

Borders within Borders: Superkilen as the Site of Assimilation

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Abstract

Cultural assimilation of “Muslim” immigrants in Europe poses a foundational question to political philosophy: is assimilation a prerequisite for socio-economic integration? What is often interpreted as the symptom of failed integration is the proliferation of ethnic enclaves in European metropolises. Non-white immigrants who experience discrimination and marginalization withdraw into isolated zones, creating internal borders within cities. These spaces are susceptible to a host of social problems and often become a fertile ground for radicalization. The State turns to design techniques to break open these ghettoized zones. This paper analyzes an urban renewal project that was conceived to address marginality in one such neighborhood in Copenhagen. Despite the façade of inclusivity and democratic participation, the design creates a parody of Muslim cultures by remixing culturally-significant symbols. In representing immigrants’ cultures as “Other,” the ideology of design mirrors the exclusionary preferences of the politics of the border.

Keywords: Superkilen; cultural assimilation; politics of space, Islam and immigration; Aga Khan Award for Architecture

From Cartoons Controversy to Public Park

Debates surrounding immigration in Europe often justify anti-Muslim policies through the discourse of failed integration and “culture wars” (Roy, 2020: 105). This failure is epitomized by the proliferation of isolated neighborhoods in European metropolises. Predominantly non-white immigrant communities close themselves off from the rest of society, creating internal borders within cities (Lapeyronnie & Courtois, 2008). These “ghettoized” spaces, then, become the target for radical groups and fundamentalist ideologies. To explain this phenomenon, often referred to as “community withdrawal,” political discourse points the finger at religion. The inhabitants of these spaces are said to be unwilling to embrace societal norms, which in turn precludes their capacity to integrate into mainstream society. The reason for this unwillingness—as the logic of this xenophobic justification goes—is that the religion of immigrants is incompatible with secular and liberal values. Thus, to be socially and economically integrated, Muslim immigrants should first be culturally assimilated.

While some programs such as preschool education of “ghetto children” are explicit about their agenda of cultural assimilation (Barry & Sorensen, 2018), state-sponsored architectural projects can transform identities without exposing their cultural aims. This paper examines the design of Superkilen park, a public space that was devised to address marginality in a working-class neighborhood in Copenhagen, Denmark. One of the reasons that the Municipality commissioned the project was the social unrest following the cartoons controversy (Steiner, 2014; Akšamija, 2016). Before analyzing the park, I will highlight the significance of the latter for debates on cultural assimilation of Muslims in Europe.

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In response to the terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo office in January 2015, the secular West as well as Muslims across the world used the slogan, *Je suis Charlie*, to express solidarity with the victims (Klausen, 2009). The cartoons controversy, however, did not start then and there: some of the drawings were reprints of what had already been published ten years earlier by a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*. The cartoons—satirical representations of the Prophet Mohammad—triggered waves of protest. Yet as the work of Jytte Klausen shows, not only were the reasons for these protests more complicated, but only a few amounted to violence. The publication of the “original” drawings in 2005 was not the first battle over representations of Muslim embodiments either. A year before *Jyllands-Posten* issued the cartoons in Denmark, the French government had decided to ban veils along with other (conspicuous) signs of religion from public schools. The decision was the culmination of fifteen years of legal and political dissent that started in Gabriel Havez middle school in Creil, France, when, in October 1989, three schoolgirls refused to remove their headscarves in the classroom (Scott, 2010). This incident, *L'affaire du foulard*, was a decisive moment in which explicit hostilities towards Muslim bodies turned into a political debate. Significantly, this event was already colored by Ayatollah Khomeini’s notorious *fatwa* against Salman Rushdi in 1989, ten years after the Islamic Revolution of Iran. What appeared as a menace to the West was not simply that the Revolution heralded the official establishment of Islamic fundamentalism, as Bruce Lawrence (1989) argues, but that political Islam was in search of new forms of cultural representations (Roy, 1994). The headscarves became a warning sign for fundamentalist ideologies—reminiscent of Khomeini’s imposition of the veil on Iranian women.

More than struggles against the ideology of Political Islam, these events (cartoons and veils) are two cases of Europe’s unease with public religion and Muslim embodiments in particular. The cartoons aimed to provoke a distressed minority to a stage of agitation, and thereby prove within their reactions the following claim: Danish Muslims are not “truly” Danes because they are not tolerant of critique of religion. *Jyllands-Posten*’s cartoons were not merely about blasphemy—breaking a taboo through satirical representations of the Prophet. Rather, the twelve drawings enumerated many reasons why Muslims do not belong to the secular West: inequality of sexes, Bedouin and primitive culture (hence, an uncivilized civilization), and intolerance toward criticism. The reproduction of the cartoons in France did not merely change the geography of the same debate. By being reproduced in a different context and deriving a similar affective response, it framed the struggle not as *national* but as *civilizational*. It was no longer the cultural norms of this or that group of Muslim immigrants that could not fit into this or that national identity. The point was to demonstrate that (a) Islam is an alien civilization to the Judeo-Christian traditions, and (b) Muslims do not belong to the geoculture of secular Europe. The headscarf controversy was predicated on a similar premise. Those French Muslims who condemned the ban could not appreciate the fact that French secularism meant the retreat of religion from the public sphere.

