

# **Report from the Aga Khan Travel Grant 2005-2006**

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## **When Flags Become Buildings: Rethinking Boundaries of Religious Space in Bosnia and Herzegovina Today**

I would like to thank Prof. Nasser Rabbat and the Aga Khan Program for the generous support that enabled me to travel to Bosnia last summer and carry out my research. My initial grant proposal aimed at investigating how Bosnia's religious space is currently being shaped by the dynamic forces of shifting paradigms and reconfiguration of territories resulting from the recent war. Today, ten years after the fighting that took place from 1992-1995, Bosnia's boundaries seem to have been settled only in the maps of the Dayton Peace Accord. The consequences of war are today echoed in the difficulties of the peaceful coexistence of the country's three major ethnic groups: Bosniaks (Muslims), Croats (Catholics) and Serbs (Orthodox Christians). While the country is trying to dissolve its internal political boundaries, these boundaries are simultaneously being recreated and reconfigured through a bottom up separatist tendencies.

During my travel through 75 different cities and villages in Bosnia, I have established a photographic documentation with over 4000 photographs of mosques and churches built in the last 10 years. My records include 92 mosques and 16 Catholic and Orthodox churches. My attention was primarily focused on new buildings and mosques in particular, mosques that do not have a claim of reconstructing the original condition before the war devastation. The research first took place in the city of Sarajevo, where I was also able to carry out interviews with representatives of different institutions involved in the mosque building practices today: Said Jamakovic, Director of the Department of Urban Planning of the Sarajevo Canton, Enes Karic, Dean of the Islamic Faculty Sarajevo, Behija Zlatar, Director of the Oriental Institute Sarajevo and Tarik Zukic, architect and architectural historian, responsible for architectural consulting in the Islamic Community of Bosnia. This research was followed by a journey around four major traffic axes of the country. These tours enabled me to document the post-war building practices of sacral architecture and render its current trends. Bosnia's contemporary spatial politics, as they are reflected and constructed through its religious architecture, indicate that this war is not over for long.

The country's goal of a common and centralized democracy is today being challenged by different forms nationalist activities that are reinforced through elements of ethnic, linguistic or religious difference. The recent history of Bosnia and Herzegovina makes such nationalist motivations understandable to some extent, as they are predominantly fueled by horrific experiences of the recent war. With the end of the communist era, the collapse of Tito's Yugoslavia released nationalist extremism that culminated in a brutal conflict among its former Federal Republics. Its violent escalation first affected Slovenia, then Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and finally Kosovo. The genocide performed on Bosnian Muslims by Bosnian Croats and Serbs started in 1992,

right after Bosnia's sovereignty as a state was internationally recognized. Over 250,000 people were killed on all sides, a greater number was injured. The war also caused more than 2 Mio refugees, tens of thousands of raped women and girls and over 3,000 destroyed architectural monuments. The controversial Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in December 1995, finally brought an end to the displacement of refugees, "ethnic cleansing", concentration camps, mass rapes, and other violations of human rights.

Although the end of fighting was welcomed by most, a compromise made for peace divided the country into two entities: the Federation of Bosniaks and Croats and the Republic of Srpska, thus effectively legitimizing the new, brutally-constructed, political and demographic landscape. Yet, this internal political boundary is not the only one tearing apart the unity of the Bosnian state and creating difficulties for a peaceful coexistence between the two entities. The present conflict is rendered in the Bosnian demographic structure, which is echoed in religious architecture on all sides. The ethnic maps of Bosnia from before and after the war clearly indicate a tremendous shift from ethnically very mixed to highly consolidated and homogeneous territories. This course is significantly affected by the need for demarcation of territories. Following the massive destruction of the built environment during the war, most significant spatial implications of this process are reflected in the mushrooming phenomenon of religious architecture and its competitiveness for visibility. Territorial domination is thus created and reflected through religious architecture, as visible in the competing signs of religious presence, such as over-sized minarets and church towers.

For example, the Serbian Orthodox church in Jezero is neither finished nor yet in use, but its bell-tower was obviously given priority for completion. Such expressions of territorial dominance are even more explicitly visible in the silhouette of the city of Mostar. Here, the Croats have marked their territory with a cross on the top of the hill, whose enormous size and nightly illumination aim for a remote and perpetual presence. In the city itself, the height of the oversized church towers was "limited" only because the towers of the Cathedral of Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, could not be superseded. In response, the Muslims in Mostar called on their regional ancestry by referencing the city's Ottoman heritage and enhancing this heritage with new, even more monumental features. While the two minarets in Mostar originally symbolized royal patronage, this historical reference was ignored when they were replicated in other regions on a monumental scale, creating similar doubling effects with minarets. For example in Krajina, a region that was not affected by war devastations, a new mosque was built in the courtyard of an old one, and not because more space was needed.

