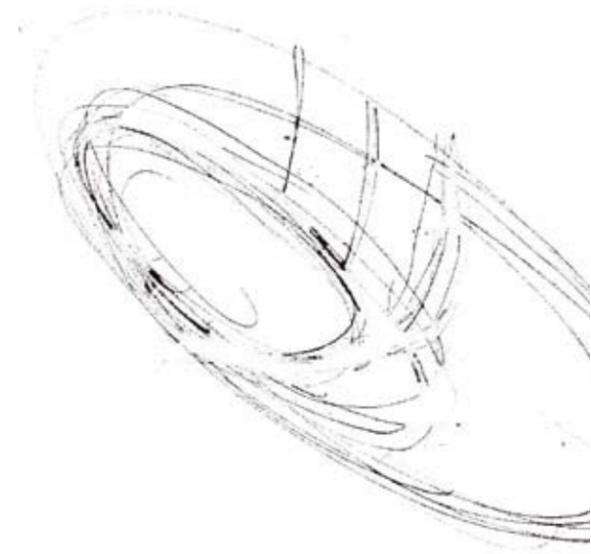
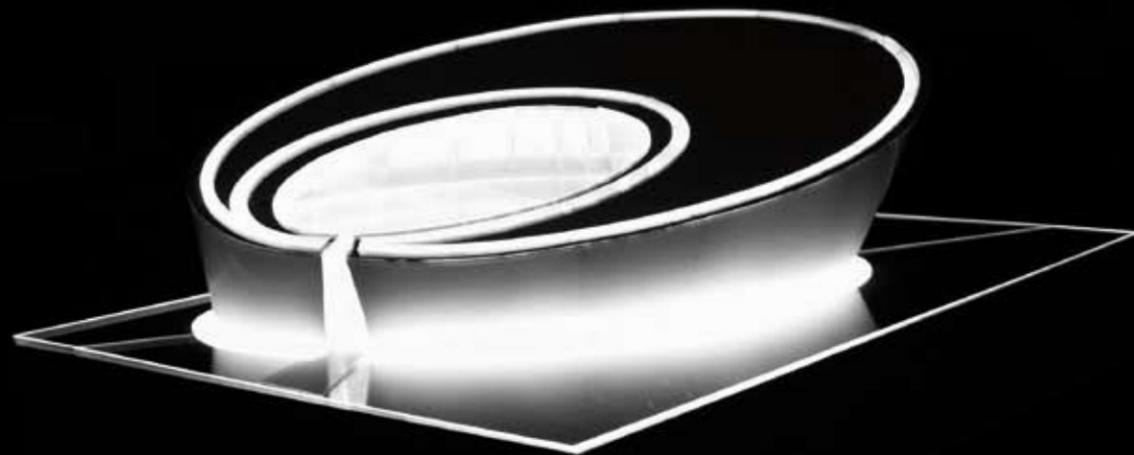


# Making Space for Islam

– the race to build Denmark's first Mosque

Almost two years after Jyllands-Posten newspaper published cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed, causing a global crisis that drove a deep rift between Denmark and much of the Islamic World, Danish architects are racing to realize the country's first purpose-built mosque.



By Ben Clement

As construction cranes swing to and fro along Copenhagen's harbor front, café-latte-lifestyle apartments spring up in Ørestad, and the new Danish Radio town dives headlong into budget overspend, one lot of land in Copenhagen remains conspicuously vacant. One side of Njalsgade, running between Islands Brygge and Amager, is equipped with a new metro station, prim canals and a university campus boasting designer accommodation that will be the envy of students the world over. The other side is in a serene state of decay. Corrugated steel roofs rust and slowly cave in over the burnt-out carcasses of what were once mechanics workshops. This inconspicuous stretch of land is the center of one of the country's most controversial debates. Since 1992 the land has been earmarked by the City Council for the construction of Denmark's first purpose-built mosque. After 15 years, what has long been no more than a bureaucrat's zoning plan is finally very close to becoming a reality. Considering that the country is home to 170,000 worshipping Muslims, it might seem surprising that no mosque has ever been built, as such, on Danish soil. Denmark's 50 mosques are all appropriated spaces, which are typically small and specific to the many fractional Muslim groups here. Turks and Iraqis, Pakistanis and Moroccans, Sunnis and Shiites worship in different venues on the fringes of the city. Finding a common language, let alone creed, once seemed like an insurmountable barrier. Curiously, it was the notorious Mohammed cartoons published in Jyllands-Posten newspaper (The Jutland Post) that was to change this situation. Less than two years after the international crisis that those

cartoons provoked, the umbrella organisation, the Muslim Council of Denmark, has brought together over 50,000 Muslims, from dozens of different Muslim groups. Furthermore Copenhagen's city mayor is pressing for a mosque to be built as soon as possible, and for the first time, Denmark faces the realistic prospect of having two major mosques built in the near future.

I spoke to Abdul Wahid Pedersen, one of the main spokesmen of the Muslim Council of Denmark, to find out what he thought this prospect could mean for the Islamic community here. "Initially it would be a signal of acceptance and inclusion into society. Secondly, it would help in uniting Muslims even more," Pedersen stated. Abdul is a Dane who converted to Islam, and in 1997 became the first Imam to deliver a sermon in Danish.

