.'** Hannah Arendt, letter to Gershom Scholem, 24 July 1963, quoted in Richard Wolin, 'The Ambivalance of German-Jewish Identity: Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem', *History & Memory* 8 (1996) no. 2, pp. 10-11.

[7] Christian Welzbacher, *Euro Islam Architectuur. De nieuwe moskeeën van het Westen*, Amsterdam: SUN, 2008. Ulrike Knöfel, 'Europe's Mosques Move from Back Alleys to Boulevards', Spiegel online, 15 October 2008 (http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,druck-583903,00.html).

[8] See also Paul Scheffer, 'Een zwarte man in het Witte Huis luidt het afscheid in van de etnische hokjesgeest', *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 November 2008.

[9] Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political*, London: Routledge, 2005.