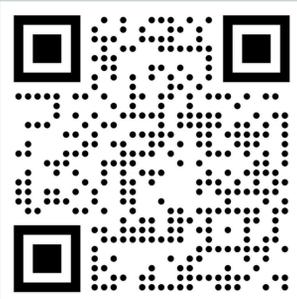


A PEEK INSIDE THE EYÜP SULTAN MOSQUE IN GHENT: A PLACE FOR RELIGION AND COMMUNITY

How does the Eyüp Sultan mosque operate and provide services for visitors while positioning itself in a broader (non-) muslim landscape?

Guided by this research question we interviewed a board member of the mosque, mr. Demir Ali Köse. This poster presents an account of the history and inner workings of this mosque. Despite the absence of a permanent imam, the mosque remains an open community where all is welcome. The mosque successfully navigates a complex political and bureaucratic landscape through the active participation of a number of volunteers, enabling it to sustain the activities and services it offers to the community.

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Moskee Eyüp Sultan Cami - Verleden week. (z.d.). <https://www.omeka.ugent.be/verledenweek2019/items/show/10>

HISTORY

The Eyüp Sultan Mosque is the biggest mosque in Ghent. It opened in 1978 because of the growing demand for a congregational space for the Turkish community. The establishment of this mosque was unique in the sense that it was the first mosque founded by a muslim community itself, rather than by factory owners or external organizations. The Turkish community in Ghent had been growing steadily since the increasing demand for labor forces to rebuild the country after the second world war. They worked jobs in sectors like the mines, metal and textile industry. The community first bought an old mustard and vinegar factory in 1977 and later in the 90s they bought a second factory next to it to expand its capacity. Today the mosque can host up to 3500 people and has a variety of communal spaces to offer. Besides multiple prayer rooms for both men and women, there is a cafeteria, kitchen, classroom, Islamic library and sanitary/washing rooms to prepare for prayer present in the mosque.

INNER WORKINGS AND SERVICES OFFERED

The Eyüp Sultan Mosque in Ghent operates completely on a basis of volunteers with limited means. Those who are involved in the working of the mosque do so besides their daily job and family life. The religious and social services offered in the mosque are in large part dependent on the available means - through donations from the local community - and the available people to plan, organize and coordinate these activities. There are many ideas for services to offer in the mosque. Which initiatives are chosen to spend energy and means on, is based on the demands of the community and visitors, and decided on by the board that gets appointed every two years. Despite the mosque nowadays not being the center of the community anymore, Eyüp Sultan Cami continues to attempt to offer a variety of religious, cultural and social services to continue this role as much as possible regardless.

Permanent services offered

- Prayer rooms for daily and friday prayer
- Islamic education for pupils on the weekend
- Cafeteria as a meeting place

Ad hoc services offered

- Youth engagement
- Women work
- Informing and raising awareness on issues close to the community
- Ramadan
- Participation in broader community initiatives from the city



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INTERCONNECTIONS: THE MOSQUE'S ENGAGEMENT WITH INSTITUTIONAL, RELIGIOUS AND LOCAL NETWORKS

Engagement with institutional structures and local authorities

Relationships with the government have always been complex for the Eyüp Sultan Mosque's board. A series of intricate judicial loopholes over the years have complicated the already troubled process of institutional recognition, which affects other aspects of the functioning of the mosque, primarily its financial support. This recognition would in fact allow it to access state funding for essential costs, including heating, electricity, and even the imam's salary. The condition for this last expense to be covered by the government would be for the mosque to be institutionally recognised, but the issue of official recognition remains unsolved to this day.

It is worth mentioning that the mosque has been recognised by the Turkish government since 1982, allowing it to receive an imam that is paid by the Turkish government. The major issue though is the impossibility for these imams to get a long-term visa, therefore often leaving the mosque without the above-mentioned permanent imam. This inevitably leaves the leadership of the mosque to rely on community members to lead prayers, often leaving the community without proper continuity in worship practices. To overcome this impasse, in 2019, the mosque submitted a recognition dossier to the Belgian government, but despite making multiple adjustments, the process has been continuously delayed and the request remains unanswered.

Engagement with the muslim community in Ghent

The Eyüp Sultan Mosque is part of the Association of Mosques of Ghent, which consists of all 21 mosques of Ghent. Periodically, the boards of these mosques meet to discuss key issues affecting the broader Muslim community, as well as the specific needs of Muslims within the city. The mosques formed this association primarily to facilitate clearer and more unified communication with the city council. This organizational approach helps present the interests of the Muslim community in Ghent in a coordinated manner. At the same time, this association serves as a point of contact for other groups in society, whether it's to arrange for an imam to address a specific need, facilitate mosque visits, or provide a spokesperson for the community in the media. Eyüp Sultan Cami being the biggest mosque in Ghent and one of the oldest, has a prominent role in this Association. Demir Ali Köse, the interviewee, represents a central figure in the Ghent muslim community.

Being a mosque established by the local Turkish population, Eyüp Sultan Cami is also part of Diyanet, the network of Turkish mosques in Belgium consisting of more than 60 affiliated mosques. Diyanet mosques are considered service centres for Turkish Muslims that aim to put forth a certain interpretation and understanding of Islam, while remaining open religious and community spaces for all muslims and those interested.

Engagement with the neighborhood

For the members of the mosque it is essential to engage with the broader public, fostering good neighbourhood relationships with the surrounding community. Despite the unavoidable difficulties deriving from its location in a densely populated area, the volunteers of the mosque always strive for mutual understanding. An example would be the issue concerning parking, which can cause incomprehensions among the residents, especially on Fridays when the majority of worshippers gather for prayer. In this regard the mosque's board maintains open dialogue with neighbours, suggesting that they contact the police about parking violations rather than addressing the issue during functions risking to interrupt prayers.

Another example of the commitment to engagement with the surroundings are the distributions of awareness flyers along with dates held during the month of Ramadan, aiming at informing the surrounding community of prayer times and increased activities. The mosque also promotes participation in a number of community initiatives as well, notably the yearly Ghent 'Great Clean-up'. Ultimately, every year, the mosque welcomes students from the local Artevelde University during the month of Ramadan, offering them the possibility to complete their internships. Students participate in iftars' preparation and the organisation of tours for external visitors.

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