Dreams of an Iconic Mosque: Spatial and Temporal Entanglements of a Converted Church in Amsterdam

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on the making of iconicity through religious architecture in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Examining the Fatih Mosque housed in a former Catholic church in the city center, we show in what ways the efforts at making this mosque iconic are shaped by the building's iconic field, by which we denote its entanglement with other (religious and non-religious) sites in the past and the present. This iconic field is characterized by the conversion chains that preceded the mosque, material and discursive legacies of “hiddenness” and contemporary symbolic interactions with nearby sites such as the Western Church. By developing an analysis of the mosque's temporal and spatial entanglements in Amsterdam's urban space, we seek to revitalize a relational and diachronic approach that has suffered from neglect, particularly in social-scientific studies of mosques in the West. Rather than looking at a singular place of worship at a particular moment in time, we draw attention to the relations between Islamic and other religious architecture and to the ways in which this mosque intersects with broader genealogies and geographies of religion, not only by association but also by actual links in relationships, politics or material culture.

Keywords: converted churches, entanglement, iconicity, iconic field, Islam, mosques, religious architecture, the Netherlands.
In 2002, a chunk of stone from one of the towers of the former Catholic church The Sower fell to the ground, right in the middle of the busy street. The church building from 1929, located in Amsterdam’s city center, was in decay. The roof was leaking, the walls were mouldy and parts of the towers ran the risk of collapsing due to rotting woodwork. What remained of the Catholic community had already abandoned and sold the building in 1971. After temporary use for different purposes, it was bought in 1981 by members of a local Turkish Muslim community. Henceforth, The Sower was called the Fatih Mosque and became the largest mosque of Amsterdam. While the Muslim community had always been proud of the building, it was now also faced with the burden of maintaining such an old site. Because it lacked the funds to restore the building, it was advised to seek the building’s enlistment as an official Amsterdam heritage monument. If granted this status, the owners could request financial assistance from the state. In 2001, the building’s historical and monumental value was acknowledged by the city, but the mosque community had not yet been able to repair the punctured tower. When the piece of stone fell, the mosque board commissioned a large-scale restoration of the building, paid for by the mosque’s rental incomes and contributions from its community as well as the municipality.

The restoration project revived a slumbering ambition among some of the mosque’s protagonists: to construct a more visible entrance to the mosque. When the church was first converted to a mosque, the former entrance was closed and replaced by a prayer wall, because this was the prescribed direction of prayer for the new Muslim users. The former church entrance made room for shops, and a small inconspicuous entrance to the mosque was created on the side. The building was not marked as a mosque, except by the replacement of the crosses on the towers by rather inconspicuous crescents and by a small sign next to the door that read “Fatih Camii Amsterdam” (camii is Turkish for mosque). While much of the mosque community had always appeared to be happy with this arrangement, at the time of the restoration new leading figures at the mosque, often younger members, strongly felt that their mosque should become more visible and recognizable. They came to realize that the building’s monumental iconicity as a church (built at a time of Catholic emancipation) did not provide them with the prominent presence as a mosque to which they aspired. They had already started to engage with non-Muslim publics by organizing guided tours in the mosque, and participating in local artistic initiatives and other forms of outreach. They felt that the mosque’s “hidden” appearance no longer corresponded to the public roles it already played and that they envisioned for it. In
their view, the Fatih Mosque should gain a prominent, visible and recognizable presence in the city that would, if not match, at least approximate the iconic status of such nearby sites as the monumental Western Church, the Anne Frank House and the Homomonument (Figure 1).

In this article we examine these efforts at what we term “making iconicity” among protagonists of the Fatih Mosque. We use the term “icon” not only in its colloquial sense of a reputed or representative symbol (as in “iconic landmark”), but also in the analytical sense of sensuous material forms that condense particular (religious) meanings and affects (Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, 2). In line with these two meanings, the protagonists of the mosque on the one hand desired for recognition of their building as “the” mosque of Amsterdam’s historic city center that is plain for all to see. On the other hand, they wanted the building to constitute an irrefutable sign of the rightful place of Islam in the Dutch public sphere. We argue that these efforts at making iconicity have to be understood in the light of not only the onset of self-conscious mosque construction in Western Europe (e.g. Kuppinger 2014; Tamimi Arab 2013), but also of what we call...
the iconic field in which the mosque is entangled. This iconic field includes both the material and discursive legacies of the church building in which the mosque is housed and the distribution of iconic sites to which members of the mosque community relate themselves. Put differently, we explore how the making of iconicity is conditioned by the mosque’s temporal and spatial entanglements in Amsterdam’s urban space.

The case of the Fatih Mosque helps open up new avenues for research on places of worship in general and mosques in particular. Social scientific studies in this field tend to focus on singular sites at a particular moment in time, thus neglecting the interactive nature of religious architecture, that is, the ways in which places of worship are often interwoven with other religious and non-religious sites within a particular geographical space, both in the past and the present. While previous research has emphasized questions of space in analyses of (urban) religion (e.g. Becci, Burchardt, and Casanova 2013; Knott 2005; Tweed 2006), we suggest that the notion of iconic field, which has been developed within the Iconic Religion research project, helps to flesh out a relational perspective that has so far been largely disregarded. We take “iconic field” to refer to the distribution of, and interaction between, iconic places and buildings, giving shape to and co-constituting a particular space in both past and present. Our relational and interactive perspective on religious places builds on the work of Robert Hayden and associates on sacred spaces used by different religious communities over time in Anatolia, Portugal and the post-Ottoman Balkans (Hayden and Walker 2013; Tanyeri-Erdemir, Hayden, and Erdemir 2014). Criticizing the focus on single religious sites in the present, these scholars argue that attention should be paid to what they call “intersecting religioscapes,” referring to the ways in which different religious communities, and their physical manifestations, intersect in a particular geographical space and through time.

