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Islamic Signage in Migrant Enterprise: Visual Negotiations of Swedish Space

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What is the function of Islamic signage in the visual transformation of commercial practices in multicultural neighborhoods? And how are such processes simultaneously forwarding integration processes and challenging visual hegemonies and local-historical narratives?

In the wake of the Middle Eastern migration processes, the profile of European public space is rapidly diversifying. The transforming demographic composition of societies co-occurs with the visual imprint of novel cultural codes and commercial practices, through which migrant populations claim a place in an increasingly heterogeneous European public life. The storefronts, restaurants, sidewalks, parks and markets of urban centers give ample evidence of diversifying signage, cuisines, dress codes, cultural events and religious practices.

The point is often lost that these are successful aspects of migrant access and integration into public space, and the result of individual as well as family initiative and entrepreneurship. In public opinion and debate, however, such changes do not occur without contestation. Successful as the diversification of public space may be from a practitioners' perspective, significant parts of the European population evidently feel alienated from this change. Assimilationist cultural policies and critique of multiculturalism currently gain momentum. Anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic political parties increase their votes, and the Internet is awash with Islamophobic mobilization.

Paradoxically, therefore, successful practices of integration through commercial practices seem to co-occur with the proliferation of anti-Muslim sentiment. Little scholarly attention has however been devoted to such ambiguous aspects of Islamic, visual symbolism in the transformation of European public space. In order to make sense of such tendencies, the research presented in this paper aims at analyzing how the visual transformation challenges visual hegemonies and local-historical narratives of urban environments.

This paper presents findings from research conducted in multicultural neighborhoods of central Malmö, Sweden. Based on visual material as well as interviews and observations, the project explores the role of Islamic references in the visual re-coding of multicultural societies, and how it co-occurs with the establishment of successful commercial practices. How do owners, employees and customers reflect on halal-signage, aesthetic choices for decorations and embodied, stylistic practices in stores and restaurants? What are the constraints as well as facilitating mechanisms of Swedish institutional provisions, such as municipal regulations for the public urban profile and incentives for entrepreneurial establishment? And how do actors conceive of and relate to anti-Muslim opinions among sections of the public in their daily practices?