## The Struggle to Find a Language

Language is a problem that any newcomer to Denmark will be bitterly familiar with. Danish is reportedly the second most difficult language in the world to pick up, second only to Chinese. It is not surprising that many Muslim groups in Denmark choose to worship with others who share their mother tongue. But as Abdul points out, the prob-

lem of language when proposing Denmark's first mosque is also an architectural one.

"If you ask the Muslims who have come to Denmark from abroad, and if you ask the large majority of Muslims born and raised here, they would say a mosque has to look like a mosque. It should have a dome, it should have minarets, it should have a classical 'Islamic' design. They don't realize that the minaret is just an old-fashioned loud speaker," Abdul jokes.

Architects involved in making mosque proposals in Denmark have to balance the need to make a building that represents the tenets of Islam, with avoiding the danger of further alienating the Muslim worshippers from the general public by making architecture that seems misplaced in Denmark.

The architects C.F. Møller have faced this issue head-on in their ambition to create a thoroughly modern mosque and Islamic center in Århus, Denmark's second largest city. A condition of taking on the project was that they wouldn't be able to simply transplant the Blue Mosque to Århus, beautiful though it might be. Instead, as project architect Tom Danielsen explained, the mosque needed to be, "a building that comes from Danish soil with Danish building techniques and as a result, establishes a dialogue between Danish architecture and Islamic architecture."

This ambition, to create a new architectural language out of a dialogue between Islamic and Danish traditions, is shared by the two rival architects' practices that are currently making proposals for the same Copenhagen site on Njalsgade. Those practices are Wenzel+Tuxen Architects and Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG).

#### **An Eye on Islam - Making Islam Visible**

From a distance, Wenzel+Tuxen's mosque proposal looks like a large eye. There is no trace of a minaret, nor a dome. The building is designed with the capacity for 3,000 worshippers and consists of an open, elliptical central courtyard enclosed by a crescent-shaped building. The structure of the open interior space is focused towards a single vertical strip window, which faces towards Mecca. I met one of the partners of the firm, Lars Tuxen, to find out more about the proposal. He talked about how he perceives many of the problems of Islamic identity in Denmark being to do with the locations in which worshipping Muslims are in. He refers to the fact that many mosques are on the outskirts of town, in socially-deprived areas with cramped, low-quality buildings. "We wanted to somehow make a

building that could take all these small mosques and just wipe them out in one way, and then unify and give them a place from where they can define a whole totally new identity." Wenzel+Tuxen's proposal focuses on visibility – both from outside and within.

To outsiders the 'The Grand Mosque' is proposed as an iconic building, finished in polished concrete, clad in titanium and made on a much more ambitious scale than the original City Council's requirement. The mosque would have a strong visual impact on the street, particularly at night when the crescent-shaped building is illuminated by light shining from a low-level perimeter window and reflected in a pool surrounding the mosque, giving the whole structure the appearance that it's floating. The proposal also includes a cultural center that would be open to the public even when the mosque was closed. Future worshippers could see this as an opportunity. Lars suggests, "This is a unique opportunity for the Islamic community to use the building's volume and identity to talk to the Danes in a different way."

The focus on visibility is also a feature within the proposal. The vast open volume of the mosque's interior stands in marked contrast to the current, small and adapted spaces occupied by Copenhagen's mosques, spaces that are arguably more vulnerable to manipulation by fundamentalists. The design bears a symbolic resemblance to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon project – the essential idea in both being to make people feel visible in an effort to eliminate dangerous and subversive behaviour. The Imam's offices are placed in a raised position at the center of the eye, as it were, of the mosque and therefore offer views across the entire space. The project has had considerable support from the Tabah Foundation, an Abu-Dhabi based Islamic consultancy firm that promotes unity amongst moderate Muslims.

It is likely that they will be able to raise the funds to foot the 3.2 billion kroner bill (427 million euros). They have also held several meetings with The Muslim Council of Denmark. One of the questions that faces Wenzel+Tuxen's proposal is whether such a large group of Islamic worshippers would want to use the mosque together. One man that is sceptical of that possibility, and suggests instead a more flexible space that could be used in shifts by different denominations is Ole Schrøder from BIG architects. Ole is the project architect for another mosque proposal for the Njalsgade site.