The claim that architecture must be understood from a symbolic and interactionalist perspective is, in itself, not new. By using the notion of iconic field, we wish, however, to revitalize a relational perspective that has suffered from neglect, particularly in social-scientific studies of mosques in the West. The focus in the large body of work on mosques has been on various aspects such as the construction process, institutional history and governance (e.g. Maussen 2009; Schmitt 2003), stylistic analysis (e.g. Dechau 2009; Roose 2009; Verkaaik 2012), stylistic criticism (e.g. Erkoçu and Bugdaci 2009; Welzbacher 2008), and geographic and socio-economic distribution in cities (e.g. Kuppinger 2010). Scarce attention has been paid to the ways in which mosques in Western European cities are interwoven with local religious histories and with other (religious and non-religious) sites.
We believe that this neglect is caused not only by an analytical focus on buildings in and by themselves, but also by a tendency in scholarship to set “Muslim minorities” apart from other religious and cultural groups (cf. Beekers 2015). This contributes to a disregard of the interactions between Islamic and other religious architecture as well as of the ways in which mosques are subjected to longer-existing social and political modalities of dealing with churches and synagogues in the public sphere. By contrast, we are interested in the ways in which current debates and practices around mosques intersect with broader genealogies and geographies of religion, not only by association but also by actual links in relationships, politics or material culture. We build on, and seek to extend, the few existing studies that have compared contemporary processes of mosque construction in Europe to historical precedents of church building (e.g. Sunier 2009), as well as recent work on London that has examined the diachronic and inter-religious connections that have shaped religious life and architecture in that city (Dodsworth, Vacchelli, and Watson 2013; Kershen and Vaughan 2013).

Based on archival and literature research on the history of the Fatih Mosque as well as ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the site since 2012, we first explore how the iconic aspirations expressed today in the community of the Fatih Mosque are linked to the history of its building and to the chain of conversions that its site has undergone. We further show that these aspirations are connected to the discursive genre of “hidden” houses of worship, which is grounded in the history of clandestine churches in the Dutch Republic (1588—1795) and which has been appropriated in discussions on mosques in the Netherlands. Subsequently, we observe how in the 2000s protagonists of the mosque began looking for ways to be visually noticed and recognized as “the” mosque of Amsterdam’s historic city center by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, at first mainly by locals, but soon attracting national and even international visitors. We end with the creation of a new, more visibly Islamic entrance for the mosque, which is still being constructed at the time of writing this article. We show that the quest for iconicity entailed a double process of luring people into the mosque and of “coming out” as a mosque in the city, in which the protagonists of the mosque explicitly related themselves to other religious and non-religious sites in the area.

The aspirations to iconicity that we observe among members of the Fatih Mosque community are not, in our view, self-evidently part of the ways in which religious practitioners approach their buildings. Indeed, as we will show, the making of iconicity at the Fatih Mosque was accompanied by marked disagreements between different groups within the mosque.
community, particularly the younger and older generations, regarding the need for a new, more visible entrance. It will become clear that the desire for an iconic mosque among the younger members seemed to be strongly informed by their wish to secure their place as Muslims in Dutch society in the face of prevailing practices and discourses of exclusion. The focus of this article, however, is neither on these intergenerational debates nor on the experiences of exclusion within this Muslim community—both themes that have already received much attention in the literature. We rather aim to tease out the iconic field in which the efforts at making the Fatih Mosque iconic are embedded, thereby showing that the social life of the mosque is not isolated from local culture but rather interwoven with the history and topography of the city.

Conversion chains
The former Jesuit church, in which the Fatih Mosque is housed, is located on the Rozengracht, a broad and busy street that connects the Western part of the city to the canal district, where it touches the majestic Western Church and the Anne Frank House, the latter one of the touristic hotspots of Amsterdam. The church, devoted to Saint Ignatius and popularly known as De Zaaier (The Sower), was completed in 1929 by the important church architect H. W. Valk. Its life as a Catholic place of worship only lasted for just over four decades. The church closed its doors in 1971, after which it was used as a carpet store and a music store. It was bought by a Turkish-Dutch mosque community in 1981 and re-opened as a mosque in 1982. The repurposing of The Sower was an early example of the widespread re-use of church buildings in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam alone, there are around fifty church buildings (and other Christian sites) that have been converted, for religious or secular uses (Bisdom van Haarlem, Rotterdam, and Belvedere 2008, 194—197). Around six of these have been converted into mosques. Today, however, re-use of church buildings as mosques has become less likely, as this has been ruled out by the Dutch leadership of the Catholic Church and is generally not favored by Protestant churches.

The widespread conversion of church buildings marks one of the most important changes in the material presence of religion in Amsterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands. Ironically, the rapid decline of operative churches in the context of an “unchurching” population should be understood against the backdrop of the extraordinary boost of church building in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, triggered in part by the emancipation of Catholics. When the Dutch Republic came into being in the late sixteenth century, the (Calvinist) Dutch Reformed Church gained the
position of public Church, supported by the state and civic authorities. Expressions of the Catholic faith were suppressed and the Catholic organizational infrastructure was dismantled (Israel 1995, 361—367). Catholics—as well as non-Calvinist Protestant communities—were for a long time forbidden to build churches and had to resort to what are now called schuilkerken, clandestine (but tolerated) “hidden” churches. The influence of French revolutionary forces and the concomitant demise of the Dutch Republic in 1795 brought religious freedom to Catholics who were once again allowed to build churches. Especially after the reestablishment of the episcopal hierarchy in 1853 they did so with a vengeance (Van Eijnatten and van Lieburg 2005, 279—282).

