7

IMMIGRANTS, MOSQUES, AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Challenges for urban design and planning

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Introduction

In recent years the steady flow of immigrants from other lands and cultures has greatly increased social pluralism (points of view, values, and needs) in cities across Europe, creating new challenges for urban design and urban planning. This chapter examines the immigrant influx from a thematic viewpoint – namely, the placement and construction of buildings of a religious nature – and from the specific geographical viewpoint of Italy. In this country, the provision of proper places of worship for some immigrant groups has become an increasingly pressing problem, as it has triggered heated conflicts in numerous Italian cities (Triandafyllidou 2002). Accordingly, the chapter first presents the Italian case and then offers suggestions on how to rethink urban design and urban planning as a means for responding to this emerging issue.

Migration and religious diversity in European and Italian cities

The history of migration in European countries in the years after the Second World War varies from country to country but nonetheless is characterized by several general trends across the western European countries (Fassmann & Münz 1994; Kocsis et al. 2016). During the last two decades, migration in Europe has become more dynamic and complex, with further complexities during the last few years because of two main factors: the political crises in the neighboring areas of Asia and Africa – which have led to an increase of illegal immigration, refugees, and asylum seekers – and the economic crisis, which has increased the intra-European migration (Trenz & Triandafyllidou 2017).

Against this backdrop, Italy has its own challenges. First, international immigration flows to Italy started to become significant only in the 1990s – at least two decades later than in other western European countries, such as France and Germany, for example. In 1991, the number of foreigners residing in Italy was around 350,000 (about 0.6% of the population). By 2017, this figure had risen to five million (8.3% of the overall population), with the majority of immigrants coming from countries outside the European community (mainly Morocco, Albania, and China) (ISTAT 2017); if we add the number of immigrants present in Italy without legal documents, estimated around 400,000 (Fondazione ISMU 2016), the total number amounts to 9% of the overall population.

Second, for centuries Italy was a country dominated almost exclusively by the Catholic religion, which therefore played a central and pervasive role in the social, cultural, and political spheres of the country. Only in the last few decades – owing to the varied religious beliefs of the many different immigrants – has Italy started to experience a shift from an overwhelming Catholic majority towards a tapestry of diverse religions (Pace 2013). For instance, about one third of the migrants residing in Italy come from Muslim countries, and another third come from mainly Christian Orthodox regions, while the size of Hindu groups is also growing (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS 2017). This has come as a shock to some Italians, who were not used to this religious diversity causing changes in the composition of Italian society, but also affecting the country's diverse urban environments. In fact, Italian cities are experiencing development of places characterized not only by a different ethnicity (Grandi & Tanzi 2007), but also by a different religious character. Some of these places directly serve religious purposes, such as places of worship and burial grounds; others are just indirectly related to particular practices influenced by religion, such as *halal* butchers. These spaces still represent a minority in the overall Italian urban landscape. Nevertheless, they are now emergent in major cities such as Milan, Turin, Rome, Bologna, and Florence, characterized by a significant presence of immigrants. Limited incidence notwithstanding, the perceptions of "alien" spaces and their impact on the public opinion are significant, as evidenced by the increasing political attention and related policies addressing this issue.

The case of Islam is particularly significant in this regard, because of both the magnitude of the Muslim presence and the perceived and actual "cultural divide" between Muslims and the native population. In Italy, as in many other European countries, Islam is the most common religion practiced by the immigrant population and *de facto* the country's second religion after Catholicism, with around 1.5 million worshipers (Introvigne & Zoccatelli 2013). For several reasons, many Muslim migrants consider not only their ethnicity, but also their religion as a central pillar on which their identity as immigrants is formed (Allievi 2010; Saint-Blancat 2002). In what follows, we will focus on Muslim places of worship, considering their relevance and how they are addressed by urban policies in general, and planning regulations in particular.

Muslim places of worship in Italy

In Italy, as well as in many migrant-receiving countries, there are two main types of places where Muslims gather to worship: formal "purpose-built mosques" (i.e., mosques in total compliance with the law and with all the requisite building permits, which are intended to be permanent) and informal prayer halls (i.e., spaces only in partial compliance with the law, or totally illegal, but accepted by worshipers only as provisional solutions).

Formal purpose-built mosques are iconic buildings, usually characterized by a dome, minarets, and Arabic scripts and symbols (Allievi 2010); they are built purposefully, following all the planning rules and building procedures. Most of them are built thanks to the financial support of organizations (e.g., foundations) and foreign governments. Currently (2018), fewer than ten purpose-built mosques exist in Italy, usually located outside the city center. They are quite isolated and often difficult to reach.