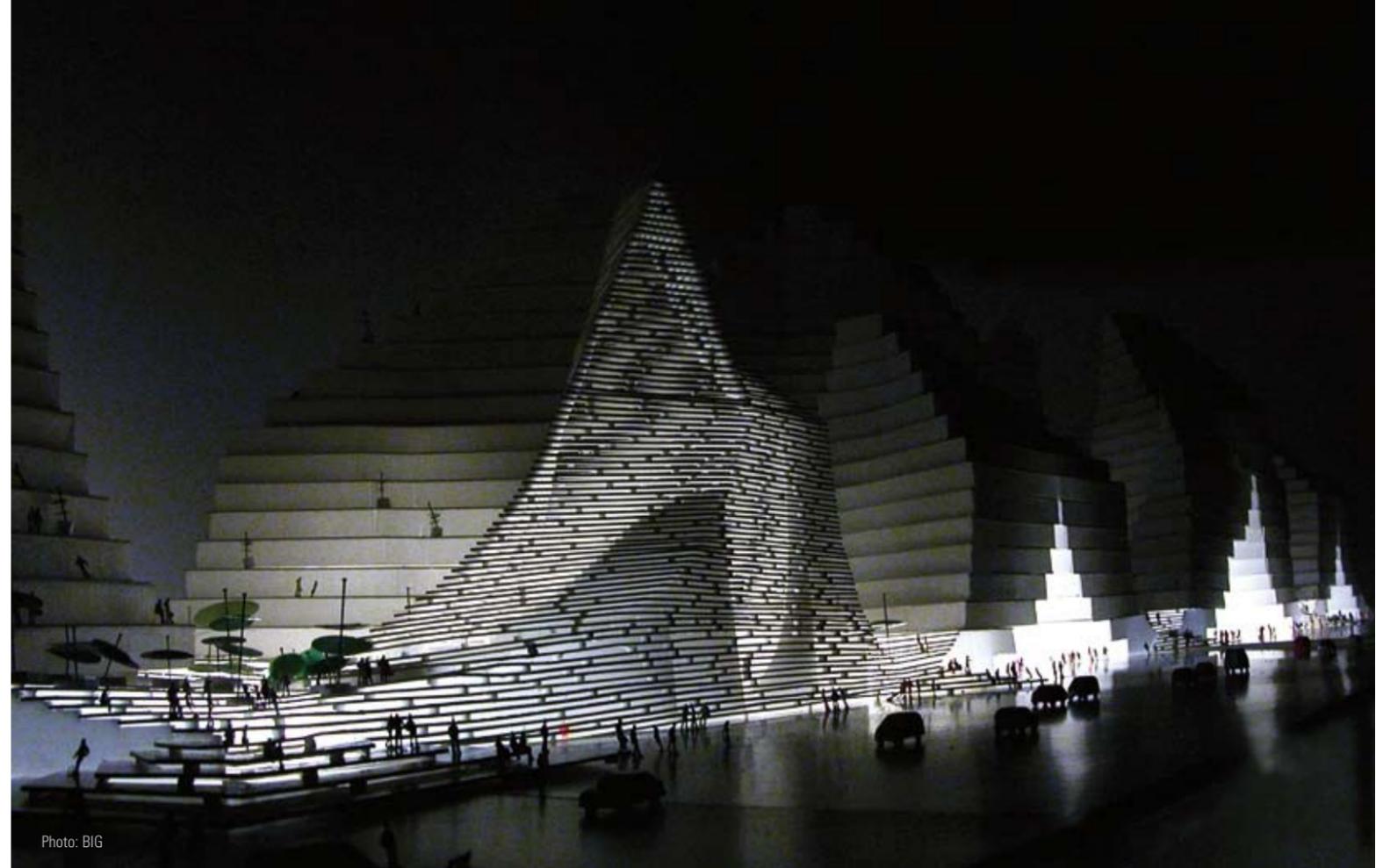


Photo: BIG

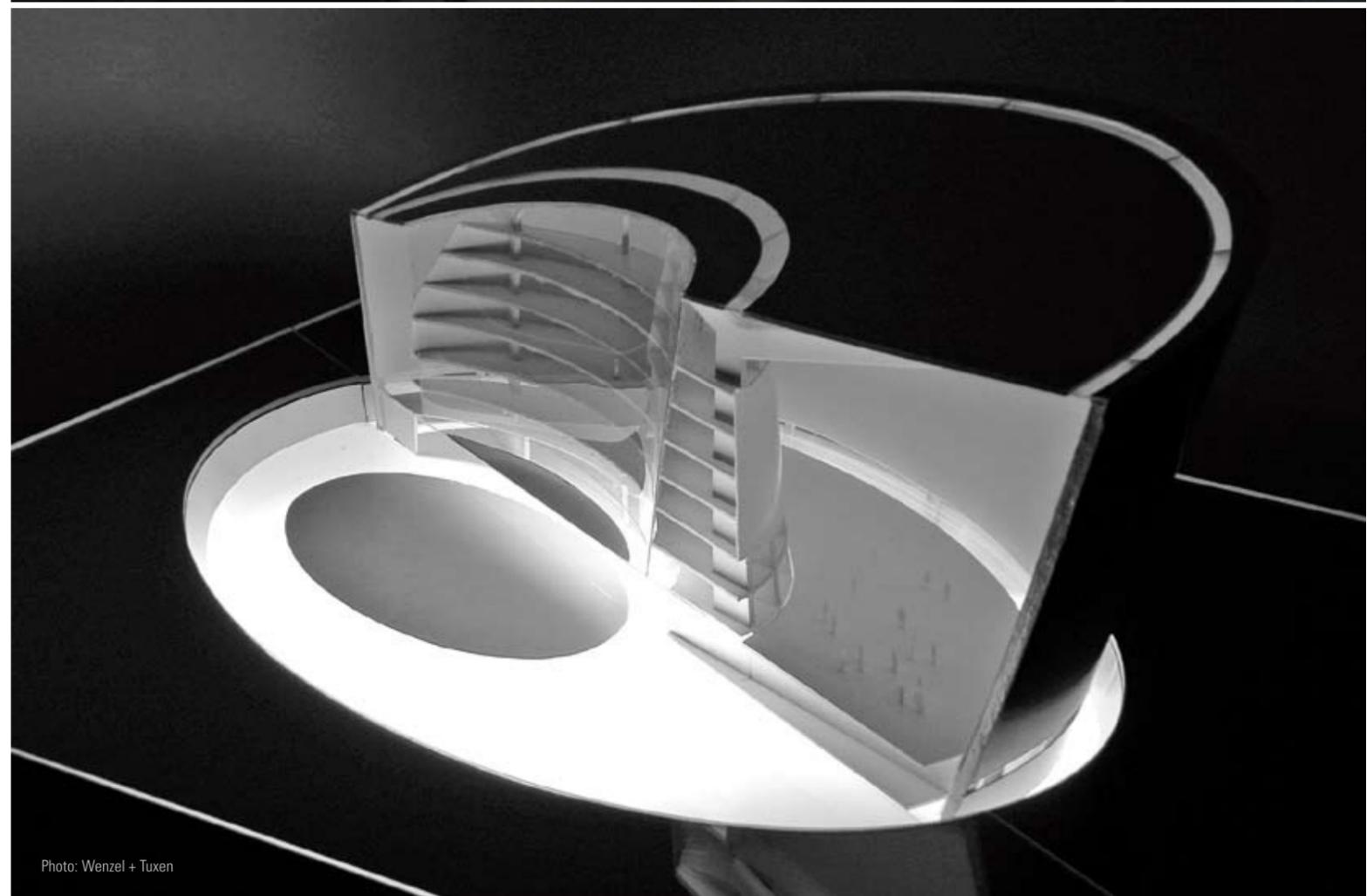
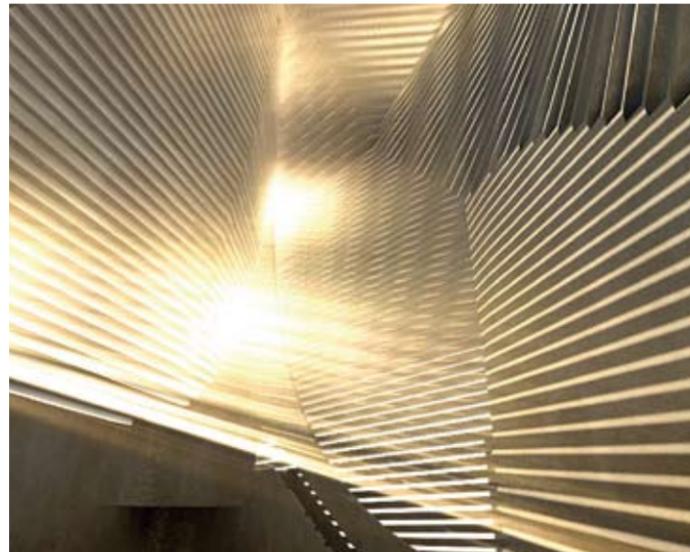


Photo: Wenzel + Tuxen



Photos: BIG



### A Mosque as Part of Our Landscape

BIG architects have been working longer than Wenzel+Tuxen on the Njalsgade site. Unlike Wenzel+Tuxen, they designed for a number of different programmes including a cinema, a hotel, a bazaar and a large amount of housing as well as the mosque.

“The focus of the project is integration,” Ole states. He starts by showing me the Copenhagen City Coat of Arms, which dates back to 1661. BIG have divided it up into its constituent elements. “We tried to break the ‘Da Vinci Code’ of Copenhagen,” he explains. Above the towers are what Ole points out as the multicultural constituents of the Star of David and the sickle moon and star of Islam. “It’s all already there!” he enthuses.

BIG’s proposal for the Njalsgade site looks like an architectural interpretation of an Alpine landscape, with tapering peak-like towers. Surprisingly, it’s a landscape inspired from a more prosaic source - Copenhagen’s municipal restrictions. The forms are generated from the principle that building height regulations in Copenhagen are relative to the distance one builds from adjacent buildings. The architects found out the maximum volume of space they would be allowed to occupy, and then modelled their proposal to make best use of that. The process was a creative exercise in rule-bending. The mosque is incorporated within this volume. “The mosque should be some kind of integrated element in this urban neighbourhood,” explains Ole. It is dwarfed by a hotel building along side it. But as he points out, “It is the smallest building from the outside and yet has the biggest volume on the inside.” The mosque’s tower is orientated towards Mecca and has twisted lamella façades that generate five different lighting conditions during the course of the day corresponding to the five calls to prayer. At night the façade acts as a beacon ‘semi public façade’ onto the street.