Unlike Denmark that recognizes the Evangelical-Lutheran Church as the official religion of the State, France has a unique history of anti-clerical secularization.ⁱ Marcel Gauchet (2015) shows how since the French Revolution attempts at pushing religion to the private sphere were marked by a series of legal battles: 1795, cutting the salary of all recognized cults; 1801 (*régime concordataire*), cutting the link between the Catholic Church and the Monarchy; 1905, the separation of the church and the state; and 1946, when France became officially *République laïque* and *laïcité* became an integral part of the Constitution. The same subtractive secularization was at work in public education, where the law of 1882 (*les lois Jules Ferry*), disentangled classrooms from religious education (Ozouf, 1982).



Already more than a century ago, an educational system hostile to religion and a public space intolerant of religious signs were institutionalized. It does not come as a surprise that anticlerical satire in France is a political tradition as old as the Revolution itself. The question remains if Denmark also shares a similar history of hostility towards religion? Incidentally, it was “revealed that a few years earlier Jyllands-Posten had refused to publish defamatory cartoons portraying Jesus on the grounds that the images would offend readers” (Klausen, 2009: 87). In further justifying the refusal, the editor claimed that the drawings “will provoke an outcry.”

In analyzing the cartoons controversy, many have focused on questions of blasphemy, tolerance-intolerance, and limits of the secular critique (Asad et al., 2013). Others have interrogated its implications for the role of the State in disciplining its less-desirable subjects (Badiou, 2017, Todd, 2015). What has not been adequately examined is the role of space in debates on integration. What is the link between the lived experiences of immigrants, their housing conditions, and the kind of discontent that resurfaced in the cartoons riots?

The Nørrebro neighborhood was one of the areas that exhibited riots and other incidents of conflict with the police attributed to the cartoons. To address social unrest and the “ongoing ghettoization of the neighborhood,” the Municipality of Copenhagen devised an urban design project (Akšamija, 2016). An important element of this large-scale initiative was the realization of the Superkilen park.

Soon after its completion in 2011, the park received sweeping accolades. Most remarkably, it received the 2016 Aga Khan Award for Architecture since it promoted “integration across lines of ethnicity, religion and culture” (*Superkilen, Aga Khan Development Network*, n.d.).

Participatory Design

The site of the project was a leftover space resulting from the removal of tramway tracks that circumnavigated the inner-city for roughly a century—1880s to 1972 (*For 40 År Siden Kørte Sidste Sporvogn i Danmark*, 2012). This derelict land was haunted by delinquency, drug trafficking, and the underground market. Through a closed competition, the Municipality commissioned a design coalition comprised of architects (Bjarke Ingels Group), landscape designers (Topotek 1), and artists (Superflex).³ They turned the space into a theme park by dividing the linear stretch of land into three color-coded zones, each dedicated to distinct programmatic activities. The theme for Red Square is “market/culture/sport;” the Black Market is a spatial metaphor for “urban living room;” and the Green Park is dedicated to “sport/play.” To substantiate these themes, each zone is “populated by a curated selection of iconic urban furniture” (Akšamija, 2016).

The design partners—who are often commissioned to tackle urban problems through design solutions—customized a community engagement technique for the park. Instead of representing Danish elements, “Participation Extreme aimed at incorporating diverse objects from geographies familiar to (non-national) inhabitants of the neighborhood. Individuals of the surrounding housing blocks were invited to share what they wished to be incorporated into the park. The idea was that if immigrants could see something familiar in the space of their daily experience, social isolation would be replaced with a sense of belonging. Barbara Steiner, whose publication on the park includes interviews with the design partners, refers to these objects as “agents of integration” (2014: 25). The objects, she argued, “create relationships with different people and [...] establish emotional connectivity.” Martin Rein-Cano, the main landscape designer from Topotek 1, pointed to the fact that while immigrants can bring with them small tokens, they cannot have their urban scenes, streetscapes, and monuments.

To facilitate integration, therefore, the design grafted elements of immigrants' former visual-scape onto the landscape of their daily experience. "In the end," said Rasmus Nielsen from SUPERFLEX, "the park is this mesh-up, gigantic Tivoli, with a big emphasis on telling stories about each object" (Steiner, 2014: 31). The principal architect of the project, Bjarke Ingels, touted that the team "would not need to design anything;" all they needed to do was to "let people recommend cool stuff from all over the world" (Steiner, 2014: 25). The designers' description of the park is saturated with terms such as cool, fun, playful, etc. Designed through this method, Superkilen does not resemble what one might expect from a community park. The design is a composition of "108 objects and 11 trees," populating a wedge-shaped space. The undulated ground is primarily built of colored asphalt and is adorned by strips of white lines. The lines themselves meander to accommodate variegated urban furniture. Instead of typical elements such as trees, plants, and flowers, the landscape is fashioned with light posts similar to those of the Las Vegas strip as well as idiosyncratic play equipment. What type of urban landscape is this and who would want such a park? Already in the late 1960s, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi suggested that it is more sensible to represent the function of a building through signage, "decorated shed," instead of turning the volume/form into an expression, "duck" (1972). But what would a signage "mean" or "signify" in a park that does not have an explicit programmatic function compared to a building?