This trend for architectural display of religious dominance shows how the recently-shifted political arrangements have conditioned new spatial configurations in Bosnia's religious architecture. Considering the recent violent past and the current state-formation processes, current expressions of nationhood in Bosnia are tightly linked to religious identities. While the many different ethnicities in Bosnia share a common history, the means for establishing a separate national identity depends on a particular utilization of cultural heritage, language, and religion. Being the most significant element of difference between the Bosnian ethnicities, religion represents the main vehicle for establishing a particular national identity, whereas religious architecture serves as a visual instrument for communicating allegiance. That this communication process is out of control is understandable from the government's handicap to carry out many major

political decisions, as they need to be agreed by all three sides and also approved by the Office of the High Representative of the International Community. Given the intricacies of internal politics in Bosnia, no institutional regulation is in charge of controlling the contemporary religious building practices. In this respect, the sky sets the only limit to the height of minarets and church towers. Signifying territorial control, mosques and churches in Bosnia have thus replaced the national flags that fulfilled this purpose right after the war. As solidified flags, they reflect the infiltration of political boundaries into architecture, as well as the instrumental role the country's religious institutions play in its spatial politics. Facing the homogenization of religious architecture to become a symbol of ethnic difference, mosques and churches in Bosnia today are not only built to fulfill liturgical or social functions. Rather, they are progressively becoming spatial instruments for the continuation of war in the time of peace.

In this context, contemporary Islamic architecture in Bosnia is facing major challenges regarding rebuilding and reconstruction after the war devastations. According to Andras Riedlmayer, a historian and the Aga Khan Librarian at Harvard University, who was commissioned by the Council of Europe to research the "systematic destruction of Bosnia's cultural heritage," this targeted annihilation included "major libraries, archives, museums, ca. 1,200 mosques, 200 mostly Catholic churches, and over 1,000 other historic buildings."<sup>1</sup> While these numbers vary in different sources, it is important to emphasize that all ethnicities suffered destruction or damage of their cultural heritage. Yet, one common feature in these numbers can be taken as a fact – that the quantity of destroyed mosques far outweighs the amount of destroyed churches. Nevertheless, "the result is what a Council of Europe report characterized as "a major cultural catastrophe."<sup>2</sup> The process of targeted destruction of Bosnian material culture is currently debated in the scholarly work under notions of "*cultural genocide, cultural cannibalism, identicide, warchitecture and urbicide*."<sup>3</sup> As a part of Bosnian material culture, mosques belong to its symbolic landscape that characterized not only Muslim, but also a hybrid Bosnian culture before the war. Constituting a particularity of a place, as analyzed by Pamela de Condappa, they also "act as narratives of collective memory that underpin the cohesion and identity of groups."<sup>4</sup> Then, the destruction and debasing of such a symbolic landscape contributes to erasure of Bosnian cultural identity, aiming for a revision of its collective memory from a hybrid, multiethnic and pluralist society to three religiously and ethnically homogenized and mutually hostile entities.

This process, also theorized under the complex term of "Balkanization," continues to be taking place today. Thus, the Bosnian Muslims are playing a significant role to what extent and in what way they contribute to the creation and revision of their collective memory. Then, the process of building and rebuilding of mosques in Bosnia first involves a reconstruction of both physical and social structures. The refugees and survivors of the concentration camps are increasingly returning to their homeland and rebuilding their devastated homes. In the village of Srednje for instance, the community is now building a new mosque next to the place where the old one once stood, which was destroyed by the Serbian Četniks during the war. Following the destruction, the Četniks have also erected a pig stall on top of the ruined mosque, probably aiming to de-sanctify the place and humiliate eventual returning refugees. Imam Avdo Hasanović, who returned to the village in 1998, is now organizing the community to build the new mosque. He was very proud on his community's achievements, since most of them returned with literally one

plastic bag of clothes. Despite their poverty, they managed to fund the new mosque from own recourses. While we were generously hosted by his wife, she told us about her son, who was a prisoner in the concentration camp of Manjaca. He survived the concentration camp, where he was working as a cook. While he was brutally beaten every day, he suffered the biggest trauma from being forced to watch his friends being slaughtered like pigs. He is now recovering in a psychiatric recovery program in Norway.