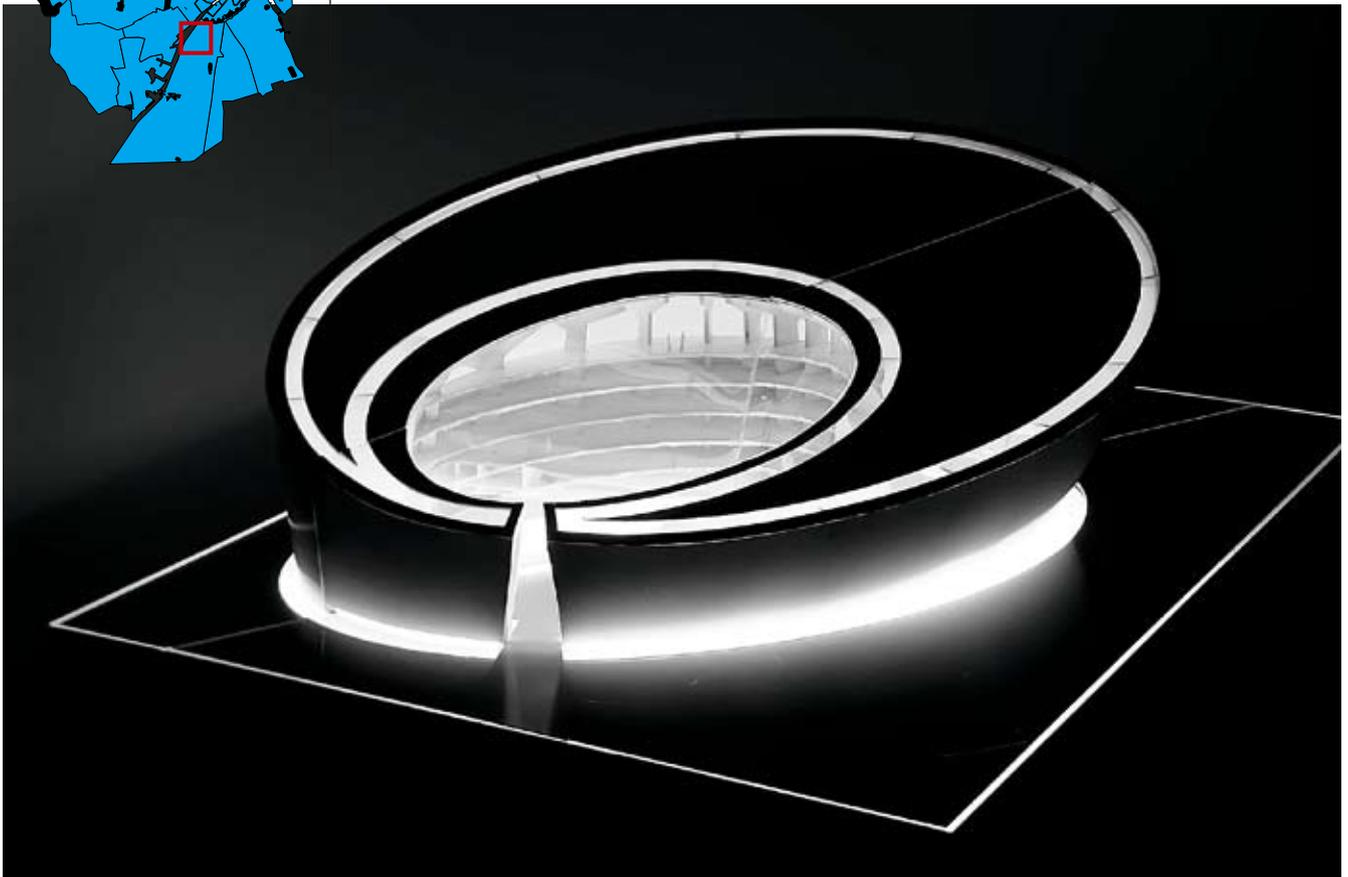
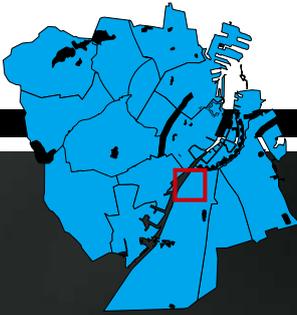
BIG’s designs are popular with the municipality and the Islands Brygge community. However they have not yet entered serious negotiations with potential Muslim clients, preferring to reach a firm solution for the planning of the whole site first. Meanwhile, Wenzel+Tuxen’s approval by the Tabah foundation should promise a strong financial grounding to their project. On the other hand, the current owners will not grant them use of the Njalsgade site. As the Muslim Council strengthens and both the architects and the council press for progress, the state of deadlock cannot last long. The ways that these two rival practices are attempting to define Islamic architecture in Denmark illustrates the complexity of a global identity crisis. Both proposals illustrate a double attitude. On one side proudly promoting the tenets and traditions of an ancient faith, on the other trying to adapt and find new space within a society from which that faith has grown alienated.