Image 1. View of the "Black Market" zone (photo credit: Scott D. Haddow)



Mapping of the Neighborhood

The neighborhood for which the park was designed accommodates the largest percentage of immigrants in Denmark (Larsen & Möller, 2013). To emphasize the multinational character of Nørrebro, the design team created a colorful tapestry of 60 national flags, allegedly corresponding to the nationalities of the residents of the neighborhood. One can notice within this colorful map flags of the US, Canada, England, and Italy, not to mention the USSR. What is remarkable about this image is that it represents all nations on the same level, with no order or hierarchy (all flags are the same size and scattered without any particular order). Yet, as Alfred Korzybski (1933) cautioned us, there always exists a minimal gap between representations (map) and the experience itself (territory). One should therefore be suspicious of the dissimulating potential of this “map” that inscribes differences within a radically egalitarian order.

To understand what is hidden behind this egalitarian façade of public participation, it is enough to look at the land use and the zoning map of the district. The area hosts the largest concentration of Islamic centers in Denmark. This is not a surprise because “more than half of” the immigrants in the neighborhood come from Muslim majority countries (Larsen & Möller, 2013). Near 11,000 “Muslim” residents of Nørrebro are from “Bosnia Herzegovina, Turkey, Somalia, Morocco, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan and Syria.” Why did the official discourse surrounding the design shy away from talking about Muslims as the main reason for this project?

As part of the comprehensive plan, the Municipality had conducted a spatial study for the district of Nørrebro. The report reflected on the dynamics between “immigrants and ethnic Danes” focusing on the issues related to “[r]ecognition, redistribution, multiculturalism, [and] positive selectivism” (Larsen & Möller, 2013: 19). Yet these studies did not make it clear who among these 60 nationalities needed recognition. Does this lacuna pertain to Muslims who would be offended to learn that they have been officially flagged as the problem, or is it meant to protect the Municipality from accusations of xenophobia and Islamophobia?

Unlike the public narrative that refrained from pointing the finger at the “Muslim” constituency, the expert (design) discourse was explicit about it. For example, the on-site review commissioned by the Aga Khan Award explains how the project was “informed by the riots and vandalism in the area linked to the so-called cartoons controversy” (Akšamija, 2016: 24). The report further notes: “In Nørrebro, the cartoon controversy sparked a number of riots, vandalism, flag burning and violent incidents involving clashes between the police and frustrated Muslim youth who were throwing stones and Molotov cocktails.” The report then zooms back and positions the design within the larger frame of cultural integration: “Although the presence of Muslims and/or representation of Islam in the West were not the primary reasons for the inception of this larger urban renewal project”, argued Azra Akšamija, “the issue of integration and the coexistence of different immigrant cultures was on the top of priority for this plan and the subsequent the competition brief for Superkilen.”

The designers themselves used less-polished language in talking about the park. The sense of resentment was conspicuous in the neighborhood, said Bjarke Ingels, “and people in Denmark were suffering a bit from the ambiguity of *being tolerant* [emphasis added]” (Steiner, 2014: 70). It is precisely this narrative gap that interests me: Superkilen as a project for celebration of diversity and pluralism, or a project for assimilation of a group who can barely be tolerated.

A Curious Object

In Superkilen, idiosyncratic objects are juxtaposed, but it is not clear if and how they should relate to each other. For example, in the Red Square, three signs mounted on light posts strike as symbols of Communism, seemingly representing brands from the USSR, Cuba, and (Mao-era) China. Being aware of the provocation, the brochure of objects, “Superkilen’s 108 Objects and their History,” released by Superflex (2012), claims that “the red aspects” do not refer to “Soviet communism” (p. 20). The explanation goes further to suggest that the red has never been red: “The Russian word ‘krasnaya’, which today primarily means red, used to mean ‘beautiful.’” This ambivalence is not confined to the relationship *between* objects; individual objects, too, exhibit unresolved tensions. While there are several objects with intriguing stories, I will focus on a neon lamp that stands tall at the center of the main space. The shape appears to be a replica of the symbolism of star and crescent. Yet, the star is replaced by a tooth.

The brochure describes the sign as a largescale re-production of a dental clinic sign from Doha, Qatar. Yet the detailed story of the crescent, especially how they “found” this object, was never explained. In an architectural festival in Ukraine, however, the landscape designer shares the trajectory of the object (Martin Rein-Cano, 2017). An immigrant from Muscat, who during door-to-door inquiry was asked to share something of his home country, comes back with a pile of photos. Flipping through pictures, *the designers* pulled out this curious image. The sign, interestingly, did not belong to the tenant but his aunt who had paid for his migration to Denmark. The name on the sign, Vasantha-Sena Devarajan, hints at an Indian pedigree. To advertise her business, Doctor Sena appropriated a symbol that she recognized as culturally significant to her “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” clients. Perhaps this was already a capitalist mode of consumption of the sacred.

Image 2. Dental clinic signage in Doha, Qatar (right), and its replica in Superkilen



What is intriguing about the design does not concern its aesthetics *per se*, but the ways in which symbols have been transformed from one historical, cultural, and geographical context to another. It is precisely through this trans-positioning (or deterritorialization, if you wish) that symbols formerly associated with the sacred are turned into profane signs.