This mosque example renders a very modest, and what I call a revitalizing approach of contemporary mosque design in Bosnia. Many communities first build a mosque prayer space from their own recourses and then look for a donation of the interior furnishing and the minaret. Such a building practice is mostly informal and initiated from within the community. The Bosnian Rijaset in Sarajevo, the central institution of the Bosnian Islamic Community, is mostly contacted after the first building phase has been completed informally. The Rijaset decides about its inclusion in the central administrative structure, as well as about a further support through an imam or eventual funding. The donations coming from the Rijaset, but also from other privately fundraised sources, are mostly very limited, and can only provide for a cheap and therefore standardized minaret design. One of the most successful privately owned construction companies that specialized on ready-made minarets is owned by Kruško Hadži-Muhare from Tešanj. Building over 94 minarets throughout the country, Hadžija Kruško is known for his developing of prefabricated concrete minaret parts that guarantee successfully standing structure in absence of an institutional supervision of construction and its engineering. Instead of a “catalogue,” from which a client can choose the minaret design, the individual communities decide on this comparatively, by identifying and selecting elements they saw in the mosques of their neighboring villages. With this process, the uniqueness of a minaret design becomes a means to represent the distinct character of its builders, their taste and wealth. In this respect, the minaret is perceived as a barometer with which the individual communities measure each other’s religiosity. However, the main motivation behind the oversized minarets, with the highest minaret in Europe in Ustikolina (60m), seems to be an expression of returning refugee’s defiance about their destroyed mosque and homes. Being a flag signalizing the territorial domination, the minaret also acts as a symbol of surviving the war and returning home.

Upon returning home, the Muslim communities face difficult questions of when, where and how to define and then reconnect the path of “traditional” religious practices, a path that was repressed during Communist regime and then resumed in the recent war. Frame of reference for the mosque design is history. The over 490 years of the imperial Ottoman past had a significant impact on the Bosnian material culture since their first invasion in 1386, their completed conquest in 1463 and the final disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1878 and the annexation of Bosnia through the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1908. This segment of history is then understood as the origin of the Bosnian Muslim identity, which is then revived in the contemporary context through the choice of the pencil-shaped design for minarets. Understandably, the Ottoman architecture represents the prevailing historical model for the contemporary minarets in Bosnia, yet it also feeds into Serbian nationalist argument that identifies Bosnian Muslims as Turks, who took on the Serbian land that they recently aimed to re-conquer.

Yet, hardly any of the Islamic communities seems explicitly interested in the Ottoman history in Bosnia and the design of the actual destroyed mosques they are now

rebuilding. According to Behija Zlatar, the director of the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo, whose bombed archive represents one of the major losses not only for Bosnian, but the entire Mediterranean cultural heritage, only two Islamic communities visited the archive after the war for getting information on what has been destroyed. While Zlatar criticized the contemporary building practices as “building in unknowing,” she also pointed out that it would be almost impossible to provide an adequate advice for these communities, since the majority of the archival material has been burned to ashes. Yet, the eradication of the historical evidence of the Muslim existence in Bosnia, also allows for them to break away from the Ottoman tradition and look for other referents.

In this respect, the Ottoman precedents are not just identically copied or reproduced; they are also added new features. The minaret of the mosque in Srednje pear-like roof, for instance, was chosen by the imam Hasanović. For him, this motive represents a symbolic reference to the time of the Prophet, which is a position rooting his community in a longer-lasting and trans-national tradition. The šerefet, the balcony, of the same mosque, similarly designed in many other visited mosques, also represents a novelty in minaret design coming from the standardized production of pre-fabricated concrete elements. The so-called “balustrade on meter” is currently a very popular feature in the contemporary housing building strategies that now suffer from competing signs of prestige expressed through concrete horses, sleeping beauties and upside down ancient columns. Such infiltration of domestic paradigms into sacral architecture, together with Kruško’s minaret sophisticated building technology has led to an industrialization of a minaret as a ready-made product. Yet, the technological innovations have also allowed for new elements to be introduced to the contemporary minaret design, which redefines the minaret’s function, but it also has an impact on the community’s social practices as well. For instance, some communities choose a minaret illumination to be applied to the entire steal, creating a disco-ball-like effect at night. Consequently, the remarkable effect of these new “disco-minarets” has conditioned changes in the religious practices, whereby illuminations are employed to signalize the evening prayer on a daily basis and not only for religious festivities like before the war. Despite existing loudspeakers, most minarets in Bosnia are still used for their traditional purpose as a place from where the call of prayer could be widely perceived. Yet, the new technologies of communication have evoked an additional function to minarets as holders for telecom antennas, which now represents a new source of income for the mosque community.