The Sower was a product of this Catholic emancipation. The history of this church community goes back to 1663 when Jesuits created a clandestine church in the attic of a house called De Zaaier, “The Sower,” on the Keizersgracht. In 1837 the parish erected a new, purpose-built church on this site, which replaced the clandestine church (Von der Dunk 2001). Later, when the parish wanted to have a church space that was more centrally located, it bought a building on the Rozengracht in 1899. This building, named Constantia, had been erected in 1890 by the socialist Sociaal-Democratische Bond (Social Democratic League) as their headquarters. The party’s famous leader Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, a Protestant minister turned anarchist, used to give speeches there (Figure 2). The sale of Constantia to the Jesuits had occurred through a middle-man. The socialists were so dismayed when they found out who the new owner was that they refused to hand over the keys. Nonetheless, the Jesuits managed to take possession of the building and converted it into a church, which they named the Saint Joseph Chapel (Figure 3; Van

FIG 2
The last meeting of the Socialists in their building Constantia, with Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis standing behind the lectern. April 16, 1899 (Amsterdam City Archives).
Dael 2014, 226). The Catholic art critic Jan Kalf wrote in 1906 that so few changes had been made to the building that one could not truly speak of an ecclesiastical interior: “it remains the theatre of socialists, where in place of the stage an altar, in place of the dressing rooms the sacristy was placed … On the façade only a big iron cross on top indicates the purpose of the building” (cited by Van Dael 2014, 226). In the 1920s it was decided to abandon The Sower on the Keizersgracht (because more and more people were leaving the canal district) and to build a new church on the location of the Saint Joseph Chapel on the Rozengracht. This new church building, a Neo-Romanesque church with two large towers, adopted the name of the old clandestine church: The Sower. Here, an initial period of flourishing (Figure 4) was soon followed by the steady decline of the parish after the Second World War.

Before it bought The Sower, the Fatih Mosque community had been accommodated since 1977 in another former church, the Protestant Nieuwezijds Chapel in the city center. This church had been built on the site of an important former Catholic church, De Heilige Stede (The Holy Stead) dating from 1347. Today, it houses a tourist attraction, the “Amsterdam Dungeon.” In an interview with one of us (Daan Beekers), an official of the diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam said that the Catholic Church has always resisted re-use of their church buildings as mosques. He thought that the sale of The Sower to Muslims was made possible by first converting it into a carpet store, which he described as an “illegal intermediate step” (Figure 5). One of the neighbors of the mosque remembered that for some time after The Sower was converted into a mosque, a small group of Catholics would occasionally gather outside the building and pray for the reconversion of the building into a church. Apart from erecting the prayer wall in place of the former church entrance (see below), the new owners made only a small number of changes to the building. They covered the floor with a prayer carpet and added small...
but legible round panels with among others the names of the Prophet Muhammad, his companions and grandsons Hasan and Husayn. A screen was placed to separate the women’s prayer space (located where the altar used to be) and a little room was created to perform wudu, the ritual ablutions (in the former sacristy). The pulpits, stained glass windows and the ichtys symbols on the ceiling were left in place. On the outside the crosses on the towers were replaced by Islamic crescents (we have been told that this happened at night so it would not attract attention).
In several ways, then, the conversion of The Sower into the Fatih Mosque mirrored the earlier conversion of the socialist building Constantia into the Jesuit church (that predated The Sower on the same site). In both cases the conversion was made possible despite misgivings of the original user through an intermediate step and in both cases minimal changes were made to the building, including the cross placed on the roof of Constantia and the crescents replacing the crosses on The Sower. The mosque community faced a similar situation as the Jesuits who converted Constantia, as they erected their own worship space in a place that had been built for different purposes. As the architect Hugo Caron (2006) stated in a booklet designed to raise funds for the restoration of the mosque and the construction of a new entrance: “Being a church rather than a mosque, alterations are necessary. This old church has never been properly adapted to its new use as a mosque.” Generally, however, the members of the Fatih Mosque had never seen this as much of a problem. Further, the transformation into a mosque linked several chains of material conversions: those starting with Constantia (1890), The Sower (1663) and The Holy Stead (1347).

The “hidden” mosque
The Fatih Mosque was the first big mosque in Amsterdam and a source of pride within the Turkish-Dutch community. In the early 1980s, when the institutionalization of Islam was only in its infancy and many Dutch Muslims still congregated in makeshift mosques (Maussen 2009), creating a mosque in such a large and centrally located former church was quite an achievement. This sense of pride has remained over the years. A young mosque congregant who came to Amsterdam for his studies, for instance, told one of us (Daan Beekers) that the Turkish Amsterdammers he met often talked about the Fatih Mosque as a special place that one simply had to see. The first thing that was always mentioned, he said, was that the building used to be a church.

The name “Fatih”, a common name for Turkish mosques, was already adopted when the community temporarily rented a space in the other former church (the Nieuwezijds Chapel). The name refers to the Fatih Mosque in Istanbul, built by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, known as el-Fatih (the Conqueror), who conquered Constantinople in 1453. One of the first acts of the Sultan in the defeated city was the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque (Mansel 1995, 1—2). It is possible that members of the community simply did not think of changing this symbolically charged name when it bought The Sower, but it is also conceivable that they regarded it as fitting for their converted church. The young congregant mentioned above suggested that he sometimes found the tone
in which the elders talked about the conversion somewhat too celebratory, but later nuanced his statement, noting that the pride he mentioned was not “imperialistic” but “a pride centered around the responsibility as servants of God.” To clarify this, he quoted from the Turkish version of the mosque’s website, which states that the purchase of The Sower was not only made possible by the initiative of the “Turkish elders” but also by “Divine Will.” The website recounts the story of a former priest of The Sower who came to the mosque and said that he was honored that the building was once again serving religion. He warned the mosque congregants to look after their community, because if the building would lose its religious purpose, he would “die of grief.” Mehmet Yamali, the mosque’s spokesperson, who was a child at the time, denied any connection between the name and the building, pointing out that the name was adopted when the community was only temporarily renting the other church space.4