This “democratization” goes beyond material remix. The designers trace an expanded genealogy of the crescent-moon to undermine its cultural significance for Muslims. The above-mentioned brochure argues that “the crescent moon is one of the world’s oldest religious symbols and not something exclusive to Islam” (Superflex: 12). The symbolism of crescent, it continues, dates “back to 2000 years BC when the moon used to be the symbol of the Mesopotamian god, Sin.” To extend the emphasis on the pagan origins of crescent to its accompanying star, the paragraph goes on to claim that in ancient mythology the star was “usually representing Sin’s daughter Ishtar, goddess of war, love, and sex.” Thus, instead of signifying the political power of the Ottoman Empire, the sign is really about sex, sin, and love. Nancy Fraser and Alex Honneth (2006: 1) articulate this penchant for this postmodern and playful remixing of cultural horizons as follows: “Hegel’s old figure of ‘the struggle for recognition’ finds new purchase as a rapidly globalizing capitalism accelerates transcultural contacts, fracturing interpretative schemata, pluralizing value horizons, and politicizing identities and differences.” Conversely, the author of the Aga Khan report regards this playful refashioning of symbols in crescent-tooth as a “positive dimension of cultural diversity,” and believes that it has been done “in a respectful manner” (Akšamija, 2016: 24). This hybrid sign, she argued, will undermine stereotypes about Muslims’ intolerance toward religious symbols.

Image 3. Crescent and tooth, and crescent and star



When in September 2005, Jyllands-Posten published a cartoon of the Prophet with crescent as the contour of his face and star as an eye, the Muslim world perceived it as a blasphemous insult. Here, the landscape provides a decentered semantic field where symbols are inserted within an

entirely invented regime of signification. The crescent-tooth does not mean the same as crescent-star, regardless of the fact that the former references the latter.

The otherwise blasphemous sign functions as a vaccine of sorts—a low dose of trigger that does not amount to violence. This seemingly humorous play is intended to desensitize Muslims, to dismantle the “moods and motivations” that give symbols “an aura of factuality,” as Geertz (1993: 87-125) would have said.

Today, identities are supposed to be open and pluralist. For those at social and economic margins, expectations to reinvent their identities are ceaseless. But, to what extent can cultural identities be expanded, remixed, and democratized? For historians, cultures have always been in flux—grafting, borrowing, mixing, and forgetting certain elements in their encounter with other cultures. But how fast can these processes happen? Furthermore, what distinguishes designed transformations of the symbolic order from state-initiated social engineering? Judith Butler was startled by the fact that in 2006 “immigrants were required to take an examination that included the mandatory viewing of images of two gay men kissing to test their ‘tolerance’ and, hence, capacity to assimilate to Dutch liberalism” (Butler, 2009: 130). It is worth noting that a journalist at *Jyllands-Posten* named the cartoons as “democratic electroshock therapy” (Klausen, 2009: 20). A “Good Muslim” then is the one who is desensitized. Good, moderate Muslims no longer react to cartoons because they can recognize humor, the playfulness of symbols.

Compromise?

But is this attempt at mediation unreasonable? In the debates on civic nationalism and multiculturalism, the notion of “reasonable accommodation” is predicated on construction of a shared cultural horizon through compromise on the side of both the minority and the majority (Taylor & Bouchard, 2007). So far, I have discussed how the minority was subjected to certain compromises. Let us look at the other side of the debate as well.

There was some discontent during public meetings between Superkilen's designers and ethnic Danes, as the white community preferred a conventional park with green spaces and promenades (Steiner, 2014: 25). As Akšamija's report shows, some residents “were irritated by the choice of the red and black colours for the park, as they were imagining a more traditional park design” (15). Contrary to their desire, they were given an asphalted space with a boxing ring, a bus station sign in Arabic, and giant array loudspeakers, which the designers had intentionally included as a subversive response to complaints about loud music. One could ask why taxpayers' money was spent on a project that does not seem to serve white Danes? These “compromises” are not on the same level, but the fact that a park was conceived as an experimental site for negotiation of identities is indeed remarkable. Furthermore, the majority of signs and urban furniture was not subjected to remix. The Moroccan fountain, for example, remains as “original” as it possibly could. In the case of the object I examined (crescent-tooth), the designers made no changes to what they saw in the photo.

But what if the designers had used the “original” crescent and star instead of this simulacrum? Would it have meant that Muslim minorities and their culture are accepted as they are without any need to change, that is, without cultural assimilation? Islamophobic voices might have argued that unmediated representations of Islamic symbolism herald the triumph of Islamism, because the domination of religious signs over public space goes against secular neutrality. Drawing on the same logic, one can also suggest that granting overt representations will embolden Islamists for more consequential demands such as inclusions of space for daily prayers in public schools and universities.



But, if non-white immigrants with radically diverse backgrounds are arbitrarily identified as Muslims, why should not their representations reflect that “Muslimness?” Ironically, when it comes to immigration and border policies or surveillance and policing, refugees and immigrants are flagged as (potentially dangerous) Muslims, but with regards to representations, they deemed cool and welcoming of compromise.

The Neighborhood: from Political Economy to Cultural Politics

The Nørrebro district has long been a troubled precinct, with its “problems” shifting from strikes to anti-establishment demonstrations to urban riots. Census data from the 1880s show that the area was home to guest workers from other parts of Denmark as well as other countries within Europe (Nielsen, 2012). This was the time when labor movements could organize their resistance against exploitations through unions. On May 5, 1872, thousands of workers protested the “long working hours,” and the Battle of Commons became the hallmark of anti-establishment resistance and “struggle for recognition” (Schmidt, 2012: 98). Social tensions were carried through even during the Nazi occupation. In summer 1944, protesters set a department store on fire because the owner was known for being a Nazi sympathizer. In the next couple of decades after the war, however, the demography of the district began to change. Similar to many industrial centers in Europe in the 1960s, Nørrebro “became a locus for a significant guest worker immigration from countries such as Pakistan and Morocco” (Schmidt, 2012: 98-99).