However, the novelties in Bosnia’s mosque architecture are not only coming with new technologies, but also from another set of historical and geographical referents such as the Islamic Center in Zagreb, Croatia. Built from 1981-1987, this mosque represents one of the two significant examples of the mosque buildings during the Communist regime. The other example is the famous Sherefudin’s White Mosque in Visoko built in 1980 by Zlatko Ugljen. Becoming internationally known receiving the Aha Khan Award for architecture While the White mosque left a significant impact on writing about contemporary mosque design, but surprisingly it does not have it does not have any visible impact on the contemporary mosque design in Bosnia. The Islamic Center in Zagreb however, which became known as a triumphal achievement of the 23,500 Muslims living in Croatia in 1981 is now referenced in several examples throughout the country. The expressive mushroom like dome combined with an extensive program of an Islamic and educational center became a new paradigm for large scale projects. This

expression of monumentality stands against the new models coming from the outside of the country. A new architectural language of “airport-style” mosques, currently developing mostly in the capital, Sarajevo, has been closely tied to the monetary donations from Saudi Arabia. Next to the King Fahd Mosque in Sarajevo, Saudi Arabia is sponsoring a whole range of large scale Islamic Centers throughout the country, which are currently exhibited in the center. This kind of development does not only affect the building of new structures, but it also influences reconstruction of older monuments, resulting in “tabula rasa” (re)building strategies of mosques that were only slightly damaged during the recent war. Many other Islamic countries are currently also building their mosques in Sarajevo, such as the Kuwaiti, Malaysian, Jordanian, Indonesian mosque, etc. These donated mosques also act as cultural centers. Being representative of the donating country’s culture, they can be understood as cultural embassies through mosques. Thus, their representative architecture homogenizes their own culture to the religion of Islam only. In addition, these foreign donations are both very welcomed and very controversial, not only because they impose their own stylistic preferences and ignore local context or building traditions, but because of their missionary program. While the King Fahd mosque in Sarajevo is one of the most controversial examples of Wahabi missionarism in Bosnia, it also provides a community and educational center offering diverse language and computer courses for free, which is a unique case compared to other foreign centers with similar program, such as the British Council for example. Although these educational possibilities are offered to non-Muslim population as well, they are mostly taken advantage by Muslims. Then, the tension between the indigenous, converted and foreign communities adds to the already disunited and fragmented Bosnian Umma.

Perhaps, Bosnia could rather be learning from a creative engagement of the foreign donations and its own recourses as suggested by the two contemporary mosque examples designed by the Bosnian architect Amir Vuk. Built with a Kuwaiti donation, the new mosque in Tuzla is attached to a boys-madrassa. The architect combined the architectural signature of the donor with elements of the local building traditions, with creative and minimal means, through carpet design and shadirwan. By blurring the boundaries of the outside and inside, the entire mosque takes on a L-shaped plan, which can be expanded through the openable façade elements that enable an outdoor prayer. While the light seems to be the major guideline in his design, the whiteness of the space is only interrupted by the forest like column and dome structure. The use of wood is also playfully employed in his second mosque project in the mountain village of Ostojici. Using traditional shingle roof and stall-like shape, Vuk’s design integrated this small mosque into the agricultural setting. That this statement of a critical regionalism will have any impact on other contemporary mosque designs in Bosnia is rather questionable, but it certainly points at the existence of the country’s own potential and recourses to engage with its ongoing process of identity formation towards a more peaceful future.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Andras Riedlmayer, “The Destruction and Reconstruction of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage, 1992-1996: A Post-war Survey of Selected Municipalities” <<http://www.savingantiquities.org/pdf/BosHeritageReport-AR.pdf>> accessed on April 17, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Pamela de Condappa, “Cultural Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina; Destroying Heritage, Destroying Identity” (Unpublished paper, source: <<http://metamedia.stanford.edu/projects/culturesofcontact/121>> accessed on April 15, 2006):1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.