

Dignified Spaces: Religious Minorities' Aspirations in Diverse Urban Environments

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Introduction

Many European cities have become more religiously and culturally diverse in recent decades. This growing diversity has had impacts on many fields of society, including politics, education, and economy. But it also becomes visible in spatial and infrastructural terms. Many migrant and minority communities, be they of Christian or non-Christian tradition, are struggling to find adequate places for themselves. They are meeting in makeshift rented places, former industrial complexes, or as subtenants in buildings of the established Christian churches. These developments have partly been studied from the perspective of the sociology of migration (Pickel 2020), spatial approaches (Knott 2010), and the comparative study of religion (Bugg 2012; Berger 2016; Burchardt and Westendorp 2018; Bender 2021), for instance resulting in mappings of religions in urban contexts (Löffler and Sharbat Dar 2022) or in studies on mosques and their architecture in Germany (Welzbacher 2008; Kraft and T. M. Schmitt 2008; T. Schmitt 2015).

On the other hand, there has been a growing body of literature concerned with democratic participation, inclusion, and justice in diverse societies (Harvey [1973] 1993; Gorringer 2002; Edwards 2017; Hartmann and Jehling 2019). This discourse is fundamentally based on the notion of dignity, a concept that has received renewed attention in philosophy (Rosen 2012; Barak 2015; Becchi and Mathis 2019; Bauer 2022). Dignity is a value attached to every single individual and community. It is often considered the basic starting point for those arguing for equal access to resources, including spatial in infrastructural resources in urban contexts (Jacobson, Oliver, and Koch 2009; Davy 2014; Davy 2017; Haltaufderheide, Otte, and Weber 2019b).

Surprisingly, these two academic discourses have not yet been brought into conversation. In this project, supported by the Architecture, Culture and Spirituality Forum (ACSF), I suggest doing just that, based on the notion of “dignified spaces.” I seek to better understand how urban built environments foster and impede dignity, focusing on the example of migrant and minority religious communities in urban contexts.

After receiving the Lindsay Jones Memorial Research Fund Award in 2021, we started recruiting informants through several networks and communities in September 2021. We set up a [website](#) explaining the project and inviting people to contribute. In early 2022, we made contact with communities and started interviewing members, usually via Zoom or Skype. Additionally, we organized an international co-teaching class in the spring of 2022. The seminar was entitled “Dignified Spaces in a Plural Europe: On the (In)Visibility of Cultural and Religious Communities in

[Post-Industrial Cities](#)” and taught together with James Kapaló (Cork), Katharina Bauer (Rotterdam), Nazlı Özkan (Istanbul) and İpek Çelik Rappas (Istanbul).

In the summer of 2022, I began organizing and analyzing the materials and recordings we had collected so far. After evaluating a few options, we decided to visualize the results with MapMe, an online tool for creating maps on specific topics that allows to add audio-visual information. In October 2023, we organized a two-day meeting, inviting scholars and representatives of the cities of Bochum and Istanbul, and representatives from migrant religious communities. The meeting took place at the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) in Bochum and was co-funded by UNIC, a network of universities that seeks to discuss the future of post-industrial cities in Europe.

Dignified Spaces: Conceptual Considerations¹

This paper aims to discuss how urban built environments foster and impede dignity, understood as a concept pointing to the value of human individuals and communities. Often, the notion of dignity involves the capacity to act intentionally on one’s own behalf. As such, dignity is a constitutional value-idea² and a cornerstone of many contemporary societies. I will address the entanglements of space and dignity focusing on the example of migrant and minority religious communities and their spatial situation in religiously and culturally diverse urban contexts.

In these instances, I study how — from the perspective of the religious communities — urban built environments relate to the presence or absence of dignity: I observe how religious minority and migrant communities seek and find places in their urban environments and what kinds of hopes and aspirations are tied to this endeavor. I analyze their attempts to make dignified places for themselves and how this relates to their infrastructural and built environments.