Informal prayer halls are small and simple prayer rooms. They are frequently located in former apartments, shops, or warehouses and have no recognizable external signs identifying their function. They are mostly temporary and informal places. In the majority of cases, they respond to the Muslims' daily prayer needs – even if they are frequently too small for necessities related to special occasions, such as Ramadan. Due to their informal status, no accurate data are available on their number; however, it is estimated that about 1,000 such prayer halls exist in Italy (Chiodelli

2015). As Allievi (2009, 25–26) argues convincingly, these figures "may seem surprising, given the widespread assumption that Muslim places of worship are few in number. Therefore, there is no problem of a lack of places of worship. . . . The problems that arise . . . are of a qualitative, not a quantitative, nature." This point is crucial: the overall availability of Muslim places of worship in Italy is quantitatively quite adequate for the number of worshipers. Hence, in Italy (as well as in other European countries), we cannot say that there is scarcity *per se* of Muslim places of worship. However, there is scarcity of *formal* and *appropriate* Islamic places of worship. This is not the case in France, where about 200 purpose-built mosques have been built (Allievi 2009). But in Italy, almost all mosques are informal prayer rooms, which do not satisfy the Muslims' need for public recognition, visibility, and dignity, which the building of a solemn formal mosque would provide. As has been argued: "For many Muslims in the diaspora the importance of the mosque has . . . come to rest in this symbolic role as a mark of their presence. Sacred or not, mosques increasingly represent Islam in the West to Muslims and non-Muslims alike" (Metcalf 1996, 17–18). Furthermore, there are also practical problems linked to the informal character of prayer halls. Such places have a precarious status; hence they are always at risk of being closed down. In many cases they are too small; often they have been established in inappropriate locations, from both an architectural viewpoint (e.g., in basements) and from the point of view of building and zoning codes (e.g., in residential areas without parking lots, which may cause conflicts with the local population).

The case of Rome is particularly interesting in this regard. In fact, Rome hosts the first purpose-built mosque constructed in Italy, inaugurated in 1995. This mosque is, at present (2018), the largest in the country, and it can hold around 12,000 worshipers (Figure 7.1). However, this mosque is not sufficient to satisfy the varied religious needs of the Islamic population residing in Rome, currently around 120,000 people, who belong to different ethnic groups (mainly

Figure 7.1 The formal mosque in Rome.

Source: Photo by Anna Botta

Bangladeshis and Egyptians). For this reason, several informal prayer rooms have mushroomed in the city. Our research discovered more than 30 informal prayer rooms in the city (but the actual number could be around 40–50).

Most of these prayer halls are located in the southeastern part of the city – although a few are also located in the central areas (close to St. Peter's Basilica and around the central railway station, two areas characterized by a high concentration of immigrants). Some of these prayer halls are quite old. Others were founded several years ago but changed their location over the years in order to find better premises, as is the case of *Dar al Salaam*, in Laurentino. However, for the large majority of cases, informal prayer halls in Rome are recent establishments. Most of the informal prayer halls are located in "residual" spaces, such as former garages or basements in residential buildings. They are usually small, with insufficient ventilation and poor lighting.

In regard to the organization and design of their internal spaces, these are also quite similar: They are composed of a main room for prayer, an area for ablution,[1] and a wardrobe. The main difference is that longer-established prayer halls are usually larger and more structured, as they may include an office, a room for language and Koran courses, etc. Such spaces, although not directly connected to prayer, are nonetheless important. In fact, Muslim prayer halls play the typical role of many gathering places for minorities in foreign countries; hence, they provide help and social assistance for newcomers and people in need and offer cultural and social activities for children and young people (Germain & Gagnon 2003). In terms of their insertion in the urban fabric, in most of the cases prayer halls are located in peripheral neighborhoods, characterized by a low availability of public transportation and parking lots. They have no recognizable external signs indicating their function, apart from small plaques with Arabic scripts or symbols. As a consequence, their presence is usually not recognized by non-Muslims (Figures 7.2 and 7.3).

Figure 7.2 Main entrance of Rome Muslim Center.

Source: Photo by Anna Botta

Figure 7.3 Main entrance of Dar al Salam mosque.