The pride that Turkish Amsterdammers feel for the Fatih Mosque stands in contrast with the everyday inconspicuousness of the mosque. Apart from the barely noticeable crescents on the towers, until very recently the mosque community had not put into place any clear signs pointing to the building’s identity, nor constructed a marked entrance that would have matched the grandness of the mosque. This was partly an unintended result of the mismatch between the structure of the church building and the organization of sacred space in Islam. The qibla, the prescribed direction of prayer toward Mecca, was opposite to the direction in which the Catholic users of the building had prayed. The qibla did not point to the former altar of the church but to the other side, the former entrance. Thus, the mosque community decided to build the prayer wall in front of the entrance (Figure 6). A small entrance and sober hallway leading to the prayer room were constructed next to the former church and the erstwhile entrance to the church made room for shops. In this way, the mosque lost the building’s prominent entrance and became inconspicuously located behind a row of shops and the church façade. A result of this is that many inhabitants of Amsterdam do not know the mosque. Many of our friends, colleagues and fieldwork contacts in Amsterdam whom we asked about it were unaware of the presence of the mosque (they had often not even noticed the monumental church building), even though it is the largest mosque of Amsterdam and has been housed in the busy Rozengracht for over three decades.

People visiting the mosque are often struck by its relative invisibility. This is illustrated by the episode on the Fatih Mosque in “Mijn moskee is top” (My mosque is great), a television show broadcasted in 2011 and 2012 about mosques in
the Netherlands. In this episode, television host Samira el Kandoussi was filmed trying to enter the mosque by using the old church entrance. Confusingly, however, it was a hair salon at the time (and currently a bicycle shop). After she greeted him with “salaam aleikum,” the Iranian employee of the shop told her that the entrance of the mosque was the white door next to the church building. The walls were covered in graffiti at the time, and the prominent signs of the grill restaurant and bakery adjacent to the entrance made the mosque entrance even harder to notice. After finding her way in and passing through the long and narrow hall way, Samira expressed a sense of awe upon entering the prayer space, the former church nave: “Wow, mashallah [“God has willed it”; a common Arabic phrase to express praise or appreciation], this is really beautiful,” she exclaimed. This double experience of noticing the mosque’s inconspicuousness on the outside and of awe inside the mosque appears to be common among people visiting the building. The inconspicuousness of the mosque was also pointed out by one of our interlocutors, who had for many years been a member of the city council of Amsterdam-West for the Christian Democrats (and had himself experienced three church closures within his own Reformed Protestant congregation). He had once visited the Fatih mosque for a meeting and noted that he was surprised, when he stood in front of the building, that he did not see any signs identifying it as a mosque, not even a name plaque. To him, it looked like a kind of “schuilkerk” (hidden church).

This use of the term schuilkerk, which refers to the clandestine churches of Catholics and non-Calvinist Protestants in the Dutch Republic, is telling. Notions of “hiddenness” have often been used in discussions about mosques in the Netherlands. Researchers, journalists and architects have regularly argued that up until the 2000s, the presence of Muslim communities...
in the Netherlands had been largely “hidden.” This argument is typically illustrated by pointing to the predominance of mosques housed in re-used buildings that are often not readily recognizable as mosques from the outside (e.g. Erkoçu and Bugdaci 2009; Maussen 2009, 21n; Sunier 2009, 171). The term *schuilmoskeeën* (hidden mosques) has occasionally been adopted in these discussions, referring implicitly or explicitly to the “hidden churches” of the past. Our interlocutor quoted above made this link particularly explicit by describing the Fatih Mosque not as a “hidden mosque” but, despite its iconic appearance as a church, a “hidden church.”

“Hidden,” or clandestine, churches (in)famously exemplify the political strategy of dealing with religious diversity in the officially Calvinist Dutch Republic. Catholic and non-Calvinist Protestant churches were banned, but tolerated in practice as long as they remained out of public sight (Kaplan 2002, 1034). Benjamin Kaplan argues that clandestine churches, of which there were at least 30 in Amsterdam alone in 1700, played an important role in managing the distinction between public and private worship: “By containing religious dissent within spaces demarcated as private, *schuilkerken* preserved the monopoly of a community’s official church in the public sphere” (2002, 1036). Today, clandestine churches are generally understood to belong to a past in which religions did not enjoy equal legal rights. The famous hidden church that has turned into a museum, Ons’ Lieve Heer op Solder (Our Lord in the Attic) in Amsterdam, illustrates the way in which the history of clandestine houses of worship is now presented as part of Dutch cultural heritage.

This well-known history means that the notion of the “hidden church” is ready at hand as a metaphor to describe today’s houses of worship that are not, or scarcely, identifiable as such from the outside, as is the case for many mosques. Yet, so-called “hidden mosques” importantly differ from the clandestine churches of the past: their “hiddenness” does not result from legal arrangements that restrict the public presence of particular religious communities, but rather from social-economic factors and erstwhile expectations of both the Dutch state and Muslim migrants that the latter’s stay in the Netherlands was temporary. What connects these different uses, however, is that the notion of a “hidden” house of worship functions as a discursive genre, denoting the lack of public presence of a religious community—a situation that is seen to be undesirable. Tellingly, the term *schuilkerken* only came into use as late as the nineteenth century, when Catholics adopted it to emphasize and to some extent exaggerate the oppression of their ancestors (Dudok Van Heel 1993).

These normative connotations are clearly reflected in today’s uses of the term “hidden mosques,” which usually
come with the suggestion that houses of worship should not have to retreat from the public gaze. A good illustration of the way in which this term is put to use in debates about contemporary mosques is a discussion some years ago on the design of the so-called Polder Mosque. While its architects presented it as a contemporary alternative for heimweemoskeeën (nostalgic mosques) that are characterized by conventional minarets and dome, opponents reportedly dismissed it as a schuilmoskee, because in their eyes the mosque looked like trendy office space. Similarly, several of our (Muslim and non-Muslim) interlocutors in Amsterdam have expressed that mosques should be recognizable as such. For example, one of the neighbors of the mosque, a Turkish-Dutch man who used to be, in his words, a “pious Muslim” but no longer practices today, explained why he regarded the construction of a new entrance to the mosque as a positive development:

If you are a mosque you also show it, not with only such a little door [as the mosque used to have]. It’s about profiling yourself […] In Turkey a house of God has a big door. If you don’t have that it is as if you think: “no one sees us, so no one is bothered by us,” or from the perspective of the [non-Muslim] Dutch: “I don’t see them, so they don’t bother me.”

He compared the situation to that of homosexuals: “It’s about showing one’s colors, showing who you are.” Our interlocutor who likened the Fatih Mosque to a “hidden church” said that as a local politician he had supported the construction of the purpose-built Western Mosque in Amsterdam, because it meant that “Muslims no longer had to pray in garages and other out of the way places.” For him, building purpose-built mosques was better than converting churches into mosques, because “a church or a mosque has its own characteristics [iets eigens], which you run up against [when you try to convert one to the other].” Here, the value placed on recognizability seems to be not only informed by support for the presence of mosques in public space, but also stemmed from a basic position that the outer appearances of a building should correspond with its “true” nature.

Ironically, The Sower, an iconic church building erected in the heyday of Catholic emancipation by a Jesuit community that had its roots in a “hidden church,” has now become a “hidden mosque” in the eyes of many. The Fatih Mosque, then, is not only linked to the history of clandestine churches by association, but also by the actual history of its material building. Both the legacy of the “hidden” house of worship as a historically grown discursive genre and the legacy of the actual building of the Fatih Mosque reinforce its appearance as a “hidden mosque” and constrain the community’s attempts at becoming more recognizable.
The art of luring people into a mosque

In recent years, protagonists of the Fatih Mosque have actively sought to counter the invisibility of the mosque by increasing contact between the mosque community and people living in the neighborhood, but also far beyond the neighborhood. Mehmet Yamali, who voluntarily works as a spokesperson and tour-guide, has played an important role in this regard. He has become the most influential social broker at the mosque and takes a central place in the efforts to endow the mosque with an iconic status. For that reason, he has also been a key interlocutor in our research into the making of iconicity at the Fatih Mosque. Ever since he came to work at the mosque in 2006, the mosque has increasingly received guests from widely different backgrounds on a weekly or even daily basis. Visitors include groups of tourists (from Indonesia or other Muslim countries) looking for a mosque on Google Maps to perform prayers (salāt). Protestants visiting from Switzerland have come to view the building, offering Mehmet a box of chocolates and their apologies for the Swiss minaret ban of 2009. Schoolchildren come to the mosque for assignments, for example non-Muslim teenage girls with questions like “must women wear the burqa according to Islam?” Buddhists have had their picture taken with the Fatih Mosque’s imam.

The mosque has been visited several times by local aldermen, the mayor of Amsterdam, and organizations interested in “inter-religious dialogue.” Also, we should not forget to mention the many academic researchers including ourselves who come to the Fatih Mosque.

The “hidden” Fatih Mosque has increasingly become a site of public interest (similarly, indeed, to the “hidden churches” of the past) and this is in part due to its very concealed nature as a mosque in a church building. Yet, the mosque has thereby actually become far less “hidden” in the past 10 years. Mehmet has once even said that, to him, the non-Muslim visitors to the prayer space are more important than the mosque congregants. Usually, these non-Muslim visitors have little interaction with mosque congregants and many are in the first instance taken by surprise by the “wow” effect generated by the interior of the building. As Birgit Meyer (2015) argues with regard to the genesis of sensations of awe or “wow” effects, religious things—such as buildings—can often be found to do more than merely represent. In their interplay with bodily sensations, these religious things may “effect a sacred surplus in a more or less powerful, persuasive manner for those involved” (2015, 20). One can say that by allowing visitors to enter the mosque’s prayer space, in a way the aesthetics of the building rather than direct interaction with “Muslims” does the intended work of “inter-religious” or “inter-cultural” encounter.
Besides Mehmet as spokesperson at the mosque, his friend and artist Jaap Kapteyn has played a key role in bringing non-Muslims to the mosque. Jaap has lived in the street behind the mosque since 1982. At first he never visited the mosque, “it was seen as a kind of a strange place that you didn’t go to.” Yet later he became increasingly engaged with the mosque and set himself the task to, in his words, help the mosque community to “emancipate” and to open up the mosque to non-Muslims. “A poison runs through our society, a dangerous venom that I want to extract,” he has said referring to religious intolerance in the Netherlands, especially toward Muslims. On the other hand, he also believed that Mehmet and other mosque congregants were still trapped by “us” and “them” categories. By organizing public events that brought non-Muslims to the mosque, he strove to dampen the mutual fear of the “other”.