Photo: C.F. Møller

### Denmark’s First Mosque – A timeline.

- 1661** The first appearance of Copenhagen’s Coat of Arms, to be interpreted 345 years later by Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) architects as a “Da Vinci Code” prophesising the city’s multi-cultural identity. The Coat of Arms shows what BIG interpret as the Star of David and the Islamic crescent moon rising above Copenhagen’s mediaeval towers.
- 1953** The right to religious freedom is written into the Danish Constitution.
- 1992** The Copenhagen City Council approves a local plan for a site in the district of Amager to include Copenhagen’s first purpose-built mosque.
- 1997** Abdul Wahid Pedersen becomes the first imam to hold sermons in Danish.
- 2005** (Summer) PLOT architects start working on proposals for the development of the Njalsgade site to include a mosque, in accordance with the original city plan.
- 2005** (Sept. 30) Jylland’s-Posten publishes Mohammed cartoons sparking what Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen describes as Denmark’s worst crisis international crisis since World War II.
- 2005** (December) PLOT architects, later to be divided into BIG and JDS architects, reveal their plans for ‘The Battery’, a mountain-like megastructure for the Njalsgade site called to the general public.
- 2006** (November) Wenzel+Tuxen architects start work on a proposal for a Grand Mosque of Copenhagen on the Njalsgade site in Amager, Copenhagen.
- 2007** (Apr. 23) Wenzel+Tuxen architects present ‘The Tabah Foundation’ to the Abu Dhabi based Islamic consultancy firm in New York. They get approval for their 3.2 billion kroner (427 million euro), 3,000 capacity crescent-moon shaped mosque.
- 2007** (May 2) Njalsgade K/S, the owners of the Amager site where Wenzel+Tuxen propose their Grand Mosque, reveal that they are developing the mosque proposal with BIG architects.
- 2007** (Jun. 11) Wenzel+Tuxen Architects reveal that they are open to considering other sites in Copenhagen for the Grand Mosque, including Ørestad.
- 2011** The year by which architects Wenzel + Tuxen hope to have completed the Grand Mosque of Copenhagen.



## THE GRAND MOSQUE OF COPENHAGEN

En moske i København har længe været mere eller mindre synonym med måske. Nu har to danske arkitekter formgivet Europas femtestørste moske, og den har økonomisk opbakning fra udlandet.

**D**et er ikke rent pral når de kalder den 'The Grand Mosque of Copenhagen'. Moskeen til 380 millioner kr. bliver Skandinaviens største. Og i forlængelse af helligdommen skal der bygges kontorer, stu-

denterboliger, caféer, et hotel og et underjordisk parkeringsanlæg til i alt 3,2 milliarder kr. "Placeringen ligger endnu ikke fast. Njalsgade-grunden, som projektet er tegnet til, er et forsøgsområde," siger arkitekten Lars Tuxen.

"Vi kan dog sagtens forestille os en placering af moskeen i Ørestaden. Det ville tilføre området derude en spændende dimension og et turistmål."

Moskeen ligner ikke en moske i traditionel forstand. Der er ingen minarettårne eller kupler. Alligevel er byggeriet stærkt symboliseret. Moskeens ellipseform vil få bygningen til at fremstå som en enorm skulptur der symboliserer rotationen om Kaabaen i Mekka – muslimernes største helligdom. Det er arkitekternes ønske at moskeens store sal med plads til 3.000 bedende i kraft af sin størrelse lader den besøgende fornemme det guddommelige i rummet.

### SVÆVER PÅ VANDET

Rundt om moskeen skal der anlægges et vandbassin der skal give moskeens ydre en atmosfære af ro og renhed. I stueetagen er

## MOSKEKONKURRENTER



■ Vesteuropas største moske ligger i London og har plads til 10.000. Den engelske hovedstad har flere andre moskeer.



■ Stockholm indrettede i 2000 en moske i et kraftværk fra 1903 tegnet af en arkitekt med en kærlighed til islamiske former.



■ La Mezquita i Cordoba var engang verdens næststørste moske. Men spanierne lavede den om til en katolsk katedral.

→ The Grand Mosque of Copenhagen bliver en lys bygning i poleret beton, titanium og glas. Omkring den skal ligge boliger, hotel og kontorer, og en af bygningerne skal være et højhus.

moskeen åben udadtil med en 30 cm høj glasvæg hvis kraftige lysskær om natten vil få moskeen til at 'svæve' på vandet mens en stærk tag-illumination aftegner halvmånen i vintermørkets lave skyer på himlen.

"Om moskeens symbolværdi er for ovovet til København? Nej, det tror jeg ikke," siger Lars Tuxen roligt.

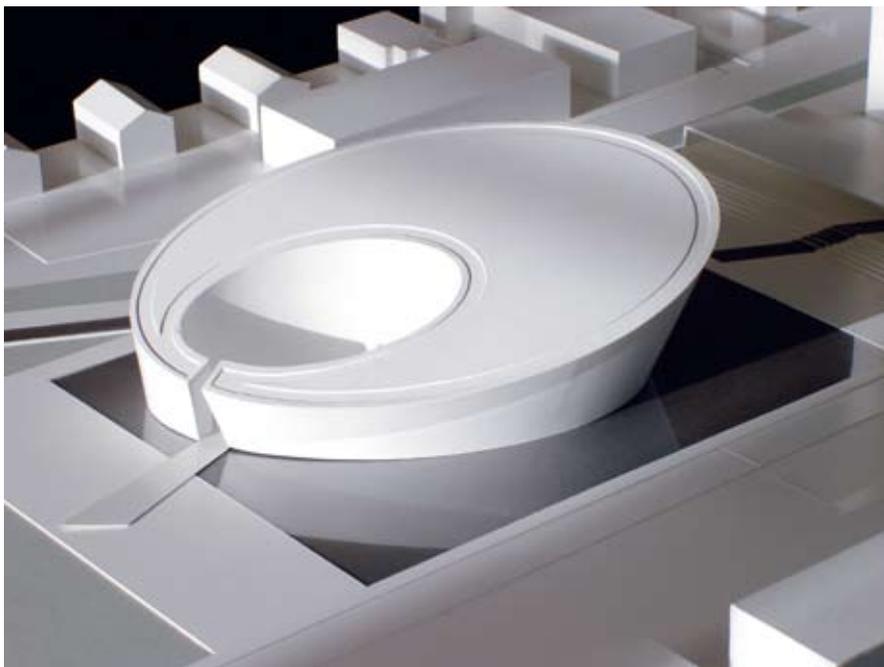
"Moskeen er ikke formet som en halvmåne, men som forskudte ellipser. Halvmåneformen vil man kunne ane om aftenen fra den rette vinkel. Men om man ser ellipser eller en halvmåne, kommer vist an på hvilken kikkert man har for øjet."