Despite the influx of non-white immigrants, the political space was able to absorb the “problem” of immigration. Until the 70s, migrant workers—some from the former colonies—were not seen as social or economic threats. They were living in working-class housing blocks in industrial cities along with other workers, some from neighboring European countries. Although the States had no strategy for integration, the workplace and its culture helped immigrants to become part of the larger working-class population. Socialist and communist unions also offered a space for solidarity around shared struggles. Cultural integration was not much of a challenge either. Factories and building sites helped to instill a culture of work, which through its porosity and elasticity, would facilitate integration.

As industries left metropolitan areas in the 80s, urban centers began to lose their economic vitality. In this period, many European city districts suffered from long-term financial crises. Copenhagen was at the brink of bankruptcy. The struggling central city was characterized by a series of interconnected malaise: “de-industrialization, suburbanization, high unemployment rates, high welfare costs, an outdated housing market and strong ethnic and income segregation” (Larsen & Möller, 2013: 2). Unemployment was followed by crimes, delinquency, and marginality.

Nørrebro has been at the center of the national debate on immigration. “Throughout the 1970s and 1980s,” Jørgen Nielsen (2012) argues, “squatters and later on radical leftist activists used Nørrebro streets for protest” (Schmidt, 2012, 96). In 1982, to appease social unrest, “the municipality granted a group of youth the rights to use the former Folkets Hus (the People’s House)” (Schmidt, 99). The House soon became the epicenter of anti-establishment activities. With the shift to neoliberal politics of privatization in the ‘80s, not only did the discourse surrounding migrant workers lose its positive overtone, but this era was coincident with the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments. In 2003, Pia Kjærsgaard, the leader of the right-wing populist Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti), expresses her longing for a peaceful past. In setting the stage for the urgency of action, her article, “Give Us Back Nørrebro,” postulated: “this country will work on getting back Nørrebro, so that tolerance and liberalism can once again make its way north of Queen Louise’s Bridge” (Kärrholm, 2015: 119).

The language of anti-immigrant nationalism marks a radical drift in the perceptions of the area from the mid-nineties. If the slogan for the political left was “[L]et’s help people even if they’re Muslims or immigrants,” today, the discourse of the center-left and Social Democrats has leaned toward populist rhetoric: “We have to take care of Danish people first” (Richard, 2018).

Despite Copenhagen’s revitalized economy, the national unemployment rate had cast its shadow on the city. The transformation of the metropolis “from a working-class city [...] to a middle-class city” can be traced in spatial terms, where the gentrification of poor neighborhoods has created areas with a high concentration of “trash proletariat” (Larsen & Möller, 2013: 6). Larsen and Möller note that spatial segregation is targeted at poor “ethnic Danes” as well as “the immigrants and their descendants” (5). Contrasting identities of “the extremes of high society and dark ghetto” are not merely class-based; the divide also is registered across ethnic lines.

In 2008, “one of the worst riots in Denmark” broke out. This was not a leftist outcry, nor a right-wing march against the immigrants. This time, ethnic minorities, especially young Muslim men who were frustrated by police brutality and other racial discriminations, were at the center of the “anarchy” (Larsen & Möller, 2013: 7). This series of events culminated in the demolition of the notorious Ungdomshuset, the former Folket Hus. Even this radical move—demolishing the locus of resistance—did not exterminate the root of the problem. Moreover, economic and social problems have now found an explicitly spatial dimension.

Critics who examined the Superkilen project were aware of this context. Luis Fernández-Galiano, a member of the 2016 Master Jury of the Aga Khan Award, writes: “Not immune to the deep xenophobic, anti-immigration currents that are slowly eroding the foundations of the European Union, Denmark too is now sadly tarnished by Islamophobia—brought violently to the surface here with the anti-mosque campaigns of the Danish People’s Party” (Mostafavi, 2016: 27). Denmark is not alone in hostility against Muslim immigrants. The infamous debates on minarets in Switzerland are symptomatic of the same tension, namely, can “Muslims” have cultural representations within cityscapes? For centuries, European societies were relatively homogeneous in terms of their ethnic and cultural outlooks—argues Diana L. Eck (2006). Migrations and exchanges have always existed, but due to the slow rate of change, gradual transformations were not perceived as threats. Today, on the contrary, “formerly homogenous European societies” that for centuries had imagined their communities “along more unitary lines” find themselves challenged by the emergence of multicultural and multiethnic social formations.

Failed Integration and Stigmatized Spaces

National security experts are quick to diagnose a common malaise in ethnic and low-income neighborhoods in Europe. Community withdrawal, or “*repli communautaire*,” refers to the social conditions in which certain communities, particularly non-white immigrants who live in public housing complexes, close themselves off from the rest of society (Lapeyronnie & Courtois, 2008). As politics creates more borders for and around precarious immigrants, the immigrants, too, cocoon themselves in identarian closures. Communitarianism in turn contributes to the ghettoization of immigrant living spaces. The danger is that these zones become a fertile ground for fundamentalist ideologies and eventually radicalization.