Thus, Jaap convinced the organizers of an art route called the Open Ateliers Jordaan to include the mosque. The route in Amsterdam’s central district De Jordaan is held once every two years and allows the public to go in and out of art galleries and even to view artworks in the homes of the neighborhood’s artists. Since 2008, the mosque has participated every two years in the event. By bringing in non-Muslim artists and their works into a mosque, Jaap believed a critical counterpoise could be offered against the division frequently made in Dutch debates between Islam and modern art, the former often perceived as stagnant and in contradiction with freedom, the latter associated with individual expression and progressive politics (cf. Van der Veer 2006). During the event the mosque’s entrance would be made recognizable thanks to the Open Ateliers Jordaan flag, which indicated to the several thousand visitors of the route that this was one of the places they could enter to view art. According to Mehmet, the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet), ultimately based in Ankara, took the collaboration seriously:

When the mosque’s board saw that their superiors at Diyanet found the art project important [because more people visited the mosque], they said let’s continue doing this […]. In this period, the desire for a larger entrance became stronger […]. People were coming to the mosque and said they hadn’t known we were there.

Among the Fatih Mosque’s most successful programs was an interreligious theatrical play in the prayer space. Jaap and Mehmet stressed how special it was to have a play in the prayer space, since it also included music (deemed un-Islamic by some of the congregants) as well as readings from Christian and Jewish holy scriptures.
Using contemporary art within church buildings in order to call attention to mosque spaces has also been employed in other European cities, such as in Venice where in 2015 an artist converted the Santa Maria della Misericordia into a mosque. City officials, police and Catholic church officials protested, the latter saying that the church, closed for over forty years, had never been officially deconsecrated. An Islamic spokesman was quoted by the New York Times saying “Sometimes you need to show yourself, to show that you are peaceful and that you want people to see your culture.” After only a few gatherings, police shut down the “mosque installation,” on the order of city officials who rejected the idea that an art installation could also function as an Islamic house of worship.

Just as the idea of a mosque in an art exhibition was deemed provocative in Venice, not all members of the Fatih Mosque liked the idea of art in a mosque, especially “their” mosque: some of the elderly mosque congregants complained that the paintings hung in the building were blasphemous, others were irritated by the disturbance of business as usual. Mehmet often joked about their “dinosaur” mentality: he had to continuously negotiate with the mosque board about the extent to which the mosque could function as on the one hand a place that could impress non-Muslims and, on the other, a comfortable and familiar space for the men who used the building on a daily basis. Mehmet, in agreement with his friend Jaap, wanted to shake things up a bit, to use the mosque for the rather grand vision of promoting “inter-religious dialogue.” For him, the mosque could play a crucial role in countering prevailing fears of, and prejudices toward, Muslims. His vision for the building was shaped by such nearby iconic sights as the Anne Frank House, the Homomonument, and the Western Church.

The Homomonument, for example, commemorates the persecution of LGBT groups and is located behind the Western Church, at the canal used for the annual Gay Pride. During Gay Pride, its rainbow flag is hung on the tower of the church (Figure 7). Thinking that Muslims and Islam also had a right to such explicit public presence, Mehmet believed that especially the Fatih Mosque, because of its church history and location, could play an important role in increasing the public presence and acceptance of Islam. This position did not indicate approval of the public display of homosexuality. Mehmet even described such public display (of homosexuality but also heterosexuality) as “sexual aggression,” though he said he would not go so far as to support banning such events (in the Netherlands; in Turkey, he said, the situation was different). Nonetheless, both the Homomonument and the Western Church played a central role in his vision of an iconic mosque: “I [i.e. the Fatih Mosque] can’t compete with
the Western Church, or the Homomonument,” he said. “The Western Church has the mystery of Rembrandt’s grave—he was buried there, but where is the grave? Our building doesn’t have anything like that, or like the Homomonument which promotes Amsterdam as a gay capital [with the world’s first gay monument].” On the other hand, proximity to the Anne Frank House and the Western Church could be used to increase the mosque’s public status: “If we could get a small fraction of the visitors of the Anne Frank House and Western Church [i.e. mostly tourists] in a combined tour representing the three religions, Judaism [represented, in Mehmet’s view, by the Anne Frank House], Christianity and Islam, then we would really be on the map.”

Such strategies must be viewed as part of simultaneously and transnationally occurring practices intended to combat anti-Muslim prejudice. To play the symbolic role that Mehmet envisioned, the iconic field in which buildings such as the Fatih Mosque find themselves entangled plays a crucial role.
Likewise in New York City, for instance, proximity to the “hallowed ground” where the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers stood allowed imam Feisal Abdul Rauf to promote his dream of an iconic mosque for global inter-religious peace (Rauf 2012; criticized in Nussbaum 2012). In practice, however, the mosque is also used in more mundane ways, for example by local Muslim employees of companies like American Express who simply need a place to pray. In relation to this, the aspiration to an iconic and cosmopolitan religious building may face resistance by users who may not identify with such iconic aspirations and are more interested in preserving an ethno-religious identity.12

Coming out
Even though the mosque’s activities have successfully attracted visitors of all stripes, there was still a feeling of a mismatch between the acquired role of an accessible, public mosque and the continuing invisibility of the mosque. This feeling was reinforced by regular comments from visitors about the lack of a conspicuous entrance. Thus, when the mosque organized an *iftar* (breaking of the fast) for non-Muslims in 2008, a local politician who attended pointed out that she had not been able to find the entrance and remarked that the mosque should get a more recognizable door. This remark, Mehmet said, “put the whole issue of a bigger door in motion again.”

Cosmetic changes were made in anticipation of a new entrance. Graffiti was removed from the walls and a large sign clearly stating “Fatih Moskee” (Fatih Mosque) and “entree” (entrance) in Dutch was hung above the door at the request of a Diyanet official (Figure 8). The mosque had never had such a sign in the past three decades, but the visiting official told Mehmet that such an unrecognizable entrance simply...
“would not do,” and that a Diyanet sign should be hung until the renovation for a new entrance began. Times had changed: several purpose-built Diyanet mosques had been constructed, others—such as the Aksa Mosque in The Hague, a converted synagogue—had also recently placed visible and clearly recognizable signs.13

The Fatih Mosque’s plans for a new entrance and hallway have been in the making for over ten years. For Mehmet, this has been a challenging process. Not only did he have to deal with the bureaucratic process of changing the exterior of a building designated as a heritage monument, he and other proponents of a new entrance also faced opposition from a part of the mosque community. According to Mehmet, these congregants saw the entrance as a practical thing, nothing more than a way to get to the prayer room:

They are [now] happy [with the plans for a new entrance], but I have also noticed that they were unaware of how ugly our entrance was … Look at that door! [It told them] … look at the Western Church! Aren’t you ashamed of your building? Of your entrance? They [non-Muslims] are nice to you—I say this very often—but do you know what they are thinking? They are Turks, those Muslims: that mess [rozzooi] is a part of who they are, chaotic, unorganized.

Today, the mosque congregants generally agree that the new entrance will make the mosque more recognizable. The entrance is, in Mehmet’s words, its “business card.” In addition to the Western Church, by comparing the future renovated mosque entrance to the Anne Frank House and the Homomonument, Mehmet placed it in an iconic field that includes a set of emblematic places that are important symbols with regard to dominant narratives about Dutch identity. Moreover, both of these places refer to groups that had hitherto been oppressed and hidden but are now widely embraced as crucial parts of the Dutch nation.14 What Mehmet was implicitly saying, perhaps, was that his mosque similarly needed to leave its past as a “hidden mosque” behind, “coming out” as a mosque with the hope of becoming accepted as part of the nation.15 Yet, he did not seem to be completely confident about this scenario: he once said that “when the entrance is finished, we will see what people really think of us.”

Before the construction of a new entrance could begin, the municipal commission concerned with the built environment and monuments (Commissie voor Welstand en Monumenten) had to be convinced of the need for such a new, bigger, and recognizable entrance. In the early 2000s, the architect Hugo Caron, at the time hired by the mosque, had suggested to the mosque board that an overarching plan, to
both restore the building as well as to renovate the entrance, would help persuade the commission (whose advice is usually followed by the Amsterdam City Council). A comparison of the inspection reports on the building’s state shows that while in 2002 there were still many major problems such as a leaking roof, with buckets in the prayer space to catch the water, by 2014 the building had been mostly restored. While in the early 2000s the building’s exterior was brown and the towers had black stains, the restoration made the red of the bricks visible once again. Such procedures were costly, of course, and the mosque had to save for a few years before a new entrance could be realized as well.

The municipal commission rejected several proposals for a new entrance, for example a design that included large glass doors and another that suggested adding a Romanesque arch over the new entrance. Plans to create a larger entrance with three doors were also dismissed. The mosque board, in its turn, was not satisfied with suggestions to only renovate the single door instead of creating a larger entrance. When Mehmet and the second of four consecutively involved architects, Pieter Kok, discussed the matter with the municipal commission, the latter said they did not see the “need” for a larger entrance. But when Mehmet countered that on busy Fridays the mosque has several hundred visitors, and the current narrow entrance was unsafe should there be a fire, the commission’s chairman was convinced of the plan to widen the door and entrance hall. In a letter to the City Council (dated November 10, 2010) the commission wrote:

Given the large number of visitors, the wish to alter the entrance is understandable. [The commission] also deemed it possible, because of the function [of the building], to make a clear accentuation on the outside so that the mosque entrance is recognisable. It has been indicated that a potentially new entrance should relate appropriately to the façade as a whole.

Despite this positive outcome, it still took several years before a design was approved. The final choice for architect Ergün Erkoçu, known among mosque architects for the Polder Mosque design (e.g. Welzbacher 2008), is revealing of the aspiration to be a “modern” and “open” mosque, “accessible” (laagdrempelig) according to Mehmet for all Muslims and non-Muslims alike. One of the architect’s colleagues involved described the process as exceptionally “arduous” (moeizaam) and said that success was made possible thanks to a “professional,” rather than “emotional,” approach. In practice, that meant following the bureaucratic rules set by the municipality diligently so that there would be no possibility of rejecting the plans. Mehmet often sighed when he spoke about the slow process of meeting all the requirements for
altering a heritage monument, and felt that the importance of the mosque was not recognized by the municipal commission. While Amsterdam’s new Apple Store was allowed to make significant (interior) changes to the monumental Hirsch Building at Leidse Square, Mehmet wrote to a former municipal councillor, the mosque could barely get the approval for changing its small entrance. When the renovation of the entrance and hallway did begin in 2015, it was a big relief for Mehmet and other community members involved in the project.

Conclusion

On a Friday afternoon in December 2015 the Fatih Mosque was alive with activity. The new tiles for the hallway had just been delivered and a group of men was at work carrying them in. The tiles were made of dimension stone, Mehmet explained, in a tone that suggested that he would not have settled for less. As the hour of the Friday prayer was approaching, men—young and old—were filing in. Many shot an approving glance at the tiles, piled up in the central hall of the mosque, some touching them to ascertain themselves of their quality. Looking at the old coffee machine standing next to the pile of tiles, Mehmet noted: “We are also getting a new coffee machine. One with fresh beans!” He was hoping, he said, that the “old men” would appreciate that, as they were accustomed to drinking cheap instant coffee. The two new imams of the mosque stood by. The youngest of the two was the first imam in the Fatih Mosque to speak Dutch fluently and to give summaries of his Friday sermons (khutab) in Dutch. He now often takes care of the guided tours that Mehmet used to give. In the meantime, all of the tiles had been brought in through the temporary door in the widened entrance space. The new, decorated wooden doors were going to be ordered soon, Mehmet said. As the Friday prayer was about to start, the Rozengracht outside the mosque witnessed the buzz of everyday city life just like any other afternoon, while in the background the bells of the Western Church started to sound the hour.