Source: Photo by Anna Botta

Regulation of mosques in Italy

One of the main reasons for the lack of formal and permanent purpose-built mosques in Italy is often the opposition of local council authorities (Chiodelli & Moroni 2017; Saint-Blancat & Schmidt di Friedberg 2005). This opposition is due to different reasons, such as security concerns, cultural hostility, or even Islamophobia. In almost all cases, it materializes mainly through planning and building controls. In this regard, it is worth stressing that Italy shares many of these controls with several other European countries. Despite some differences in specific legal frameworks, local authorities in many other European countries have the *de facto* power, through planning regulations and controls, to block or hamper the construction of certain places of worship (Eade 1996; Gale 2005; Gale & Naylor 2002).

In Italy, the legislative framework governing places of worship is quite complex, and comprises four normative levels, as follows.

The constitutional level

The Italian Constitution defends the freedom of individuals and groups to profess their own religion. The availability of a place of worship is considered intrinsic to this constitutional right. In a nutshell, the principle of religious freedom cannot be reduced to inward prayer, but must also be expressed through collective prayer in a devoted place of worship (Bettetini 2010).

The national level

National laws impose no specific restrictions on the construction of new places of worship, whatever the religion. New places of worship are subject to ordinary planning regulations, as is any other building.

The regional level

In Italy, town planning legislation is mainly a regional prerogative. Hence, each region has its own planning legislation – which, obviously, on paper should be congruous with the national laws and the Constitution. However, certain regions have recently passed planning laws that discriminate against several minority religions (Islam in particular), with reference to building places of worship. Lombardy is a blatant case in this respect. Lombardy planning law no. 2/2015 introduced several clauses that hamper religious minorities, and Islam in particular, in building their places of worship. These obstacles, for instance, concern the requirement for new places of worship to respect the "particular characteristics" of the Lombardy landscape, the requirement to draw a specific plan – the "Plan of Religious Facilities" – for (new) places of worship only, and the possibility to conduct a public municipal referendum on a proposal to build new places of worship. Basically, the law introduces "fuzzy" planning and building criteria that give leeway for discretionary decision-making in each council area. At the same time, it introduces special requirements that apply exclusively to the religious facilities of religious minorities and open the door to bureaucratic delays and complications (Chiodelli & Moroni 2017). It is worth stressing that Lombardy planning law no. 2/2015 is an extreme case of over-discriminatory planning laws in Italy. There are also several regions that, on the contrary, do not set any specific constraints to the construction of minority places of worship. This is the case, for instance, in the Region of Lazio, where Rome is located. However, this does not change the fact that purpose-built mosques are usually not present in these territories. The reason is related to the municipal level of government that is discussed next.

The municipal level

Planning activities at the municipal level must take place within the framework of the regional planning law. In some cases, as in the case of Lombardy planning law no. 2/2015, the regional framework sets explicit clauses that allow local authorities to directly impede the construction of (or conversion of an existing building into) a place of worship for minority religions; hence, if for any reason a local municipality does not welcome the construction of a mosque, it can block it through planning measures.[2] Even in regions where the regional planning law does not allow local authorities to implement such discrimination, municipalities have several technical devices for reaching the same goal. This occurs, in particular, through the biased application of planning regulations, sluggish administration, bureaucratic holdups, and extra red tape reserved for "special interest" groups. Several cases of this kind have been documented in many Italian regions (Bettetini 2010; Roccella 2008). If we combine the possibility of discretional treatment by local authorities with an often overt popular hostility towards Muslims (Wike et al. 2016), it is easy to understand why purpose-built mosques do not spread in Italy, despite the desire and many attempts of Muslim organizations. At the same time, municipal authorities also have the possibility to close informal prayer rooms for "technical reasons." As mentioned, in fact, most of the informal prayer rooms are located in former garages or cellars, often without proper authorization and permits. According to planning and building regulations, these places are normally

not adequate to host collective activities – such as collective prayer, for instance – because of their insufficient ventilation and poor lighting, or their lack of emergency exits. Hence, local authorities can easily close these spaces down, in particular if they are pressured by local residents or political parties, as has occurred several times in Rome (for instance, a prayer room in Tor Pignattara neighborhood was shut down in October 2017 for violation of planning and building regulations).

Rethinking urban design and urban planning

The difficulty faced by Islamic places of worship in Italy is primarily the outcome of a widespread social and political opposition. Therefore, in order to change the situation, it is necessary to embark on a social and political battle. However, there are several crucial challenges also for urban design and urban planning. In particular, we want to discuss and criticize three beliefs that are still influential in urban design and urban planning, which often end up, sadly, endorsing certain socio-political trends.