These spaces are characterized by the following traits: 1) low-income housing with high rates of unemployment or precarious employment; 2) dilapidated housing environment; 3) poor public services;



4) high rates of school dropouts, and above all, 5) high concentration of ethno-racial minorities (Bancel & Blanchard & Ahmed Boubeker, 2015).

As I mentioned earlier, Nørrebro is on Denmark's ghetto list and is subjected to "anti-ghetto laws" (Barry & Sorensen, 2018). Similar to other European countries, Denmark identifies ghettos through the following criteria: "unemployment rates over 20%, 50% of its population from non-Western countries or are descendants of migrants from non-Western countries, relatively low-income, low education level, and the presence of criminal activity" (Turan, 2021: 62).

Two types of questions emerge. First, why did immigrants from the Middle East or North Africa concentrate in these neighborhoods in the first place, and why they not able to find alternative housing? The discourse surrounding communitarianism is predicated on the assumption that immigrants prefer to stick together, which is to say, to self-segregate. Second, how have non-white urban outcasts been identified by their assumed religion and religiosity, and why is culture blamed for communitarianism?

Unlike what has been propagated by the popular media about Muslim's unwillingness to "integrate into the wider society," the majority of Muslims have a strong desire to integrate, and almost half of the Muslim population wants to be seen as Danish (Larsen & Möller, 2013: 20). Yet only around ten percent of "Muslims" in Denmark "believe that others see them as Danish." While the multiculturalist conception of "Danishness" is predicated on "ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity," the growing anti-immigrant sentiments in the West—along with malevolent claims about "Muslim invasion," or "reverse colonialization"—has challenged the limits of Danish multiculturalism (Schmidt, 2012: 96). To represent Muslims as a minority group that can never be included into Danishness, there is a need to resuscitate what has been long fought against: Europe's Christian identity. Anxious about their ethno-cultural identity, conservative Danes have realized that being Dane and Christian are inextricably bound. This view is integral to "traditional Danish culture" to such a degree which leaves little room for cultural differences: "any model of multiculturalism which suggest the presence of parallel communities," may be construed as "a threat to national unity and social cohesion" (Schmidt, 2012: 232).

Today, the return to civilizational discourse is a way of alienating non-white immigrants and citizens. This operates on two levels. The emphasis on Judeo-Christian civilization, a term that for historians of religion is rather an oxymoron, is a polemic that frames Islam as an incompatible ideology. Couched in civilizational discourse, there lurks also the specter of racism that insists that Europe was, and indeed should remain, a white, Christian civilization.

While many immigrants aspire to "[be] Muslim and Danish at the same time," some prefer "to avoid cultural assimilation." (Schmidt, 2012: 232). Why? Under real or imagined discrimination and in response to racist treatments, minorities feel that any form of assimilation may cause them to lose "their collective cultural and religious identity." Against this anxiety, they enter in an obsessional relationship with particular elements of their culture. This is what Charles Taylor (1994) calls the politics of "cultural survival." Since many constitutive elements of their cultures cannot be sustained outside the "original" social milieu—think of holidays that are calendar-specific and that only make sense when accompanied with food, music, and celebrations—it is again religion that represents itself as the last bastion of identity. The more these minorities feel threatened, that is, the more the external grip tightens on their "ways of life," the more they tend to essentialize their religion. To protect their identity, it is not their culture that is emphasized, but the most stereotypical elements of religion.

Despite the variegated cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the immigrant inhabitants of Nørrebro, they were perceived as a homogeneous population. A socio-spatial study acknowledged that, contrary to the dominant political discourse, the Muslim community was not a singular entity with rigid boundaries (At Home in Europe Project, 2011). The report also suggested that individuals with a certain “cultural and ethnic background” would be automatically perceived as Muslim “even though they may be atheists or followers of other religions” (23). Not only does this blanket identification serve the conservative political agenda to blame religion for their economic precarity, but this false flag also attracts radical Islamic groups who wish to turn these segregated spaces into havens for radicalization. The more the State stigmatize these neighborhoods, the more chance would emerge for them to be turned into what Olivier Roy calls “Islamized spaces” (1994).

The question that I am concerned with here is not whether Muslims are racialized, but how racialization works. It happens at the crossroads of categories that have nothing to do with the color of skin: clothing and surfaces attached to the body (headscarves), architecture and surfaces that serve as the background for the body (stigmatized neighborhoods), images that exert their forces on the body (media representations), names that foreground the body (non-Western names), etc. It does not come as a surprise that some change their Muslim/Arab names “to increase their chance of employment” (Abid Ullah Jan, 2006, 180).

Architecture is not a neutral vessel that contains or represents social relations; it constructs its own subjects. A stigmatized public housing project is not simply a space inhabited by the urban underclass. Since the dilapidated place is associated with migrant workers who are experiencing unemployment, anyone who comes to inhabit that space is seen through a lens that colors their identity with particular racial, class, and cultural (if not religious) tones. Incidentally, an undesirable neighborhood with crumbling public housing complexes is the only housing option that unemployed immigrants can afford. The State also accommodates refugees and the displaced population in such complexes. By the “virtue” of living in these already-segregated and stigmatized spaces, the subjects are automatically perceived as urban outcasts with a set of cultural associations.