One of the most obvious aspects concerning the relationship between dignity and the (urban) built environment is that some places appear not to provide inhabitants with dignity (Haltaufderheide, Otte, and Weber 2019a, 21). This often refers to basic human needs, such as the need for privacy, adequate spatial dimensions of built environments, and the availability of choice. In one of the first studies on the topic, Harold Proshansky (1973) demonstrates how architecture and the built environment affect human wellbeing and dignity. He argues that urban planning and the organization of urban spaces often impede dignity and wellbeing because the most basic human needs are not appropriately addressed in the spatial and architectural set-up of cities. More recently, Katrin Grossmann and Elena Trubina have noticed that “dignity” is not one of the key terms in critical urban geography although this research field is concerned with injustice and justice in the city. They seek to bring the discourse about dignity in conversation with urban geography because they assume that it opens new analytical horizons (Grossmann and Trubina 2022).

¹ I am thankful for receiving the Lindsay Jones Memorial Research Fund Award by the Architecture, Culture and Spirituality Forum (ACSF) in 2021 which enabled me to do a large part of the empirical research for this paper. Yet this research would not have been possible without further groups and initiatives that I have been part of in the last couple of years: My thinking about this topic was initially inspired through the participation in a research group ‘Spaces of Dignity’ in the ‘Global Young Faculty’ (2018/19, Mercator Research Center Ruhr, Germany). The project was further developed through the participation in an online workshop at the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI) in Princeton, New Jersey, held in the spring of 2020 on the topic of ‘Religion and the Built Environment.’ I thank William Storrar and Joshua Mauldin, conveners of the workshop, and the participants for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, my thanks go to Aizhana Khasanova, Ava Asiaii, Dunja Sharbat Dar, Ann-Kristin Götze, Sabrina Weiß, Sarah Jahn, Frederik Elwert, Stefan Schröder, Anna Neumaier and Christian Lamker for commenting on and supporting this research in various ways.

² In his seminal study on individualism as a modern ideology, Louis Dumont suggests ‘not to separate an idea and its value but to consider instead as our object the configuration formed by idea-values or value-ideas’ (Dumont [1983] 1986, 252).

The author of this paper is not qualified to make specific recommendations on how ‘dignified places’ *should* be designed. Still, it may be possible to use some insights from this study that may inspire city planners, migrant communities, architects, designers, and others in their attempts to make the city a place of dignity for all its inhabitants.

What Built Spaces Can or Can’t Do: The ‘Agency’ of Non-Human Actors

I assume with Thomas Barrie and others that architecture as a cultural artifact is entangled with its societal contexts and may be an “active agent that performs didactic, elucidative, exhortative, and, in some cases, coercive roles” (Barrie 2010, 5). When I suggest that built spaces have an “agency,” I do not pose that they have a capacity to act intentionally like human beings do. Instead, I take up Bruno Latour’s argument that they make a difference in social practice. They influence the ways people perceive their environment and act upon it: Agency is “the capacity to make effects in the world” (Hazard 2013, 65). Or: “any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor” (Latour 2005, 71).

Thomas Barrie and Julio Bermudez point out that architecture has the capacity to “provide settings that articulate the human condition” and that it “serves deeper spiritual needs” (Barrie and Bermudez 2019, 345–46). This is exactly what dignified spaces are about, both when they are perceived and assessed by minority and migrant religious communities and when they are projected and produced by city departments and architects. Still, architecture and built places cannot force people to do or feel something; they can only offer possibilities, affording some actions, and impeding others (Cutieru 2020).

Architect and writer John Cary brought together these ideas on the agency of architecture and the question of dignity in a TED talk he held in 2017: Referring to the hospital room where his wife was about to give birth to their daughter, he recounts, “At best, a hospital room like this might just be described or dismissed as uninspiring. At worst, it is undignifying” (Cary 2017, 01:53). Architect Richard Buchanan supports this view, posing that “design is fundamentally grounded in human dignity and human rights” (Buchanan 2001, 36). He calls for architecture and spatial planning to ‘consider what we mean by human dignity and how all of the products that we make either succeed or fail to support and advance human dignity’ (Buchanan 2001, 37).

A Typology and Examples

Having studied more than 20 cases of religious migrant and minority communities in (mostly) European cities, we have developed a typology of dignified spaces that is based on three dimensions:

a) Spatial position: central – peripheral.

This refers to the position of the community’s place in relation to the urban context: A central position would usually be in the traditional city center, in most European cities that is the central market, church, and/or municipality. Often, cities of the radial pattern have developed one or several ring roads during periods of spatial expansion, or along former city walls. These circular roads may indicate the movement from central to peripheral positions; central being within the most inner ring road, and peripheral being outside of them. However, there are exceptions to this rule. Locations close to the railway stations or railroads, even if they are within the city center, are often perceived as being non-places, or places of low estimation among the neighborhoods.

b) Exterior architecture: visible – invisible

The exterior architecture of a religious place may be rather visible and recognizable, as is the case with traditional church buildings that are characterized by a large nave and a high-rise tower, or with

mosques built in traditional ways (particularly the dome and minaret). Other places are more or less invisible from the perspective of looking at a cityscape: They do not have any exterior architecture that would hint at the presence of a religious group, or they have very few such elements that are only recognizable to the community members. What is visible can be recognized by passers-by only if they are socialized appropriately or have learned to recognize these architectural features.

c) Interior architecture: adequate – insufficient

The interior architecture of minority and migrant religious communities proves to be very different. In some cases, buildings that are nearly invisible from the outside are designed with much effort on the inside, displaying all necessary features, decorations, and furniture that are traditionally required. These would be classified as “adequate” in this typology, while the attribute of “adequate” is based on the assessment of community members. In other cases, and mostly due to a lack of financial resources, the interior design is make-shift and improvised, such as a few plastic chairs and an improvised stage. This may be assessed by community members as insufficient, but still, they may argue that their community is content because they cherish the collective rituals and are proud to be part of this group. This dimension looks at the material resources and facilities of a place and can only be analyzed properly by talking to members of these communities.

The selection of cases from different countries is not representative by any means, but instead meant to illustrate the variety of contexts, problems, and solutions that these communities face and find in their quest to make dignified places for themselves in urban environments. I will mention here only one example for each type.

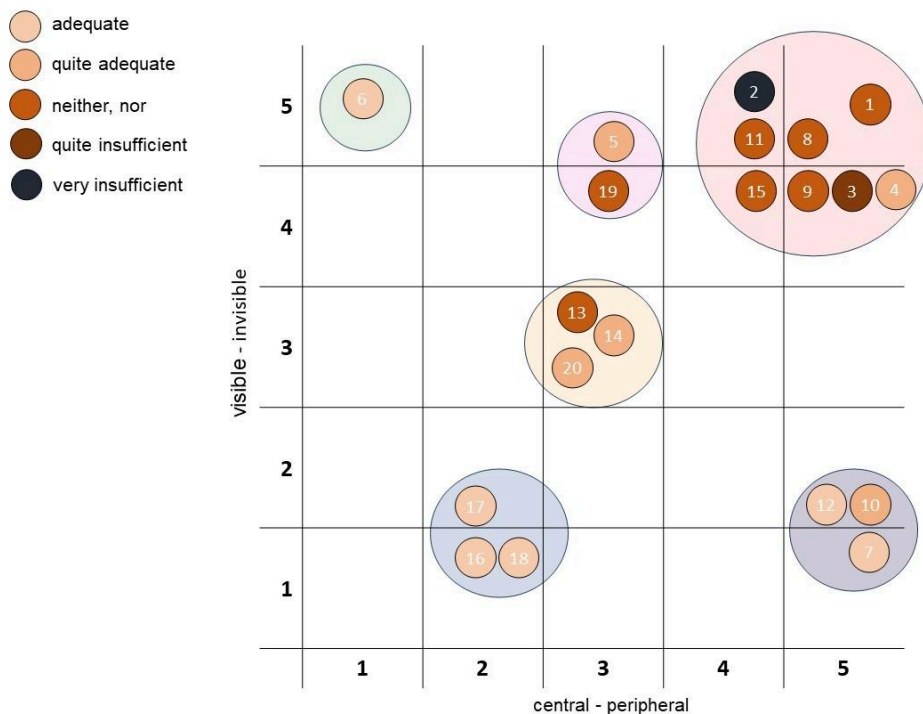


Figure 1: A three-dimensional typology of religious spaces (the numbers in circles stand for communities whose names are not disclosed for data protection).³

³ My thanks go to Aizhana Khasanova for designing this typology.

1	quite central, quite visible, very adequate
2	close to the city center, but lacking visibility
3	historic minority in the city center
4	preferring periphery to build what they need
5	close to the city, rather invisible
6	peripheral, invisible, rather undignified

Example for type 1: New Synagogue, Dresden (Germany)

Opened in 2001 at the same spot as the old Synagogue, destroyed in 1938, this building is both a continuation of tradition and a fresh start. “The fact that Jews are visible again in a prominent place in Dresden – that’s the essential thing for me” (a member of the Jewish community in Dresden).

Example for type 2: DITIB Central Mosque, Münster (Germany)

The Muslim community in Münster has existed since the 1980s and consisted primarily of members of Turkish worker migrants. First, the worship was held in the basement of the building, but with the expansion of the congregation, a decision was made to renovate the building. The structure represents traditional Islamic Turkish architecture: the mosque has high ceilings, a dome, and a minaret. The references to traditional Turkish religious architecture are essential for the identity of the members of the community.

Example for type 3: Austrian Church of St. George, Istanbul (Turkey)

The “Austrian Catholic Church of St. George” was founded in 1882 as the first German Church in Istanbul. Without a steeple and church bells, the building is almost invisible architecturally. In the neighborhood, though, they are well known for the German school. Members of the community regard dignified space as being content with having this traditional, old place in the city that is invisible to outsiders but well recognized as a school building.

Example for type 4: Sri Kamadchi Ampal Temple, Hamm (Germany)

The “Sri Kamadchi Ampal Temple” in the city of Hamm is the second-largest Hindu temple in Europe. It was constructed after the example of the Kanchi-Kamadchi-Tempel Kanchipuram (South India) and opened in 2002. The temple is 27 by 27 meters large and topped by a 17 meter high tower above the entrance (Gopuram). In 2022, a cultural center was erected right next to the temple, to provide space for large gatherings, weddings, performances, a museum, and a library. “The temple is a refuge for Hindus and their religious rituals” (the priest). “While the temple displays a strange and distant culture, this culture has already become to be at home in Germany” (a leading member of the community).

Example for type 5: Ehlbeyt Mosque, Bochum (Germany)

Founded in the early 1990s, the “Ehlbeyt Mosque” is situated in a courtyard behind a Turkish bakery, directly surrounded by apartment houses in a residential area. The congregation has about 200 members, from Shiite and Sunni Muslims. A leading member of the community says that they feel ambivalent about the dignity of their place. On the one hand, they are thankful to have this place, and the interior is designed according to their aesthetic and functional needs. But on the outside, nothing indicates that there is a mosque inside.

Example for type 6: All Nations Christian Church, Münster (Germany)

The “All Nations Christian Church” in Münster was founded in 2014. It is an international, non-denominational community with Pentecostal and Evangelical features. It is a part of the Association of Pentecostal Churches in Germany. For the time being, they hold their meetings and services in the basement of a communal kindergarten south of the city center. They seek to offer an atmosphere that allows people to “experience the transformative power of Jesus Christ.” Their intercultural and heterogenous community is conceptualized as a “foretaste of eternity” because, as the pastor puts it, “heaven is not homogenous.” For the international community in Münster, they want to provide a “spiritual home.”

In this paper, the basic approach and a few first findings can only be sketched. Further research and publications will follow to elaborate in more nuanced ways the entanglements of space and dignity.

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