First, there is the tendency to believe that when typological, formal, dimensional, and decorative elements are homogeneous, they necessarily and unequivocally strengthen the identity of a place. This belief emerges in the aforementioned regional law of Lombardy, according to which the design of religious buildings must provide "architectural and dimensional congruity of the places of worship with the general and peculiar characteristics of the landscape of Lombardy, as provided for in the Regional Territorial Plan."[3] The text of the law reveals the fear that alien architecture different from that "typical of Lombardy" may undermine the visual characteristics that identify the local landscape.

Actually, Lombardy's landscape is already in itself heterogeneous and diverse, similar to the Italian landscape in general. In fact, its uniqueness is the fruit of countless historic stratifications among various architectural, construction, and decorative traditions ascribable to different places and cultures. Italy in its whole, for example, is studded with architectural masterpieces originating exactly by its encounter with Arabian and Byzantine architecture and art. In Venice, for example, the blending of Arabian and Byzantine elements with Lombardy-Romanesque and International Gothic allowed the creation of a peculiar and original synthesis: the church of San Marco is indeed an extraordinary union between the East and the West. Also, the stylistic elements of the Doge's Palace recall Arabian and Byzantine architecture (Fontana 2012). Innumerable other cases of such blending are found in Sicily, and even in Lombardy (Fontana 2012).

The variegated architectural and urban landscape in Italy highlights how diversity is not necessarily a threat for the identity of a place. Identity originates, in fact, not by tracing boundaries and by excluding what is considered the "other" and is beyond those boundaries. On the contrary, the uniqueness of a place often originates from the fact that it becomes a point of intersection where people and cultures coming from different places actually meet (Dovey et al. 2009; Massey 1994).

Second, there is the tendency to think that the sense of place is necessarily and principally linked to the past. For example, the current Landscape plan of the Region of Lombardy envisages regulations that aim "to protect the structural elements of historical memory" (Regione Lombardia 2010: 23); in this perspective, new buildings must "respect the traditional formal characters and building techniques (typology, materials and building details equivalent to those of the original nucleus)" (24). Indeed, on the one hand, there is an architectural and artistic patrimony of great value in Italy, which must be protected. On the other hand, though, vital places have developed over time and the desire to codify and crystallize their character *rigidly* means to interrupt their inevitable evolution and adaptation. The sense of place is not reducible to something rigid and immutable (Massey 1994) but transforms together with the life of its inhabitants.

Moreover, it is possible for the character of a building or of an urban place to remain unchanged, even if its spaces are modified. Actually, transformations can even highlight the character of a space: its formal logic, its DNA. Architect Rafael Moneo (1985) notes how the construction of a building is only the beginning of its life; the desire to maintain it rigidly in all its aspects (as it was realized originally) means to crystallize it in a precise moment – and therefore interrupt its "lifecycle." On the contrary, if the initial construction and geometric principles are clear and readable, a building can maintain its character despite undergoing innumerable changes throughout its history.

Third, certain laws and cultural norms tend to suggest that the identity and character of a place are reducible to its architecture or its physical form, and that it can be codified and protected by a series of rules involving morphological elements. Actually, the character of a place is difficult to codify because it emerges from the continuous interaction between the people that inhabit it – or pass through it every day – and its physical structure (Dovey 2010). As highlighted by Dovey et al. (2009, 2612–2613),

> while planning codes and consultants' studies generally try to reduce character to a set of formal elements, the ways it is experienced in everyday life tend to resist attempts to separate the social from the physical. Struggles to prevent the wrong kinds of building can easily slip into the exclusion of the wrong kinds of people. . . . A serious threat to character may lie in the desire to reduce it to a series of fixed features which turn character into caricature.

If we truly start to consider places as complex living systems – whose identity emerges from the mutable interaction between various spaces and people, and from a continuous exchange with other places – we will be able to assert that the insertion of a mosque in the architectural landscape of an Italian city does not necessarily constitute a threat for the characteristics that identify the local landscape. Indeed, it can be a transformation even capable of emphasizing the character of the place, contributing towards its evolution and uniqueness.

Therefore, the problem is not to rigidly *confirm* the historical memory, standardizing colors and materials or codifying all the stylistic and formal elements in great detail. The challenge for architecture and for urban design consists in knowing how to insert new elements in the lifecycle of a given place, how to cooperate with the (social-spatial) emerging transformations, and how to satisfy the many needs continuously evolving (Ouf 2001). The pertinent questions are thus totally different: for example, what is the spatial principle or structure that allows a place, a complex of buildings, or a single building to keep its integrity, while accommodating countless transformations made by history? This question concerns the design of new buildings and their ability to insert themselves in a specific urban context and to adapt to the spatial and social changes in that context over time. In this regard, open incremental (urban) structures are of particular interest, as they are designed with the aim to welcome subsequent unforeseeable transformations without losing their founding characteristics.