Superkilen as Extension of the Institution of the Border

While the concept of national border marks the territorial boundary, the actual extent of its symbolic, legal, and material presence is not confined to the ultimate line that separates geopolitical entities. Even at the edges of the territory, borders are operative not merely upon their material force and physical impermeability, but by the political and symbolic power that support them. This is to say that borders are always already institutional. Their function is sustained upon forces, real and imagined, that themselves are buttressed by legal and penal infrastructures as well as police and military entities. I use the *institution of the border* to refer to physical, symbolic, and legal apparatuses that control the processes of inclusion and exclusion. By determining who is permitted to traverse frontiers, the institution of the border creates not only an Schmittian binary between those who (fully) belong and those who don’t, but it also establishes hierarchies between the population based on their relationship to the function of this very institution. Indispensable to biopolitics and key to political economy of nation, the institution of the border expands its presence inward as much as it spreads outward. Étienne Balibar (2001) captures this process of “thickening” of borders succinctly:

The borders of new politico-economic entities, the function of which is to preserve the sovereignty of the State, are no longer situated at the edge of the territories. They are scattered almost everywhere, where they effectuate and control the movement of information, people, and things. (1)



This thickening encompasses physical apparatuses of control at all scales—from fortified and militarized zones at national borders to ever-expanding refugee camps that are meant to protect larger political entities. It does not come as a surprise that although Turkey has never been recognized as part of Europe (not EU nor Eurozone), it is, nonetheless, a NATO member. Turkey has thus become the border for Europe, a scaled-up border checkpoint that protects Europe from Syrian refugees and the like. While externally the institution of the border exceeds the limits of Europe itself, internally, it penetrates the domestic realm through surveillance, profiling, and policing.

Charged with anxieties of the Other, the institution of the border cuts through the entire social field. When the society is stratified by different types of borders—citizenship, class, race, gender, religion—*bordering* becomes the social practice par excellence. Architecture is no stranger here. Urban politics mirrors the exclusionary practices that are operative in border politics. As an “ideological state apparatus,” to use Althusser’s formula, such projects are designed to not only keep certain categories of immigrants outside, but also to sideline subaltern citizens. “Outside” in this scheme is not confined to territoriality. By being confined to stigmatized places and the living conditions that do not afford certain types of freedom, marginalized population are being kept outside the sphere of politics in a Habermasian sense.

Seen in this light, Superkilen is an extension of the institution of the border that has reached the heart of urban life. It is a community-scale testing ground for biopolitics. Why should cultural representation of non-white immigrants have something to do with Islam? The fact that the designers assumed that non-white citizens living in the area need cultural elements from elsewhere (their “original” homeland) begs the question whether they will ever “pass the border” and be accepted as fellow Danes?

Let us now see the park in a positive light. Superkilen borders between the interiority of the domestic realm and the exteriority of the public space. Positioned between the two, the park brings them into “play” to create the “third space” of translation and negotiation. The point of the participatory design was to turn the inbetween space into a quasi-private zone for the neighborhood, an outdoor “living room” or a shared “backyard” for otherwise isolated communities. Superkilen provides a chance for isolated communities to feel that they have a space that belongs to them, precisely because they have helped to create it. At the same time, it becomes a quasi-public zone when it juxtaposes different cultural symbols within a universal space of representations. It mediates between particular cultures and the mainstream, giving the former the means to become part of the geoculture of modernity, to use Wallerstein’s (1991) terminology. The fact that different communities now use the park for organizing different events is indicative of its success in building bridges. “Superkilen now provides a meeting point for people in the community,” writes Akšamija. “The site,” she continues, “is now associated with vivid activity” (2016, 28).

Moreover, if the institution of the border is concerned with drawing lines between inside and outside, between us and them, the Superkilen park—which provides a site for grafting identities by blurring the lines between them—poses a serious challenge to this institution. Finally, one might regard the botched attempt at recognition of immigrant communities as a part of the diversity of city life. No matter how ambivalent the “participatory” process of Superkilen was, the city of Copenhagen is a desirable political form because it strives to be open and inclusive. Interestingly, Iris Young’s (2011) defense of the normative function of cities is fitting here, as one can see Superkilen as “heterogeneous, plural, and playful, a place where people witness and appreciate diverse cultural expressions that they do not share and do not fully understand” (241).

If the neoliberal State with its privatizing agenda is not genuinely invested in helping immigrants to integrate through market economy, then assimilation through spatial means represents itself as a viable solution. The designers of Superkilen were not naïve to assume that the park will function as an ultimate solution and dissolve social tensions. Rather, they conceived the park, I think, as an open layout, a third space, for construction of hybrid identities and cultural fusions.

At a time when multicultural politics in Europe has reached a point of impasse, Superkilen seems to offer an alternative. The problem with differentialist multiculturalism is that it accepts cultures as given. Two vices ensue. First, this uncritical acceptance ends up foreclosing particular cultures into reified entities with fixed essences. Second, it also indulges the desire of different cultural communities for self-perpetuation. This type of multiculturalism can breed phenomena such as culturalism, identitarianism, and communitarianism. While multiculturalism seems to carry stigma, other vocabularies are taking its place. Interculturalism, for example, rejects the multi-cultural fragmentation of the society. (Bouchard, 2011: 468) It has become clear that keeping immigrants excluded in spatial and cultural closures inevitably yields greater problems.