## MOSKE MED DET HELE

Moskeen vil byde på mere end imamer og bønner. Den skal både indeholde foredrags-sale og sydvendte lejligheder placeret ud mod den store indergård. I moskeens vestlige ende skal der indrettes kunstgallerier, restaurant, bibliotek og læsesale der også vil komme til at nyde godt af gårdens ro og meditative vandrislen fra et vandfald på vestvæggen.

Det ligger således i kortene at moskeen kan blive en kraftig turistmagnet der vil brande København som en tolerant by.

"Jeg kan mærke på de folk der har set moskeplanerne – danskere, muslimer som amerikanere – at de ser potentiale i moskeen som et vigtigt turistmål. Det er et sjældent syn at moskeer tegnes af ikke-muslimer i utraditionelle former. Og jeg må virkelig



understrege at det er en bygning der skal være åben for alle: muslimer, danskere og turister," siger Lars Tuxen.

## ET DRØMMEPROJEKT

Arkitekterne Wenzel + Tuxen har haft en drøm om at forene det enkle skandinaviske udtryk med den orientalske tradition for symbolik, fordybelse og ro i The Giant Mosque of Copenhagen. Men snart skal drømmen tydes af investorer og kommunalpolitikere der afgør moskeens skæbne – vision eller virkelighed?

"Der har været en del forvirring i pressen om den udenlandske finansiering. Men nu ligger det fast at moskeen skal styres i det daglige af danskere uden indblanding fra udlandet," understreger Lars Tuxen som er optimistisk med hensyn til moskeens fremtid.

"Vi er enige med Ritt Bjerregaard i at der kun er plads til én stormoske i København. Derfor tager vi et møde med kommunen i næste måned for at se på de spændende muligheder for stormoskeen i København." «



## MOSKEFAKTA

- Arkitekter: Wenzel + Tuxen
- Fundrasier: Tabah Foundation for Islamic Studies and Research
- Pris: 382 mio. kr.



## MOSKE – MÅSKE IKKE

- Københavns kommune bestemte i 1992 at en del af en 70.000 m<sup>2</sup> stor grund på Njalsgade skulle reserveres til et moskebyggeri.
- Den nuværende ejer af grunden, Njalsgade K/S, er i tæt samarbejde med tegnestuen B.I.G. i færd med at realisere 'Batteriet' der også involverer et moskebyggeri (til venstre). Ifølge Ole Schrøder fra B.I.G. har planerne om The Grand Mosque of Copenhagen ingen indflydelse på de igangværende planer.

- Finansieringen af The Grand Mosque står Tabah Foundation for Islamic Studies and Research for ved at fundraise pengene i udlandet. Hvis moskeen bliver realiseret, kommer den kvit og frit under dansk ledelse.
- Om The Grand Mosque of Copenhagen overhovedet bliver til virkelighed, afhænger nu af et større politisk og økonomisk kludetæppe da Ritt Bjerregaard har udtalt at der kun er plads til én stormoske i København.


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## ABOUT US

# Copenhagen is Diversifying

MONDAY, 28 NOVEMBER 2011 04:44



Since 2007 various entities within the extended Copenhagen community were striving to build a “Grand Mosque of Copenhagen.” As with most large-scale cultural/institutional projects a competition was held for design proposals and from the submission pool various winners were selected. Copenhagen is an interesting place within the context of the Muslim community in Europe, so much so that even The New York Times ran an article on their website titled, “Push to Build Mosques is met with Resistance,” in 2009.



There’s no denying that various forces within the Danish political and social sphere have a tense relationship with the Muslim Danish community (we all remember the Danish Cartoon fiasco back in 2005). Therefore history simply isn’t on the side of the growing congregations within the city of Copenhagen. Regardless, Copenhagen is sure to receive not one but two Grand Mosques within the next several years (a large Shiite congregation has already approved plans to build a center in a relatively industrial quarter of town on the site of a former factory) and a Sunni congregation has started the process by acquiring a site with the help of Abu Dhabi-based Muslim consultancy group, the [Tabah Foundation](#).