These considerations invite us to deeply rethink not only the culture of architecture and urban design, but also the planning regulations (and bureaucratic procedures) that affect the built environment. With reference to the latter aspect, according to our opinion, it is a matter of adopting a more impartial perspective towards transformations and possible uses (Moroni 2007, 2010, 2015) in at least three scopes of action. First, the traditional and persistent idea that local planning must define the purpose of *use* of areas and spaces – their *function* – should be abandoned in favor of more general and flexible regulations that rather indicate which *negative externalities* any land use must not produce anywhere. In other words, the regulatory attention should abstain from determining the possible *uses* (residential, commercial, religious, etc.) in predefined areas, and concentrate instead on the *undesired effects* of any use whatever (Chiodelli & Moroni 2017). For instance, it is more advisable to establish a maximum limit to noise emitted outside, a threshold that must

not be surpassed (by discos, bars, religious buildings, etc.), instead of trying to coordinate the urban fabric as a whole by defining and localizing all uses, top down. By this logic, religious buildings should be treated like any other building. Second, excessively detailed and meticulous regulations and standards should be avoided as they interpret the goal of respecting context as an unimaginative reproduction of the existing urban fabric. Third, obtaining a building permit should become automatic if the proposed building transformations comply with all the prevailing laws, thereby eliminating any form of administrative discretionary power.

This strategy could be brought into play by shifting the focus of attention onto what has been termed the *right to the city*; the version of this that we prefer here, however, involves primarily the right whereby no obstacles are posed towards certain *basic liberties* (closely linked to the civic experiences, such as freedom of worship, to join associations of one's choice, etc.). These basic liberties would be assured through a radical idea of *equal treatment by the law* (Chiodelli & Moroni 2014).

It is worth noticing that relaxing the planning requirements for the building of various places of worship could better respond also to the frequent concerns for security of the kind highlighted in Lombardy's regional law, for example. In fact, in all likelihood, this would drastically reduce the quantity of "invisible" places and would rather foster their diffusion as visible and recognizable to all citizens and municipal governments. Moreover, to move certain faiths from the informal and distant places to which they are currently consigned, making them instead a visible and integral part of the urban reality, would foster a desirable daily and ordinary perception of their presence.

Conclusion

The aforementioned urban design and policy actions have become particularly urgent in Italy as a means to effectively and justly address the challenges that are currently emerging and respond to the claims and conflicts brought about by immigration. Significant changes in the culture of urban design and regulatory approaches seem indispensable also in other countries. The challenge of pluralism and multiculturalism has become, unavoidably, the main challenge to which design and planning should respond (Chiodelli & Moroni 2017).

Notes

1 Ablution (*wudu*) is the ceremonial act of washing parts of the body (hands, forearms, face, etc.), to mark a break from normal life and enter a state of devotion suitable for worship.

2 The Italian Constitutional Court examined the constitutionality of Lombardy planning law no. 2/2015. The ruling of the Court (Italian Constitutional Court, ruling 63/2016) declared unconstitutional certain requirements; by contrast, some other provisions of the law were not condemned (e.g., the respect for the local regional landscape and the necessity of a specific Plan for religious facilities). After the ruling of the Constitutional Court, a part of the Lombard law is still valid and operative. Moreover, the regional authority may enact a new law on the issue.

3 In the regional law (no. 2/2015), *this* architectural congruity requirement is mentioned explicitly only with reference to minority places of worship. (Clearly, requirements for congruity with the context exist for other types of building, but this specific formulation was introduced in this law exclusively regarding places of worship.)

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Further reading

Burayidi, M. (ed.) (2000). *Urban Planning in a Multicultural Society*. Westport: Praeger. This book collects contributions from leading scholars concerning planning in multicultural societies; the chapters focus on both theoretical and empirical issues.

Burayidi, M. (ed.). (2015). *Cities and the Politics of Difference: Multiculturalism and Diversity in Urban Planning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Several leading scholars discuss, from both a theoretical and a practical viewpoint, ways in which urban planning can enhance and support diversity and inclusiveness in cities.

Moroni, S. and Weberman, D. (eds.) (2016). *Space and Pluralism: Can Our Cities Today Be Places of Toleration?* Budapest: CEU Press. This book discusses how to interpret and foster tolerance in contemporary cities.

Qadeer, M. A. (2016). *Multicultural Cities*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Discusses planning for multiculturalism, offering a tour of three of North America's premier multicultural metropolises (Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles).