

Domus Dei

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A large number of mosques have been built in Kosovo since its independence from Serbia in 2008. Some of them substitute old historic mosques that were specifically targeted for destruction by the Serbian army, with the idea of erasing all evidence of the historical presence of Muslim Albanians in the territory. However, most of them are built from scratch, in what could be understood as a process of reterritorialising the landscapes of Kosovo following Milosevic's attempt of genocide.

The vast majority of these newly built structures stylistically reject modernism, and follow the tradition of the classical Ottoman mosque, featuring large domes and tall minarets nevertheless built with contemporary building techniques such as reinforced concrete and prefabricated elements. The arguments behind such stylistic decisions are multiple. Modernist architecture arrived with the Yugoslavian state, today remembered for the oppression exerted by the Serbian regime. Recurring to the Ottoman domed mosque with pencil-shaped minarets, on the other hand, establishes a continuity with a more "suitable past" from which a new national narrative can be built. However, the main reason, as it is merely put by most clients, that is, community leaders, imams, and mostly, their international sponsors from the Gulf countries, prefer tradition.

Following an orthodox interpretation of the hadiths, that is, the sayings of the Prophet, innovation (bid'ah) could be interpreted as creation in the divine sense, an argument used mostly against changes in religious custom, that could eventually be applied also to religious architecture. Appreciating buildings for their specific formal beauty may also be considered idolatry, an argument that has already been used to destroy monuments such as the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan or historical structures in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the fact that Islam lacks a central authority such as the Vatican leaves decision making in the consensus of the Ulema, the community of scholars, giving a particular preference to "the ancestral precedent" or "the custom of the tribe" (Sunna). All these arguments would justify the perpetuation of tradition when building mosques.

Nevertheless, a brief look into the history of mosques would reveal that minarets and domes, the main features of what is today considered the "traditional" mosque, were innovations at some point. In the times of the Prophet, the call to prayer was done from the roof of the mosques, and Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet and fourth caliph, had a tower turned down as the muezzin could violate the privacy of the houses surrounding the mosque. Minarets only started to appear

consistently as from the 12th century, and the many different interpretations of their origin, taking as reference the lighthouse in Alexandria or the victory columns of the Byzantine empire, point towards their importance as a symbol rather than religious necessity.

The same applies to the dome; while the first mosque employing one is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built after the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik took over the city, it did not become a recurring feature in mosque design until the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453. In both cases, the appropriation of domical architecture was more related to the ambition of the new rulers to be measured against the imperial splendour of the Byzantine empire than anything related to Islam as a religion.

On the other hand, while there are a few imperial domed mosques in Kosovo built during the Ottoman period (now being carefully rebuilt and restored by the Turkish government), the traditional village mosque in Kosovo was usually covered with a hip roof.

Considering all these historical facts we could elucidate that the so-called “traditional” style of the newly built mosques of Kosovo has, in fact, little to do with tradition. By appropriating the classical style of the longest-ruling and most powerful Muslim empire, the Ottoman empire, the contemporary mosque builders of Kosovo attempt to gain political and ideological support as well as legitimacy. Their domes and minarets are less about customary religion but about marking a landscape in a way that can be only imagined through religious ideology.













Trained as an architect and urban designer, Ibai is currently working as an architecture broadcaster, through Actar publishers and the new digital platform urbanNext.net, assisting in the coordination, edition, organisation and production of books as well as architectural events. Previously, as Project Coordinator at the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, he was involved in the Historic Cities Programme in architectural preservation and urban regeneration projects located in West Africa, the Middle East and Asia; he also assisted the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in the process of documentation and outreach of the Award proceedings.

Alongside his professional work, Ibai has been lecturer and critic at the Architectural Association Mittelmeerland Visiting Schools in Algiers, Alexandria and Izmir, at Cornell University in Ithaca, at Columbia University GSAPP Studio in Paris, and at the Barcelona School of Architecture (UPC-ETSAB). He's currently working on a comparative research project on the urban sprawl developments in Kosovo and Switzerland, taking into consideration the remittance economy and cultural exchange between both countries, which will result in an exhibition and book to be published in 2019.

Ibai Rigby received his Architecture degree with honours from the Institut d'Architecture de l'Université de Genève and realised studies in Architecture and Urban Culture at the Metropolis Programme at the Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de Barcelona. He currently lives in Austin, Texas.