Although a brewing institutionalized Islamophobia is simmering all across Europe (with France recently banning public prayer and the wearing face coverings), Denmark is quite the extreme case study. Immigrant hate among the people is one of the main factors in the propulsion of the Danish

People’s Party, which more or less ran on a nationalistic platform of re-establishing Denmark as entirely “Danish.” They’ve successfully passed new legislation in their tenure that makes it much harder to obtain citizenship or even enter the country in the first place. It wouldn’t be far-fetched to assume that this social disconnect with Islam is what propelled various groups to work together to make the Grand Mosque become a reality.

But as always the building of a new mosque brings with it the challenges of funding, the lingering question in the heads of Muslims and Danes alike is one all too common: “Who’s paying for it?” In the case of the Shiite congregation its quite obvious the Danish Parliament immediately assumed the Iranian Regime had something to with it. The obvious parallel with the Sunni Grand Mosque is the lingering question of Saudi Arabia, equally demonized by European leadership for extensive funding of Grand Mosques all across Europe. With that said, proponents within Danish society exist as well, for example the deputy mayor has defended the rights of Muslims to build places of worship on various occasions, citing that synagogues and churches exist in harmony with Danish life and mosques should be no different.



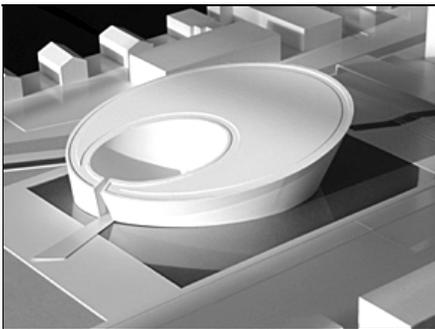
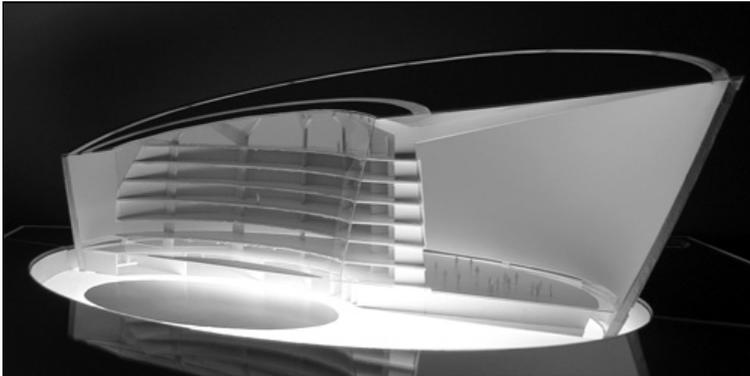
Enter [BIG \(Bjarke Ingels Group\)](#), one of the loudest firms working in architecture today. Led by the young and often idealized Bjarke Ingels, they’ve seemed to score more commissions in recent years than some firms do their entire lifetime. If there were a Kobe Bryant of Architecture (before he wore the number 24) it would be Ingels. In other words, young, talented, with various achievements under his belt, but still having a lot to prove (mind you he use to work for the current Michael Jordan of architecture, journalist gone “starchitect” Rem Koolhaas). Bjarke’s plan took the simple project of the mosque and went “BIG” with it (no pun intended). With very little details released and no official post on BIG’s projects page, the renderings and brief suggest a massive development with various residential and non-Islamic programming alongside the mosque. The idea being that the center is more of a cultural hub for Islam and Muslims rather than a traditional Mosque development (It also might be worth checking out BIG’s confirmed project in Albania, the new Mosque and Museum of Religious Harmony in Tirana).

The interesting twist in the history of the project however reveals that BIG originally came in second after the judge’s voting to little-known Danish firm Wenzel-Tuxen’s more traditional solution. They took only the initial program described in the brief and sculpted an elegant yet simple crescent inspired glowing beacon. I spoke with Lars Tuxen and the latest new suggests that the judges have recently reverted to the BIG proposal, not surprisingly for issues of finance. When your mosque makes money (through non-mosque programming for sale or rent), you’re far less likely to rely on external (and often times questionable) funding. BIG succeeded in selling not only architecture, but financial independence. In their summary BIG clearly highlighted their social design agenda as well, with Bjarke Ingles saying “our purpose was to design a Danish mosque as an interpretation of the Islamic architectural and cultural tradition adjusted to the Danish context.” With one grand sweeping move, I feel the Grand Mosque of Copenhagen became a little more...Danish.

Of all the mosque projects I have seen none are as impressive as this one designed by Danish firm [Wenzel+Tuxen](#):

[From a distance, Wenzel+Tuxen's mosque proposal looks like a large eye.](#) There is no trace of a minaret, nor a dome. The building is designed with the capacity for 3,000 worshippers and consists of an open, elliptical central courtyard enclosed by a crescent-shaped building. The structure of the open interior space is focused towards a single vertical strip window, which faces towards [Mecca](#). I met one of the partners of the firm, Lars Tuxen, to find out more about the proposal. He talked about how he perceives many of the problems of Islamic identity in Denmark being to do with the locations in which worshipping Muslims are in. He refers to the fact that many mosques are on the outskirts of town, in socially-deprived areas with cramped, low-quality buildings. "We wanted to somehow make a building that could take all these small mosques and just wipe them out in one way, and then unify and give them a place from where they can define a whole totally new identity." Wenzel+Tuxen's proposal focuses on visibility – both from outside and within.

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Way to go. Next, reform Sharia.

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