Conclusion: The Question of Political Inclusivity

The park mediates between public space and private domain of social isolation. It creates an intermediary zone for negotiation of differences. Superkilen offers cultural representations, recognizing and affirming particular identities, while also helping to transform those very identities into more open, hybrid, and inbetween subjective constellations. Why should I be critical of this twofold aim?

The design creates a lively and exciting public space, but it does little in creating an inclusive public sphere—understood as “an arena of political deliberation and participation” (Harvey, 2006: 20). Superkilen succeeds in introducing a democratic regime of representations, but the question remains if political inclusivity can be limited to representations. As Iris Young notes, “[d]emocratization requires the development of grass-roots institutions of local discussion and decision making. Such democratization is meaningless unless the decisions include participation in economic power” (Young, 249). I am not merely critical of the design because it did not adequately include immigrants in decisions about design. Neither is my dismay due to the fact that in deciding on the nature of representation, the designers “did not let neighborhood dwellers exert any influence over decisions,” or that the people of the area “had less than a 10% input on overall decision making.” (Turan, 2021) The problem rather is that the design depoliticized what was at its core a political question: how to create an egalitarian public sphere beyond representations? It seems that, in spite of the façade of democratic inclusivity, cultural representation and political empowerment were kept separate. As Mark Lilla (2018) would have framed it, the project is rather an “empty gestures of recognition and ‘celebration’” (14), because it absolves the State from taking meaningful measures in helping immigrants to integrate.

The politics of the neoliberal State blames its social malaise as well as its economic shortcomings on its immigrant population. To absolve itself from the responsibility of providing sustainable employment and public infrastructure while also masking its racial biases, the State blames immigrants for not having the desire to fit into the mold of entrepreneurial success. Since race/ethnicity-based discrimination falls outside the limits of political-correctness, something else should be blamed as the obstacle to participation in public life. It is not, then, unemployment and discrimination that marginalize immigrants; it is their religion that does not allow integration.



They can never become good citizens, because their religion is incompatible with modernity and liberalism, or so we are told.

We are dealing with the aestheticization of the politics of integration. Spatial identity politics does more than re-presenting ethnic communities. Through participation, certain voices are heard and turned into images. This is important because an inclusive representation is crucial for equitable distribution of resources. Yet this very process of translating voices is never neutral. What about voices that could not have been translated into “cool” images, those that were cacophonous—demanding more equitable rights, social services, and sustainable jobs? The constituency seems to have been given agency, but it was a prescribed agency. Incidentally, a grassroots initiative that tried to formulate the needs of the residents was sidelined (Bloom, 2020). Architecture that is limited to curated representations conceals social antagonisms and relations of domination more than it reveals them. Important to note that Nørrebro is subject to anti-ghetto laws which aim to displace those living in low-income houses by either demolition or privatization (Danish Transport, Construction and Housing Authority, 2019). As Mohsen Mostafavi has noted, the “success” of Superkilen has contributed to the gentrification of the area. Who is Superkilen serving? As the cost of housing increases, the urban poor will be further pushed to the margins. The “right to the city,” Richard Sennett argues, is increasingly “a bourgeois prerogative” (Harvey, 2006: 20). At the end, the process only reinforces the domination of the rich, ethnic Danes over political space.

Design projects are meant to be solutions to given problems. The Municipality of Copenhagen misrecognized the problem of urban marginality and economic precarity as cultural. The reference to the cartoons controversy distracts attention from larger social discontents and structural issues. Following this misdiagnosis, the solution was also conceived as cultural, namely, giving more representations. Furthermore, the project “celebrates” cultural difference. Yet, the more it emphasizes the notion of difference, the more it frames immigrants as outsiders. Why did the designers assume that the culture of ethnic citizens is different from the mainstream (white) culture? Still, upon what measures did the designers assume that non-white inhabitants of the neighborhood were immigrants and not citizens? To bring objects from other places (including Muslim countries) reinforces the idea that non-white citizens are not accepted as citizens.

It is worth remembering that the district was once the center of political resistance. The State’s ultimate solution was the demolition of the “House of People.” The House was doomed because it was a place for the opposition to organize and turn their resistance to a more effective force in demanding political rights. What would it have meant for Superkilen to include a community center? Would it turn into another “House of People,” or a union of sorts where unemployed immigrants could organize and formulate their political demands, such as non-precarious jobs and more social services? Against this image, designing a park that aims at building inclusivity through representations seems insufficient, if not irrelevant, to the question of political inclusivity.ⁱⁱⁱ

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Notes:

ⁱ Immediately after the 1789 Revolution, wearing a cassock (*soutane*) was banned outside of religious ceremonies. The Law of 1905—which declared the official separation of the Church and the state—reopened the debates on religious clothing. The rationale behind the law was the following. Not only will the presence of such representations provoke conflict between lay (Protestant) citizens and (Catholic) clergy, but it also institutes social hierarchy within the society at large by giving the clergy a higher status. Finally, it perpetuates a regime of privilege among the clergy themselves, demanding submission to religious authority. In short, wearing of *soutanes* should be banned because it disturbs the social order, as conceived by the state.

ⁱⁱ As Brett Bloom explains, the Municipality involved some of the citizens from the area in selecting the design coalition.

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