The construction of a new entrance is the end-station, for the time being at least, of the renovation of the Fatih Mosque, which had begun with the necessary restoration of the old church building. The preparation and construction of the new entrance took shape in a set of interactions with various circumstances, actors and aspirations, including the constraints that the church building put on the increasing desire of visibility among protagonists of the mosque, the legacy of a discursive genre that framed the mosque as a “hidden” place of worship, local politicians and other visitors who insisted on the need of a more visible entrance, the efforts of Mehmet,
Jaap and others to bring non-Muslims into the mosque and a desire to approximate such nearby icons of Amsterdam as the Western Church and the Anne Frank House. The renovation involved negotiations within the mosque community between (mostly younger) members who formulated rather ambitious plans for their mosque and (mostly older) congregants who were content with their habitual prayer space as it was (as well as with their instant coffee). In the end, as has become clear, the desire for a mosque with an iconic presence in the cityscape got the upper hand.

We have argued that the aspirations to iconicity expressed at the Fatih Mosque should be understood in relation to the material realities of the historical building, local religious history and the discursive genre of “hiddenness” as well as the iconic sites to which members of the mosque community relate themselves. The case of this converted church, located near a tourist hotspot in the city center of Amsterdam, exposes the inadequacy of examining places of worship in isolation from their built environment and at a single moment in time. By contrast, we have proposed an approach to religious sites that pays close attention to their associated iconic fields, shaped by local histories and contemporary interactions between religious and non-religious iconic sites. Efforts at making iconicity at a place like the Fatih Mosque cannot be properly understood if we do not pay heed to its entanglements in space and time.

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Pooyan Tamimi Arab started ethnographic research at the Fatih Mosque in June 2012 in the context of his doctoral research on amplified calls to prayer (Tamimi Arab forthcoming). He has lived in close vicinity to the mosque since 2013. Daan Beekers has conducted fieldwork at the Fatih Mosque (including its neighbors and visitors) in the context of the research project Iconic Religion since September 2014.


See the policy documents “Het kerkgebouw als getuige van de christelijke traditie” (The church building as witness of the Christian tradition), published in 2008 by the Nederlandse Bisschoppenconferentie, and “Een protestants visie op het kerkgebouw: Met een praktisch theologisch oormerk” (A Protestant vision of the church building: From a practical theological perspective, published in 2009 by the Protestantse Kerk in the Netherlands.

The use of “Fatih” for a converted religious building is not unique to this mosque: in 1979 a synagogue in The Hague that could not sustain itself after the Second World War and had been abandoned was squatted and converted by Turkish "labor migrants. " When one of the elders was asked about this period in a 2012 documentary (Aurangzeb, N. 2012. Met het gezicht naar het oosten (Facing towards the East). Hilversum: NTR), he said that at first “we named the mosque Fatih because we had squatted the building.” In 1981 they renamed it Aksa Mosque. The elder explained: “The Jews have [taken] the Aksa Mosque [in Jerusalem] … so we named this synagogue in the Netherlands the Aksa Mosque.” People working at Amsterdam’s Fatih Mosque today generally avoid such confrontational language and Mehmet Yamali noted that he would probably have chosen a different name. When one of us (Pooyan Tamimi Arab) suggested to him that the name did not match the mosque’s intercultural and interreligious outreach activities, the latter countered that changing the name would mean giving in to Dutch social pressures on mosques: “They [Dutch non-Muslims] would be even happier if we closed down.”

Similar discussions can be found outside of the Netherlands (e.g. Schuller 2013).

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“Uít de tijd of juist bíj de tijd: Over koepel-, heimwee-, polder-, schuil- en kosmosmoskeeën” (Old fashioned or contemporary: About dome, nostalgic, polder, hidden and cosmic mosques), NRC Handelsblad, July 24, 2009.

The purported positive effects of “contact,” taken for granted in many social cohesion projects, have been critically examined by Gill Valentine (2008).

See e.g. “Moskee opent deuren voor kunst” (Mosque opens doors for art). Het Parool, May 13, 2008.

On the role of Diyanet in religious affairs among Turkish (post)migrants in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, see Sunier and Landman (2015).


We are indebted to Oskar Verkaaik for the distinction between a habitual space and an iconic sight.

Verkaaik (2014) similarly describes how a Russian-Jewish migrant community sought a habitual space and was indifferent to the internationally celebrated memory aesthetics associated with the New Synagogue of Dresden.

Not only have mosques in the Netherlands recently become more visible, they have also increasingly amplified
the call to prayer, or azan. Amplifying the azan is a right guaranteed by the Constitution of 1983 and the Public Manifestations Act that officially came into effect in 1988 (Tamimi Arab forthcoming). The Fatih Mosque, however, has stood silent for decades, in contrast to the musical bells of the nearby Western Church that can be heard every 15 minutes to indicate the time, all day and night long, but also as a call to prayer on Sunday mornings and during events of national importance such as the commemoration of the end of the Second World War. Mehmet Yamali had for a long time shown no interest in amplifying the azan, in part because he feared that doing so could attract negative (media) attention and possibly slow down the renovation project, but he and other leading figures at the mosque have recently started discussing this option.

14 Justus Uitermark, Paul Mepschen, and Jan Willem Duyvendak (2015) have analyzed the rise of sexual nationalism in the Netherlands, in which LGBT rights—identified as a national value—are pitted against the conservative sexual mores associated with Muslims.

15 We are indebted to Irene Stengs and Jojada Verrips in drawing out this analogy.

16 The reports were made by Monumentenwacht Noord-Holland, an independent organization that was hired by the mosque.


